

DEPARTMENT OF ANGLOPHONE LITERATURES AND CULTURES
ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

Beyond Words: Visual Aspects in the Work of Virginia Woolf

Za slovy: vizuální aspekty v díle Virginie Woolfové

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE



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Praha, leden 2009

Prohlašuji, že jsem diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně s použitím uvedených pramenů a literatury.

V Praze dne

.....

Ráda bych tímto poděkovala prof. PhDr. Martinovi Hliskému, CSc. za laskavou podporu, porozumění a inspiraci, které mi poskytl nejen při vedení této diplomové práce, ale i v průběhu celého studia.

.....

Abstrakt

Otázky týkající se vztahu mezi literaturou a malířstvím, slovem a obrazem, přitahovaly Virginii Woolfovou po celou dobu její spisovatelské dráhy. Zájem o oblast vizuálního umění nachází výraznou odezvu v její literární metodě. Využití vizuálního umění v literatuře u Woolfové dalece přesahuje pouhou dekorativní funkci. Způsob, jímž Woolfová využívá vizualitu v textu, je významnou stylistickou inovací, jejímž prostřednictvím se autorka odklání od konvenčního způsobu reprodukce reality a deskriptivního realismu 19. století. Ve snaze nalézt nový způsob psaní, který by odrážel realitu v souladu s charakterem moderního vnímání, se Woolfová opírá o principy uplatňované v soudobé teorii a praxi vizuálního umění, zejména o estetiku impresionismu a post-impresionismu. Principy obou uměleckých směrů se vzájemně doplňují i v jejím pozdějším díle, které je častěji považováno za výsledek vlivu post-impresionismu. S estetikou post-impresionismu se Woolfová seznámila především díky pracem Rogera Frye, kolegy a člena Skupiny Bloomsbury. Jeho teorie se staly významným formativním vlivem v rámci autorčina posunu k novému uměleckému ztvárnění reality.

Abstract

Throughout her career Woolf was captivated by questions about the relationship between literature and painting, *word* and *image*. Her intense interest in the field of the visual arts was reflected in her development of a new literary method. Woolf's use of the visual arts in her writing largely transcends a mere decorative function. Her employment in her texts of visuality represents a significant stylistic innovation by means of which she rejects the conventional way of depicting reality and the descriptive realism of the nineteenth-

century writers. In attempt to develop a modern way of writing, which would render reality more in accord with the modern sensibility, she employed in her texts principles underlying the contemporary theory and practice in the visual arts relying particularly on the aesthetics of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. The principles of these two styles exist side by side and complement each other even in Woolf's later works which have been considered as predominantly post-impressionist. The objectives of Post-Impressionist art became known to Woolf through the theories of Roger Fry which turned out to be a major formative influence in the shift towards her new aesthetics.

*Tell me where is fancy bred,
Or in the heart, or in the head?
How begot, how nourishèd?*

Reply, reply.

*It is engend'ed in the eyes
With gazing fed, and fancy dies
In the cradle where it lies.*

(The Merchant of Venice, III, ii, 63ff.)

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Abbreviations

- CE** *Collected Essays*, 4 vols. (London : The Hogarth Press, 1966–67)
- CS** *Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf* (London :
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989)
- CSF** *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, 2nd ed., ed. Susan Dick
(San Diego : A Harvest Book, 1989)
- D 1-5** *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols., eds. Anne Olivier Bell and
Andrew McNeillie (London : The Hogarth Press, 1977–84)
- E 2** *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 2., ed. Andrew McNeillie (London :
The Hogarth Press, 1942)
- L 2-6** *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols., eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne
Trautmann (London : The Hogarth Press, 1975–80)
- MD** *Mrs Dalloway* (London : Penguin Books, 1996)
- O** *Orlando* (London : Granada Publishing, 1977)
- RF** *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London : The Hogarth Press, 1940)
- TM** *The Moment and Other Essays* (London : The Hogarth Press, 1964)
- TTL** *To the Lighthouse* (London : Penguin Books, 1996)
- TW** *The Waves* (London : Grafton Books, 1977)

1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf's unceasing interest in the relationship between painting and literature can be traced throughout her entire work in which intense lyricism and stylistic virtuosity fuse creating a world overabundant with visual impressions. Woolf continually experimented with features of vision, "radically reframing the visible world in her image texts – texts which display a remarkable concern for visual themes and images".¹

The aim of the present study is to examine the use of the visual arts in some selected works by Virginia Woolf. I will try to explore the function in the texts of visuality as one of the main principles of the author's literary experiment. I would like to demonstrate that the way in which Woolf employs *image* in the text is a significant stylistic innovation by means of which Woolf rejects the conventional, largely descriptive realism of the nineteenth century. Further, I will attempt to show that this shift towards a new aesthetics, which has been denominated by critics of literature as literary Impressionism and in recent criticism even more frequently as literary Post-Impressionism, is the outcome not only of Woolf's extremely intense visual sensibility, her interest in the visual arts or her intimate and sustained relationships with practising painters and art critics within the Bloomsbury Group but also, and most importantly, of her close involvement with the contemporary aesthetic theories of Roger Fry, the champion in Britain of the modern movement in the visual arts which spread under the name of Post-Impressionism.

¹ Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 3.

There is a long history of interest in the parallels between literature and the visual arts. Concepts such as the ancient *pictura poema tacitum* reportedly voiced by Simonides, Horace's *ut pictura poesis*, the Renaissance *paragone*, Lessing's *Laokóon* and others have been endlessly quoted and referred to in studies examining the painting-literature analogy. Also in modern criticism the parallels between literature and the visual arts have been attracting considerable attention. The recent critical developments offered a renewed impetus towards the exploration of the field and as a result the last decades have witnessed a particularly ardent interest in the interart studies. Though it may fairly be argued that the number of interesting interdisciplinary studies exploring the interrelatedness of literature and the visual arts has been growing steadily – *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* by V.A. Kolve, *Milton's Imagery and the Visual Arts* by Roland M. Frye or *Book and Painting: Shakespeare, Milton and the Bible* by Ronald Paulson, to name just some of them, the map of this far from thoroughly explored territory still has numerous white spots.

One of the most frequent arguments against the synchronist method in recent interdisciplinary criticism has been aimed at the disparities in conception and technique between verbal and visual forms of expression as well as the claim that the different limitations each medium has to strive to overcome are too wide to allow for the drawing of any ultimately valid comparisons.² Thus the approach has been criticised for vague analogies and unsupported conclusions, and for its „tendency to impressionistic comparisons and easily elastic formulas“, which can be stretched to fit almost any

² Murray Roston, *Changing Perspectives in Literature and the Visual Arts 1650–1820*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 12.

preconceived theory.³ “Impressionistic responses and vague gesturing toward supposed parallels and subjective assertions unsupported by evidence have given synchronic enquiry its doubtful reputation”, says Murray Roston in his study *Changing Perspectives in Literature and the Visual Arts – 1650–1820*. He, however, refutes this accusation by illustrating the way in which recent critical developments have, as he says, at least theoretically confirmed the legitimacy of interart criticism, offering linguistic, mythological and sociological justifications for the enterprise. The synchronist research has been helped particularly by the structuralists as

“the separation of langue and parole in the semiotic studies of Saussure has revealed the extent to which language communication both written and spoken, relies even in its most primitive forms upon a matrix of social norms. That matrix, it is argued, endows the reader or listener with a competence for deciphering patterns of meaning which the words in isolation would otherwise possess in only a restricted sense. The cultural setting of texts becomes by this linguistic approach not merely an interesting background to the works but intrinsic to their comprehension, making literary criticism isolated from that context no longer fully persuasive. Furthermore, the seminal studies of Levi-Strauss and his followers, exposing in literature a concealed level of systematized mythic relationship bearing universal significance, have furthered the recognition that any segregation of literature from other forms of artistic expression (which by their nature share such mythic elements) is both arbitrary and artificial. The result has been a new impetus for interart studies, which, with the added momentum of Julia

³ Ibid, 4.

Kristeva's concept of intertextuality developed by Harold Bloom, takes us outside the bare text to consider those philosophical, literary, or social traditions which impose preconditions on our reading, as they do on our responses to other arts. Mary Ann Cows can now posit the existence of an architecture in each era, an intertextual overstructure created with the reader's collaboration, which transcends the barriers between the media. Structural interpretation has, for example, made possible, as in her own work, *The Eye in the Text*, the application to literature, too, of psychologically analyzed principles of „perception“ or creative illusionism which had previously been the exclusive preserve of such art historians as Gombrich or Arnheim; and by that cross-application, has demonstrated as outmoded the claim that each art form must be judged solely by its own rules.⁴

There have been different methods of enquiry in the recent interdisciplinary criticism. In her study *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf* Marianna Torgovnick distinguishes two basic common approaches “to fulfilling the promise of interdisciplinary studies”⁵. The first approach deals with the more general connections between art and literature as well as other forms of intellectual activity within a given period, the second approach, which Torgovnick calls “documentary”, focuses rather on a particular author and documents his/her interest in the visual arts.⁶

⁴ Ibid, 6–7.

⁵ Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf*. (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1985) 11.

⁶ Ibid, 11.

The stream of criticism exploring the relationship between the visual arts and literature within the first and more general approach has traditionally rested on the assumption of a cultural patterning in each era, a theory which, under the generic name „periodization“, followed the general principle of *Zeitgeist* as the positing of a universal world-spirit guiding all the activities in a given age. Literature and the visual arts were considered aesthetic expressions of the dominant cultural patterns of a particular period and were thus believed to share certain thematic and stylistic qualities. Such approach has been generally rejected as outmoded and the retrospective view of the complex and often even contradictory sensitivities and forms of expression of individual writers and artists within each period as a monolithic design was wholly abandoned. “The condemnation of this method in the mid-twentieth century encouraged a finer critical awareness of the manifold and often paradoxical elements working within the same time span and even within the same literary work or a work of art.”⁷

Yet, although the *Zeitgeist* tradition approach has been claimed as wholly abandoned, it seems that other concepts which, to a large extent seem analogous, have kept emerging. Critics such as Mario Praz (and his term of “ductus” or handwriting of the age marking an element of style that links the arts within a certain temporal unit), Willie Sypher or even Wendy Steiner who in her interesting interdisciplinary study *The Colors of Rhetoric* says that “the ways that different periods interpret and use the interart analogy reveal much of what is essential to the period’s, genre’s or writer’s overall aesthetics”⁸ share a similar approach.

⁷ Murray Roston, *Changing Perspectives in Literature and the Visual Arts 1650–1820*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 12.

⁸ Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric: Problems in the Relation between Modern Literature and Painting*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982) 4.

These conceptions that have forwarded themselves as correctives to the Zeitgeist tradition are, says Torgovnick, grand but, unfortunately, sometimes rather vague and “frequently require stripping a period of all the countertendencies and quirks that make it interesting”.⁹ The principal danger of this approach rests, she says, in the fact that typically the critic using this method explores a number of periods, sometimes his interest stretches over an entire Western culture. Analogies between literary technique and technique in the visual arts seem more relevant if focused on specific authors.

Therefore she sees as more fruitful the second approach employed in interdisciplinary criticism which she describes as documentary. The critic working within this method either notes all references explicit or implicit to works of art in the examined text and then traces their historical sources in the visual arts or he/she carefully traces the author’s exposure to the visual arts and tastes using journals, publications, letters and subsequently identifies works of art referred to in fiction and makes some analogies between the author’s interests in the visual arts and his writing. Examples of studies executed in this mode are Viola Hopkins’ *Henry James and the Visual Arts* or *Visual Imagination of D.H. Lawrence* by Aldritt. This method, however, often concentrates on the role of particular works of art, which is much less significant than that of the theories of artistic movements or more precisely, how novelists conceived of and used those theories.¹⁰

Torgovnick offers her own comprehensive model of how visual arts can be used in literature. She establishes a *continuum* which is supposed to serve as “rhetoric of ways novels can use the visual arts”.¹¹ The continuum begins with *a decorative use of visual*

⁹ Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf*. (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1985) 11.

¹⁰ Ibid, 12.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

arts followed by a *biographical*, *ideological* and *interpretive use*. Torgovnick points out that a use of the visual arts falling into a particular segment usually involves aspects of all the segments that precede it. The *decorative use* applies to cases when small and isolatable units of the novel like allusions, metaphors or descriptions show a definite and definable use of the visual arts with no real implications beyond itself. These are often short descriptive passages which stand out as influenced by the visual arts and suggest a particular movement or work. The *biographical use* reveals the author's exposure to and contact with particular works of art. The *ideological use* is explained as formulating the major themes of the fiction, views on politics, history, society or reality (for instance descriptions, objects, metaphors or scenes) based upon the aesthetic theories in visual arts. The last segment on the continuum is occupied by the so-called *interpretive use* which is further divided into *perceptual* or *psychological use*, i.e. in what ways *characters* experience art and pictorial objects and scenes in a way that that provokes their conscious or unconscious minds and *hermeneutic use* referring to the ways in which references to the visual arts or objects and scenes rendered pictorially stimulate the interpretive process on the part of the *reader* and cause him to arrive at an understanding of a novel's methods and meanings.¹²

In the light of what has been said so far the present study will focus on its modest aim, i.e. to discuss selected visual aspects in some of the texts by Virginia Woolf. Although it is true that in the major years of modernism, i.e. the first decades of the twentieth century, new vocabularies of vision were transforming literary and cultural texts and that new representations of cognition, of new ways of seeing the world became the common

¹² Ibid, 14.

project of many modernist writers and artists¹³, I certainly do not want to suggest that what I am going to say about Woolf's technique could be in one way or another extended to other modernist writers or even the whole of modernist period.

To avoid subjective assertions and trying not to degenerate into "impressionistic responses and vague drawing of supposed parallels", the drawbacks large-scoped interartistic studies have been so frequently reproached for, I will keep my focus restricted to one author only, i.e. Virginia Woolf, grounding my work in the factual connections and documentable interests of Woolf in the visual arts and the aesthetic theories of her day. To minimize the scope of this study even further I will illustrate my discussions with just a selection of her texts rather than attempting to account for the whole canon or to cover her development within her entire writing career. In my discussion I will employ Torgovnick's distinction between different uses of the visual arts in literature focusing mainly on the *ideological* and *interpretive* uses in Woolf's work.

¹³ Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 2.

2. The Silent Realm of Paint and the Border-land of No Man's Language

The relationship between painting, literature and other forms of art haunted Virginia Woolf throughout her entire artistic life. In the beginning of her essay "Pictures" (1925) Woolf muses over the possibility that someone should write a book which would be concerned with "the flirtations between music, letters, sculpture and architecture" ("Pictures" *TM* 140) and the way the individual arts influenced each other throughout the ages. The inquiry, she claims, would lead to the conclusion that "literature has always been the most sociable and the most impressionable of them all; that sculpture influenced Greek literature, music Elizabethan, architecture the English of the eighteenth century, and now undoubtedly we are under the dominion of painting". ("Pictures" *TM* 140)

Although she was playing with the idea of the interrelatedness between different kinds of arts – "The best critics, Dryden, Lamb, Hazlitt", she says, "wrote of literature with music and painting in their minds" ("Walter Sickert" *CE* 2: 242) – painting and literature were evidently the two arts which occupied her thought most persistently. In the essay on Walter Sickert, a contemporary painter, whose work Woolf admired she observes that "though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common." ("Walter Sickert" *CE* 2: 241)

Woolf's sustained interest in the parallels between the two arts was nourished within the Bloomsbury circle where she associated with painters, writers and art critics. She meditated upon painting and literature and the different sensibilities of painters and

writers in her diaries and essays as well as in letters to her Bloomsbury colleagues – her older sister Vanessa, a painter, whom Virginia loved and admired greatly, Duncan Grant, also a painter, her sister’s husband Clive Bell and Roger Fry, both influential art critics and with her literary associates Lytton Strachey or E.M. Forster. “With Lytton I talk about reading; [...] with Nessa about people; with Roger about art; with Morgan about writing”, notes Woolf in one of her letters. (CS 216)

It is true that in the Bloomsbury Group, the issue of “fusing” the arts, especially the arts of painting and literature, was viewed with some suspicion. Yet, Woolf was utterly convinced of the close though far from easily definable relationship between the two arts: “Were all modern paintings to be destroyed,” she says, “a critic of the twenty-fifth century would be able to deduce from the works of Proust alone the existence of Matisse, Cézanne, Derain and Picasso; he would be able to say with those books before him that painters of the highest originality and power must be covering canvas after canvas, squeezing tube after tube, in the room next door. (“Pictures” *TM* 140)

The influence of the artistic environment where opinions of the two arts often clashed and provided heated discussions resulted in Woolf’s profound preoccupation with and frequent meditation upon their *vedam affinitas* as well as their differences. Woolf’s writings reveal that she is inquisitive to the nature of the painter’s world and often uses “painterly” vocabulary when speaking of works of literature. She is persistently concerned with questions like How far can an artist go in his “raids across the boundaries” of the other art without becoming its victim? (*RF* 239–240) In what ways does the painter’s world differ from the writer’s? Is it possible to treat paintings like novels? (*CS* 337)

Woolf's comments on the relationships between literature and painting are embroidered with such territorial terms as "boundaries", "margins" or "borders", suggesting that she tended to conceive of them as of two distinct territories or maps of two distinct worlds. Vocabulary such as "raids" or "transgressions" which she uses referring to the expeditions undertaken to the 'foreign' territory, to 'the other' world seem to suggest that, in some respects, Woolf thought of the two arts as of rival worlds.¹⁴ Among the number of questions concerning the nature of the world of paint and the world of words there was particularly one that continued to vex Woolf's mind. Is either of the two arts superior to the other? Woolf's comments on the arts of literature and painting scattered throughout her letters, diaries and essays reveal her often ambivalent attitude to this intriguing issue. "An undercurrent of anxiety runs throughout her remarks on relationships between these arts, a sense of danger, rivalry, and uncertainty, kept in check by her mocking and self-mocking wit."¹⁵ In a letter addressed to her nephew Quentin Bell in 1928 the mocking tone is evident:

Your letter has been rather a great surprise to me; because, if you can write as well as that, with such abandonment to devilry and ribaldry, [...], how in God's name can you be content to remain a painter? Surely you must see the infinite superiority of the language to the paint? Think how many things are impossible in paint; giving pain to the Keynes', making fun of one's aunts, telling libidinous stories, making mischief – these are only a few of the

¹⁴ C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective." *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (1989): 327–359.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

advantages; against which a painter has nothing to show: for all his merits are also a writer's. Throw up your career, for God's sake. (CS 234)

The playful irony keeps in check this bold proclamation of the superiority of the language to paint. But even elsewhere Woolf admits to the power of the written word versus the mute brush strokes. While she conceived of writing as the proper medium to encompass the din and the hustle and the marvellous twitter of life, the major characteristic Woolf attributed to the painter's world was silence. In a letter to her sister Vanessa she says: "As a painter, I believe you are much less conscious of the drone of daily life than I am, as a writer. You *are* a painter." (CS 67) While Woolf as a writer loves to roam the busy streets of London with all their noise, omnibuses, cars, dogs and human voices, her sister's painting hang in galleries, which are "sanctuaries where silence reigns supreme" („Pictures" *TM* 142). In a foreword to the catalogue of her sister's exhibition from 1930 Woolf describes a particular painting unveiling the different sensibilities of her sister, a painter, who "transmits it and makes us share it; but it is always by her means, in her language, with her susceptibility, and not ours"¹⁶ and herself, a writer, contrasting the way the two sisters and the two 'sister arts', i.e. painting and writing, approach the same subject.

A good example is to be found in the painting of the Foundling Hospital. Here one says, is the fine old building which has housed a million orphans; here Hogarth painted and kind hearted Thackeray shed a tear, here Dickens, who lived down the street on the left-hand side, must often have paused in his walk to watch the children at play. And it is all gone, all perished. House

¹⁶ S.P. Rosenbaum, ed., *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs, Commentary and Criticism*. (London: University of Toronto Press, 1975) 172.

breakers have been at work, speculators have speculated. It is dust and ashes – but what has Mrs Bell got to say about it? Nothing. There is the picture severe and sunny, and very still. It represents a fine eighteenth century house and an equally fine London plane tree. But there are no orphans, no Thackeray, no Dickens, no housebreakers, no speculators, no tears, no sense that this sunny day is perhaps the last. Our emotion has been given the slip.¹⁷

Not only are the paintings silent but also as opposed to the writer the identity of the painter remains perfectly concealed behind them: “Any writer so ardently questioned,” Woolf claims, “would have yielded something to our curiosity. One defies a novelist to keep his life through twenty-seven volumes of fiction safe from scrutiny. But Mrs Bell says nothing. Mrs Bell is as silent as the grave. Her pictures do not betray her. Their reticence is inviolable.”¹⁸ The “strange painter’s world, in which morality does not enter, and psychology is held at bay, and there are no words”¹⁹ is silent, mysterious, impenetrable. The painters, whom she sees as “the inmates” of this strange world, “must say what they have to say by shading greens into blues, posing block upon block. They must weave their spells like mackerel behind the glass at the aquarium, mutely, mysteriously. Once let them raise the glass and begin to speak and the spell is broken.” (“Pictures” *TM* 142) Woolf frequently calls painters ‘inarticulate’ (*L* I 60), ‘as mute as mackerel’ (“Pictures” *TM* 143), and even claims that due to the silence their art might ‘tend to dumbness’ (*L* II 382).

¹⁷ Ibid, 171.

¹⁸ Ibid, 172.

¹⁹ Ibid, 172.

And yet there are moments in life when time stands still, when the din and the hustle of the street subsides and one is with oneself only, overcome by the beauty of the view in front of him. In such moments words “fold their wings and sit huddled like rooks on the tops of the trees in winter”. (“Walter Sickert” *CE* 2: 240) They become inadequate to express the overpowering beauty and sensation. And it is in these situations, Woolf admits, that the art of painting overtakes the crown. In a letter to her sister she confesses:

Only – well, in Duncan’s highlands, the colours in a perfectly deep blue lake of green and purple trees reflected in the middle of the water which was enclosed with green reeds, and yellow flags, and the whole sky and a purple hill – well, enough. One should be a painter. As a writer, I feel the beauty, which is almost entirely colour, very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen, as if you poured a large jug of champagne over a hairpin.” (*CS* 404)

Evidently, Woolf was perfectly aware that silence in one domain could easily become eloquence in another. In her essay on the painter Walter Sickert she reveals her belief that in certain respects the art of painting stands aloof from the “dribble” of the writer’s pen and the ingenious power of the writer’s language is beaten by the silent and dignified art of painting. She felt that compared to literature, painting expressed itself in a more comprehensible and profound way. Unlike the writer, the painter

Sickert takes his brush, squeezes his tube, looks at the face; and then, cloaked in the divine gift of silence, he paints – lies, paltriness, splendour, depravity, endurance, beauty – it is all there. [...] Not in our time will anyone write a life as Sickert paints it. Words are an impure medium; better

far to have been born into the silent kingdom of paint. (“Walter Sickert” *CE* 2: 236)

Woolf frequently comments upon the inadequacy of language in confrontation with painting. The “impure medium of words” could not, she felt, encompass what the painting expressed. It is possible to describe in words what the eye can see. Thus the writer can say standing in front of Cézanne’s rocky landscape that the landscape is “all cleft in ridges of opal colour as if by a giant’s hammer, silent, solid, serene”. (“Pictures” *TM* 142) Yet this does not suffice. There is always the urge to convey what the picture expresses. But, “[w]ords begin to raise their feeble limbs in the pale border-land of no man’s language, [only] to sink down again in despair. We fling them like nets upon a rocky and inhospitable shores; they fade and disappear. It is vain, it is futile; but we can never resist the temptation.” (“Pictures” *TM* 142) Orlando feels the same way when he tries to translate into words the effect of colours:

So then he tried saying the grass is green and the sky is blue and so to propitiate the austere spirit of poetry whom still, though at a great distance he could not help reverencing. ‘The sky is blue,’ he said, the grass is green.’ Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils of 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. ‘Upon my word,’ he said, (for he had fallen into the bad habit of speaking aloud), ‘I don’t see that one’s more true than another. Both are utterly false.’ And he despaired of being able to solve the problem of what poetry is and what truth is and he fell into a deep dejection. (*O* 63)

Woolf saw the major difference between literature and painting in the way they expressed emotion. Commenting on her sister's paintings she says that they are "immensely expressive", yet "their expressiveness has no truck with words". "Her vision", says Woolf, "excites a strong emotion and yet when we have dramatised it or poetised it or translated it into all the blues and greens, and fines and exquisites and subtles of our vocabulary, the picture itself escapes."²⁰ Woolf felt that as opposed to the novelists who are for ever "tripped up by those miserable impediments called facts", the painters like Sickert can achieve in their works more "complete and flawless statements of life".
(*"Walter Sickert"* *CE* 2: 236)

²⁰ *Ibid*, 173.

3. Roger Fry, Post-Impressionism and the Cultural Earthquake

In the previous chapter I have tried to illustrate Woolf's rather unresolved attitude towards the relationship between literature and painting. On the one hand there was her consistent determination that painting and literature "have much in common", on the other hand her necessary acknowledgement of the rational demarcation lines that "they must part in the end". On the one hand, she confessed her uneasiness about being a stranger to the realm of painting, on the other hand she was under its constant silent spell. And although she felt that literature could express things painting could not, she was much attracted by the silent, dignified world of painters whose silence, it seemed to her, was often more expressive and eloquent than the written word.

It has been mentioned that Woolf's interest in painting and its relationship to literature was cultivated within the Bloomsbury Group. However, none of its members had such profound influence on the way Woolf thought of her work in visual terms as Roger Fry. It was Fry who taught Woolf (and through his relentless defence in art journals and magazines of the "new art" also the British public) how to look at paintings, it was he who made pictures speak. Woolf comments upon Fry's undeniable role in bringing sound into the silent "sanctuaries" of gallery spaces.

Pictures were to many of us – if I may generalize – things that hung upon walls; silent inscrutable patterns; treasure houses with locked doors in front of which learned people would stop, and about which they would lecture,

saying that they were of this period or of that, of this school, or of that, probably by this master, but perhaps on the other hand by one of his disciples. And we would trail behind them silent, servile and bored. Then all of a sudden those pictures began to flash light and colour; and our guides, those respectable professors, began to argue and quarrel, called each other – if I remember rightly– liars and cheats and altogether began to behave like living people arguing about something of vital importance. What had happened? What had brought this life and colour, this racket and din into the quiet galleries of ancient art?

Woolf answers her own rhetorical question:

It was that Roger Fry had gathered together the Post-Impressionist Exhibition in Dover Street; and the names of Cézanne and Gauguin, of Matisse and Picasso suddenly became ... hotly debated ...” (“Roger Fry” *CE* 4: 88)

The name of Roger Fry is now forever associated with the advent of the so-called Post-Impressionism in England in the first decades of the last century marked by the two now notorious Post-Impressionist exhibitions at Grafton Galleries in 1910 and 1912. Post-Impressionism was essentially an English concept. The whole notion of Post-Impressionism was promulgated in England and none of the painters who were given the name would have recognised it or understood it.²¹ The term ‘Post-Impressionist’ appeared in print for the first time probably in a review of the Salon d’Automne in *Art*

²¹ J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 31.

News, 15 October 1910, 4, in which art critic Frank Rutter described Othon Friesz as a ‘post-impressionist’ leader’ and the same issue of *Art News* carried an advertisement for the ‘Post-Impressionists of France’.²² Interestingly enough, Rutter himself objected to the labelling of all modern movements with the term. He argued on the basis of his first-hand familiarity with French art in Paris, that “[t]he loose way, in which the term ‘post-impressionist’ has been used to cover a number of varying, and in some respects contradictory movements, has naturally confused a public seldom inclined to push very far its analysis of modern painting.”²³ The term seemed to induce utter confusion in England as it represented “some half-a-dozen distinct and separate art movements which in France are given separate names”.²⁴

Perhaps it might be appropriate to mention that the two exhibitions organized by Fry were neither unheralded, nor were they the only paths by which modern French art infiltrated the English cultural life. There were several minor exhibitions of art from the Continent between 1905 and 1910 beginning with the Grafton Galleries exhibition of 1905 and the British public was treated to regular accounts of the major shows of modern art in Paris in art journals. The *Burlington Magazine*, the *Connoisseur* and the *Studio* published notices of contemporary artistic activity across the Channel and journals and newspapers such as the *Athenaeum* and *The Times* regularly devoted space to the Salon des Indépendantes and the Salon d’Automne.²⁵ Fry was thus by no means the first and the only critic who was aware that important developments in art were taking place in France. Yet the significance of his two exhibitions remains unquestioned as well as the fact that it was he who was primarily responsible for bringing modern art to England.

²² *Ibid*, 37.

²³ Frank Rutter, “Revolution in Art” 1910, in: J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 191.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 191.

²⁵ J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 6.

Woolf's notorious claim that "in or about December 1910 human character changed" ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" *CE* 1: 320) has been frequently interpreted as having to do with living in what she called "Post-Impressionist age". It may not have been human character that changed with the arrival in Britain of Post-Impressionism, says J.B. Bullen in his introduction to the book of collected criticism of Post-Impressionism from the time span between 1905 and 1914, but "[t]he language and discourse of art certainly underwent substantial modification, and the vocabulary and grammar of painting which had been evolving in France seemed, from a British point of view, to overthrow established traditions and stable artistic values."²⁶

To say that the advent of Post-Impressionism in England caused a cultural earthquake would perhaps not be much of an overstatement. The uncertainty among critics and the confusion amongst the public caused by the introduction of the new art were great. The violent reviews of the early exhibitions displaying the work of the modern French painters serve as the most eloquent proofs. In one of them a critic asks: "What is one to think of Paul Gauguin's ideas of oxen – 'Les Boeufs'? They are wooden-looking beasts akin to those of the nursery Noah's ark variety, and their landscape environment is innocent of any attempt at perspective."²⁷ Another critic commented upon a painting by Andre Derain: "[C]an an artist who paints the Thames Embankment with yellow sky, pink trees and pavements, yellow water, blue cabs and green houses, by any means, be serious in his art?"²⁸

²⁶ Ibid, I.

²⁷ "Modern French Art at Brighton: Some Nightmare Impressionists", *Brighton Standard and Fashionable Visitors' List*, 11 June 1910, 2 in: J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 14.

²⁸ Walter Higgins, "Modern French Painting", *Art Chronicle*, 25 June 1910 in: J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 118.

Fry's first Post-Impressionist exhibition was much larger in scale than the previous exhibitions of continental art. And, unsurprisingly, the number of reviews, raging, furious or mocking, rose proportionately to the size of the exhibition. A representative of the most extreme responses to the pictures at this exhibition the poet and politician W.S. Blunt noted in his diary: "The exhibition is either an extremely bad joke or a swindle. [...] The drawing is on the level of that of an untaught child of seven or eight years old, the sense of colour that of a teatray painter, the method that of a schoolboy who wipes his fingers on a slate after spitting on them. There is nothing at all more humorous than that, at all more clever."²⁹ In an unsigned review characteristically called "Paint Run Mad: Post-Impressionists at Grafton Galleries" a critic rages about the works on display: "It is astonishing to find that van Gogh's raging golden sea against a royal blue sky, a vermilion paint-pot upset in the foreground, represents a cornfield with black-birds; and only on the retreating to the far side of the gallery do you find that the vermilion splodges might – this is a suggestion, not a statement fact – be roads."³⁰ Elsewhere he attacks Matisse's painting: "Words are powerless to describe an epileptic landscape by Henri Matisse, quite without form, its kaleidoscopic colour scheme only bearable from the next room."³¹ The newspapers and art journals swarmed with similarly outraged responses in which the Post-Impressionist works were linked with adjectives like "primitive", "offensive", "crude", "ridiculous", "insane", "a terrible disease or infection". Post-Impressionism was associated with social anarchy, revolution and psychological disturbance.

²⁹ Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, "My Diaries", 1920, entry for 15 November 1910 in: J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 114.

³⁰ "Paint Run Mad: Post-Impressionists at Grafton Galleries", *Daily Express*, 9 November 1910 in: J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 105.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 106.

It is evident from the above-quoted reviews that the principal artistic objections to the new art were mostly poor technique, lack of perspective or unnatural use of colour, in other words, the major offense committed by the modern painters and one the critics and the public found themselves unable to reconcile with was the absolute disregard of any form of representationalism or likeness to natural form, which has traditionally been considered as the fundamental purpose of pictorial art. In his articles, essays, reviews and lectures Fry defended unrelentingly the new art. And his major concern was to convince the English audience that it was exactly this assumption, that art should imitate reality, that must be abandoned in understanding the modern paintings. The modern sensibilities, he argued, demanded a new appropriate pictorial language. And this, he was convinced, was one of the aims of the artistic revolution inaugurated by Cézanne and continued by Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse and others.

[T]he feeling on the part of the public may, and I think in this case it does, arise from a simple misunderstanding of what these artists set out to do. The difficulty springs from a deep-rooted conviction, due to long-established custom, that the aim of painting is the descriptive imitation of natural forms. Now these artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and

contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities.³²

While critics saw in the Post-Impressionist art a revolution and considered it an utter and unprecedented disruption of certain traditions in the history of art, Fry saw in the advent of the new way of painting a logical development to evolve from the preceding movement – the French Impressionism.

Impressionism marked the climax of a movement which had been going on more or less steadily from the thirteenth century – the tendency to approximate the forms of art more and more exactly to the representation of the totality of appearance. When once representation had been pushed to this point where further development was impossible, it was inevitable that artists should turn round and question the validity of the fundamental assumption that art aimed at representation; and the moment the question was fairly posed it became clear that the pseudo-scientific assumption that the fidelity to appearance was the measure of art had no logical foundation.³³

Thus the Post-Impressionist painting, according to Fry, did not mean a breakaway from the earlier development in art. It did, however, involve a significant rethinking of the purpose of art, abandoning its traditional mimetic aspects in favour of stressing the purely decorative quality of painting and establishing the primacy of form, colour and design.

³² Roger Fry, “The French Post-Impressionists” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 166.

³³ Roger Fry, “Art and Life” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 8.

It is this re-valuation of the visual that Cézanne started. [...] He discovered distortions and ruthless simplifications ... of natural form, which allowed the fundamental element of design – the echo of human need – to reappear in his representations. And this has gone on ever since his day in the group of artists we are considering. More and more regardlessly they are cutting away the merely representative element in art to establish more and more firmly the fundamental elements of expressive form in its barest, most abstract elements.³⁴

Ignoring the antagonistic criticism Fry continued to explain what he considered to be the principal objectives of Post-Impressionist art: re-establishment of purely aesthetic criteria in place of the criterion of conformity to appearance and the rediscovery of the principles of structural design and harmony and the attempt on the part of the French artists to express by pictorial and plastic form certain spiritual experiences.³⁵ Fry was naturally not the only champion of the new movement in modern art. He was supported in his quest by a number of other critics, and also by his Bloomsbury associates, the painters Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell through their work which was inspired by the Post-Impressionists and, by his colleague, art critic Clive Bell, whose reviews and especially his book *Art* published in 1914 in which he worked out the concept of “significant form”, helped to make the British public acquainted and used to the new ideas and concepts worked out in the Post-Impressionist art.

³⁴ Roger Fry, “The Grafton Gallery – I”, *Nation*, 3 December 1910 in: J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 122.

³⁵ Roger Fry, “The French Post-Impressionists” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 166.

Surprisingly, it did not take long before the change in acceptance of the new art by the British audience happened. The French painters being more frequently on display at a number of minor shows and their reproductions being available in art magazines the public was becoming used to acquiring in time a new tolerance in their judgment on the works of art. Even though there was still heard some negative criticism in autumn 1912 when Fry organized the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at Grafton Galleries “most critics found complimentary things to say especially about the small section of works by Cezanne or the work of Duncan Grant, Frederick Etchells or Vanessa Bell ...”³⁶ The cultural earthquake was slowly beginning to subside. The new art of Post-Impressionism offered a new way of seeing and understanding the world. It defined a new relationship between man and nature, and developed a new connection between the spectator and the work of art. It was not just that the subjects of Post-Impressionist art were new or different; the principles of mimesis itself – perspective, representationalism, the articulation of the picture surface – all seemed to have been reorganised.³⁷

Importantly, the new art had caused a significant change in the language of art criticism. “Acceptability of any new art form is intimately dependent upon the written word and during the period 1910-1914 criticism changed substantially; broadly speaking it evolved in the direction of formalism where concepts such as ‘rhythm’, ‘movement’, ‘decorative power’ or ‘expressive colour’ were used to translate visual experience into verbal experience.”³⁸ As will be illustrated later, this new language of art criticism, greatly promoted by Roger Fry, was a principal and fruitful source of inspiration for Virginia Woolf, who frequently employed it in her writing. Woolf pointed out in her address at the

³⁶ J.B. Bullen, ed., *Post-Impressionism in England*. (London: Routledge, 1988) 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 32.

opening of Fry's posthumous exhibition that "pictures have never gone back to their walls. They are no longer silent, decorous and dull. They are things we live with, and laugh at, love and discuss. And I think I am right in saying that it was Roger Fry more than anybody who brought about this change." ("Roger Fry" *CE* 4: 88) It was Roger Fry more than anybody who made pictures speak. And, we may add, it was him more than anybody who taught Woolf to look at literature with a painter's eye.

4. Painting with Words

It could be argued that within the Bloomsbury Group the principles of aesthetics were set forth chiefly by Roger Fry. Although some critics have stressed the role of Clive Bell as the pace-maker due to his publication in 1914 of his influential book on aesthetics *Art*, in which he explained his concept of the “significant form”, it is necessary to realize that although Fry’s *Vision and Design*, a book in which his most important ideas on art were formulated was published only six years later, it was a collection of essays Fry wrote and published between 1901 and 1920. And, though more radical in certain aspects, Bell’s aesthetics seems to rely heavily on Fry’s opinions voiced in his early work. Fry, the oldest member of Bloomsbury, studied natural sciences at Cambridge but his inclination towards art finally made him pursue extensive studies in art and become an artist and a critic of art. He became member of the Bloomsbury Group in 1910 and his anti-utilitarian views of art were warmly welcome by the Bloomsburies whose interest in aesthetics rested to a large degree on the philosophical background of G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica* which, among other things, put forward the enjoyment of beautiful things as one of the most important states of consciousness.

As an art critic Fry soon became an established authority and his professional views excited respect and admiration not only within the Bloomsbury Group. For Woolf Fry was not only something of a mentor in the domain of the visual arts but also a good friend and an interesting personality, qualities which she felt deserved to be portrayed and preserved for the public in her biography of Fry. “[J]ust as connoisseurs would bring him

a picture for his opinion,” she wrote, “so people of all kinds ... would bring him their lives – those canvases upon which we paint so many queer designs – and he would bring to bear upon their muddles and misfortunes the same rare mixture of logic and sympathy that made him so invigorating as a critic.” (*RF* 90) Woolf greatly respected Fry’s judgment of works of art and feeling her own inferiority in the field often confessed to her uneasiness when speaking about art in his presence. An entry in her diary from 1918 says:

Nor did I show myself one of the elect, with regard to painting at least. We visited the National Gallery together this morning; I thought a Rembrandt “very fine” which to him was mere melodrama. A little El Greco conveyed little until he illumined it; showed how it held more real colour than any other picture there. Then the Ingres was repulsive to me; & to him one of the most marvellous designs. 16 Dec 1918 (*D* 1: 228)

Woolf’s discussions of art with Fry were not limited to the field of painting only. Just like Woolf Fry had a considerable interest in other kinds of art outside his ‘territory’, particularly literature. In her biography of Fry Woolf notes a long-standing though incomplete theory of the influence of the Post-Impressionist painting upon literature which Fry had intended to work out and of his dream of establishing a broadsheet “in which the two arts should work out their theories side by side” (*RF* 180). Fry and Woolf discussed the respective methods of painting and literature and their possible relation of which both shared some fascination. “Roger and I,” says Woolf in her diary, “get on very well now; more genuine & free than we were... We agree on many points ... Then we discuss prose; & as usual some book is had out; & I have to read a passage over his

shoulder. Theories are fabricated.” 7 Dec 1918 (*D* 1: 225) Woolf’s letters to Fry also show that she valued his opinion of her own work:

“I’m sending you my novel tomorrow – a little reluctantly. It has some merit, but its too much of an experiment. I am buyoed up, as usual, by the thought that I’m now, at last, going to bring it off – next time. I suppose one goes on thinking this for ever; and so burrowing deeper and deeper into whatever it is that perpetually fascinates. Why don’t you come back and explain it? – you are the only person who ever does[.]” Sun Oct. 22nd 1922
(*CS* 148)

It cannot be claimed that Woolf accepted the literary theories ‘fabricated’ by Fry fully and without reservations. “As a critic of literature,” Woolf says, “he was not what is called a safe guide. He looked at the carpet from the wrong side[.]” Yet it was exactly the fact that Fry looked at books with the eye of an art critic and painter and offered a different perspective from that of the writer that Woolf found inspiring. “[B]ut he made it for that very reason display unexpected patterns. And many of his theories held good for both arts. Design, rhythm, texture – there they were again – in Flaubert as in Cézanne. And he would hold up a book to the light as if it were a picture and show where in his view – it was a painter’s of course – it fell short.” (*RF* 240) Fry himself encouraged Woolf to look at a book with the painter’s view and he praised the striking visual character of Woolf’s writing which he commented upon in an essay of 1919. Discussing the work of the French painter Survage Fry makes an experiment in the essay of translating into words one of Survage’s paintings to illustrate his point that in the “new

kind of literary painting” “ideas, symbolised by forms, could be juxtaposed, contrasted and combined almost as they can be by words on a page”.³⁹

The Town

Houses, always houses, yellow fronts and pink fronts jostle one another, push one another this way and that way, crowd into every corner and climb to the sky; but however close they get together the leaves of trees push into their interstices, and mar the drilled decorum of their ranks; hard green leaves, delicate green leaves, veined all over with black lines, touched with rust between the veins, always more and more minutely articulated, more fragile and more irresistible. But the houses do not despair, they continue to line up, precise and prim, flat and textureless; always they have windows all over them and insides, banisters, cornices, friezes; always in their proper places; they try to deny the leaves, but the leaves are harder than the houses and more persistent. Between houses and leaves there move the shapes of men; more transient than either, they scarcely leave a mark; their shadows stain the walls for a moment; they do not even rustle the leaves.

I see, now that I have done it, that it was meant for Mrs. Virginia Woolf – that Survage is almost precisely the same thing in paint that Mrs Virginia Woolf is in prose. Only I like intensely such sequences of ideas presented to me in Mrs Virginia Woolf’s prose, and as yet I have a rather strong distaste for Survage’s visual statements.⁴⁰

³⁹ Roger Fry, “Modern French Art at the Mansard Gallery”, I, *The Athenaeum* (8 August, 1919), 724.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 724.

Fry's direct comparison between what he calls "literary painting" and Woolf's writing finds justification in a number of Woolf's texts. In her fiction, essays, articles and even letters we find similar visual images which are reminiscent of a transcription in words of a painting. These are usually short descriptive passages in which Woolf depicts a setting of a story or a particular place as the following examples will illustrate. In an essay "Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a motor-car" Woolf describes an evening descending on the land:

What remains is what there was when William came over from France ten centuries ago: a line of cliffs running out to sea. Also the fields are redeemed. The freckle of red villas on the coast is washed over by a thin lucid lake of brown air, in which they and their redness are drowned. It was still too early for lamps; and too early for stars. ("Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a motor-car" *CE* 2: 290)

The same principle is used in a short story called "Sympathy":

We sit down and look at the triangular space of yellow-green field beneath us through the arch of bramble twigs which divides them so queerly. ("Sympathy" *CSF* 109)

In "Flying over London" Woolf recounts her remarkable experience of seeing the city from the plane:

Nothing more fantastic could be imagined. Houses, streets, banks, public buildings, and habits and muttons and brussels sprouts had been swept into

long spirals and curves of pink and purple like that a wet brush makes when it sweeps mounds of paint together. (“Flying over London” *CE* 2: 168)

In yet another essay called “Street Haunting” Woolf gives her account of the place this time from the pedestrian’s perspective:

But this is London, we are reminded; high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish-yellow light–windows; there are points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars–lamps. ... Let us dally a little longer, be content still with surfaces only– the glossy brilliance of the omnibuses; the carnal splendour of the butchers’ shops with their yellow flanks and purple steaks; the blue and red bunches of flowers burning so bravely through the plate glass of the florists’ window ... (“Street Haunting” *CE* 2: 156)

Pages and pages could be covered with examples of similar strongly visual passages that are scattered through Woolf’s works. However, it should be pointed out that Marianna Torgovnick’s definition of “decorative” segments, i.e. “isolatable units” of text with “no real implications beyond themselves” which display “a definable use of the visual arts often suggesting a particular artistic movement”⁴¹, can be applied almost exclusively to Woolf’s non-fictional writing. In her fiction the “decorative use” of the visual arts is usually closely related to the other uses, either “ideological” or “interpretive”, more of which and also of the relevant artistic movements Impressionism and Post-Impressionism will be said in the following chapters.

⁴¹ Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf*. (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1985) 12.

Woolf's use of the visual arts, however, is more complex than the mere making of 'sketches' and 'painting with words'. It is only "partial" and "incomplete" writers ("Pictures" *TM* 140) who are satisfied with the pictorial embroidery in their texts. "The world", says Woolf, "is full of cripples at the moment, victims of the art of painting who paint apples, roses, china, pomegranates, tamarinds, and glass jars as well as words can paint them, which is, of course, not very well." ("Pictures" *TM* 140) Woolf herself goes beyond.

5. The Way Beyond: Towards a New Literary Method

Let us now look more closely at what has been noted as the "ideological use" of the visual arts in literature. In Torgovnick's definition this particular use rests in rendering the major themes of the fiction and the writer's views on society, politics or reality in specific ways which draw from theories developed and practiced in the visual arts.⁴² With regard to Woolf's work this involves a derivation of important aspects of her theory of fiction particularly from the Impressionist and the Post-Impressionist styles in painting. As has been suggested in the previous chapter describing a scene by the mere painting with words was not satisfactory. Yet Woolf was convinced that

[t]he novelist after all wants to make us see. Gardens, rivers, skies, clouds changing, the colour of a woman's dress, landscapes that bask beneath lovers, twisted woods that people walk in when they quarrel—novels are full of pictures like these. The novelist is always saying to himself how can I bring the sun on to my page? How can I show the night and the moon rising? And he must often think that to describe a scene is the worst way to show it. ("Walter Sickert" *CE* 2: 240-241)

Woolf therefore experimented with other ways of "bringing the sun on to her page" drawing inspiration from the current trends in the visual arts.

⁴² Ibid, 13.

Generally, the tendency among critics has been to see in Woolf's work a gradual progress in method from the Impressionist towards the Post-Impressionist style. Jack F. Stewart claims in his essay on form and colour in *The Waves* that "Woolf's art evolved from impressionism to post-impressionism" and explains that "the analogy here is with Cézanne, [who] created a new unity and cohesiveness of composition by laying bare the elements of color relationships and space definitions. He bound color to structure, surface to depth, form to content, process to realized work."⁴³ Ann Banfield's interpretation is also based on the analogy with Cézanne, whom Fry and the Bloomsburies saw as the key figure and the father of Post-Impressionism. Banfield argues that Woolf's literary Impressionism developed from short story experiments towards Post-Impressionist novel. In the same way Cézanne's "Post-Impressionism constructed a geometry in Impressionism's sensible world" claims Banfield, Woolf turned story into novel by creating a continuity of Impressionist moments through the interlude. According to this hypothesis Part One and Part Three of *To the Lighthouse* are composed as "short stories" and the interlude "Time Passes", "transforms story into novel by relating past to future creating a Post-Impressionist novel".⁴⁴ Allen McLaurin stresses the progress from the sensational world of the Impressionists to the Post-Impressionist form, rhythm and geometry focusing his investigation on the repetitive aspects of Woolf's work⁴⁵, while Jane Goldman's study of Woolf's writing explores "the possibility of an interventionist and feminist understanding of colour, more readily associated with aspects of Post-Impressionism than Impressionism".⁴⁶

⁴³ Jack F. Stewart, "Spatial Form and Color in *The Waves*" *Twentieth Century Literature* 28.1 (1982) 86-107.

⁴⁴ Ann Banfield, "Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism and Cambridge Time" *Poetics Today* 24:3 (2003) 473-516.

⁴⁵ Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*. (London : CUP, 1973) 1.

⁴⁶ Jane Goldman, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf*. (Cambridge: The University of Cambridge Press 1998) 9.

It is evident that the interpretations of what has been called Post-Impressionism in Virginia Woolf's work are rather diverse. And, naturally, most of the analyses concentrate on Woolf's later work where the Post-Impressionist features are more prominent. Although it might be true that while Woolf's early works relied in their aesthetic method solely on the Impressionist technique and that later on, aided by discussions with Roger Fry, Woolf came to adapt and perhaps put more emphasis on new ways of approaching the novel, it cannot be claimed that in Woolf's method of writing 'literary Impressionism' was replaced entirely by the new ideas associated with the Post-Impressionist aesthetic theory. It rather seems, as I hope to illustrate, that Woolf picked and transformed in a way which fitted her literary aims aspects of both artistic concepts. "Impressionism still has its valuable place even in Woolf's later texts, though it must, constantly struggle with the Post-Impressionist logic of form and design," says McLaurin in the conclusion to his book.⁴⁷ It seems that rather than struggling with each other the "Impressionist" and "Post-Impressionist" principles exist 'peacefully' side by side and even complement each other in Woolf's fiction.

Woolf acquired her knowledge and understanding of Post-Impressionism chiefly through Fry's aesthetics. She also agreed with some more general points of his theory of art which she incorporated into her literary method. Before moving to the more specific aspects of Fry's theory and their influence on Woolf's work, let us first explore the common ground Woolf and Fry shared in their opinions of art and its relation to life and the problem of representation in art. Fry's most important doctrines and critical ideas were largely formulated as early as 1909 in "An Essay in Aesthetics" published in the *New Quarterly* and re-issued in *Vision and Design* in 1920 while Woolf expressed her theoretical

⁴⁷ Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*. (London : CUP, 1973) 184.

opinions on fiction most cogently in her essays “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1923) and “Modern Fiction” (1924). These texts will serve as the point of departure for the discussion of some important parallels between Woolf’s and Fry’s aesthetic theories.

According to Fry, art differed from life mainly in that it required no responsive deeds. Rather than a copy of actual life, all graphic arts, he said, were the expression of what he called “the imaginative life”.⁴⁸ He explained that a great part of human life was made up of instinctive reactions to sensible objects, and their accompanying emotions as, for instance, when we see a bull, a nervous process goes on which results in a flight. Thus, claimed Fry, since “man has the peculiar faculty of calling up again in his mind the echo of past experiences, of going over it again, ‘in imagination’, he has, therefore, the possibility of a double life; one the actual life, the other the imaginative life”.⁴⁹ The major difference between them is that unlike in the actual life where the instinctive reaction is the important part of the whole process, in imaginative life no such action is necessary and, therefore, “the whole consciousness may be focused upon the perceptive and the emotional aspects of the experience.”⁵⁰ Art, then, is according to Fry an expression and a stimulus of this imaginative life, which offers a different set of values and a different kind of perception and is separated from actual life by the absence of responsive action. Art in his view is self-sufficient, serves no ulterior purpose, and should not be judged by moral, political or other non-aesthetic standards.⁵¹

Similarly, Woolf insisted on the autonomous character of art repudiating the sociological implications of the “Edwardian” novels, which leave the reader with a sense of

⁴⁸ Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 16.

⁴⁹ Ibid 17.

⁵⁰ Ibid 18.

⁵¹ Ibid, 19.

incompleteness and dissatisfaction so that “in order to complete them it seems necessary to do something – to join a society, or, more desperately, to write a cheque.” (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” *CE* 1: 326) Novels, says Woolf, should be complete in themselves, leaving the reader with no other desire but to “read the book again” and understand it better. (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” *CE* 1: 327) Everything should be inside, nothing outside and there should be no feeling of necessity on the part of the reader for any external action. Thus in accord with the general anti-utilitarian character of art promoted within the Bloomsbury Group, both Fry and Woolf put stress on the self-contained quality of art and agree that through the absence of responsive action required in actual life, art presents a world freed from the binding necessities of our actual existence.

The second issue that was of importance both for Woolf and Fry was that of representation in art. Fry’s embattled view of conventional representation in the visual arts has been pointed out in the previous chapter. An ardent advocate of formal significance Fry was opposed to the idea that art should be a truthful imitation of reality and attacked the photographic copying of outward appearances in visual arts.⁵² It is true, that in this respect Fry was not as radical as his younger colleague, the art critic Clive Bell, who insisted on art being entirely non-representational. Nevertheless, Fry strongly believed that it should no longer be the true aim of art to imitate the existing reality according to the old convention and his conviction in this respect applied also to literature. He asked as early as the first Post-Impressionistic Exhibition in London (1910), why no English novelist took his art seriously. “Why were they all engrossed in childish problems of photographic representation?” “Literature,” he was sure, “was suffering from

⁵² Allen McLaurin offers a detailed discussion of Fry and the problem of representation in art in Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*. (London : CUP, 1973), 17-25.

a plethora of old clothes. Cézanne and Picasso had shown the way; writers should fling representation to the winds and follow suit.“ (RF 172)⁵³

Fry’s attack on exact copying of external reality in the visual arts is paralleled by Woolf’s rejection of the photographic description of reality in literature and her call for a new and fundamentally different method of writing. She believed that as “in or about December, 1910, human character changed”, and with it “all human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children”, such profound change in human relations necessarily had to be reflected in politics, religion and, of course, in literature. (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” CE 1: 320) The tools of the contemporary established writers like Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells, “the Edwardians”, says Woolf, had ceased to work. (“Modern Fiction” CE 2: 106). She considered wasted the enormous labour these writers spent on trying to achieve the likeness to life. She believed that they “write of unimportant things and spend immense skills making the transitory appear true and enduring” where “one line of insight would do more than all the lines of description”. (“Modern Fiction” CE 2: 107) The excessive “materialism” resting in the slavish copying of external detail cannot render satisfactorily “the spirit we live by, life itself”. (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” CE 1: 337) The “magnificent apparatus for catching life”, she suggests, might be “just an inch or two on the wrong side” so that the essential thing, “whether we call it life or spirit or reality”, escapes. (“Modern Fiction” CE 2: 105)

⁵³ Jane Goldman (Goldman, 1998) points out that Fry’s statement echoes Arnold Bennett’s challenge made in his (quite surprisingly and almost uniquely) favourable review of “Manet and the Post-Impressionists” written as early as 1910, which Woolf in turn reviewed: “These new pictures, he says, have wearied him of other pictures; is it no possible that some writer will come along and do in words what these men have done in paint?” (E 2:130)

The long-established convention, argued Woolf, ceased to be a means of communication between writer and reader and instead became an obstacle and an impediment. Fry's comment on the plethora of old clothes from which literature suffered finds direct echo in Woolf's claim that: "At the present moment we are suffering, not from decay, but from having no code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship. The literary convention of the time is so artificial ... that, naturally the feeble are tempted to outrage, and the strong are led to destroy the very foundations and rules of literary society." ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" *CE* 1: 334) Therefore, the Georgian age is characterised by "the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction". And just like the works of the nineteenth century realist painters have been shattered into the new and free compositions of artists like Matisse and Picasso, "the sound of the axes of the Georgian writers is heard throughout poems, novels, biographies, even newspaper articles and essays" and in the season of failures and fragments they must face the problem of finding a new form, "a new way of telling the truth". ("Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" *CE* 1: 334)

Fry and Woolf both call for new methods within their artistic domains which involve the abandonment of photographic representation of external reality. And they both see as vital a subversion of established expectations on the part of the audience of the particular artistic genre. Just as Fry stresses the need to "fling to the winds" the long-established assumption that a good piece of art is such which imitates reality most truthfully, Woolf insists that critics and readers should forget about the traditional "signposts" of a novel „which for generations have served to support the imagination of a reader when called upon to imagine what he can neither touch nor see.“ ("Modern Fiction" *CE* 2: 107)

[I]f a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond street tailors would have it. (“Modern Fiction” *CE* 2: 106)

Also, both with Fry and Woolf, freeing their respective arts from the traditional and the established bonds involves a certain turn ‘inwards’. The emphasis lies on the inner essence rather than external reality. Fry points out the analogy in the new orientation of scientific and artistic endeavour. “Science,” he says, “has turned its instruments in on human nature and begun to investigate its fundamental needs, and art has also turned its vision inwards, has begun to work upon the fundamental necessities of man’s aesthetic functions.”⁵⁴ Woolf also puts stress on the turn from the exterior and objective towards the interior and subjective praising the “spiritual“ rather than “materialist“ approach of the modern writers whose “point of interest lies very likely in the dark places of psychology“. (“Modern Fiction” *CE* 2: 105) They put emphasis “upon something hitherto ignored“ attempting to reveal “the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain“ (“Modern Fiction” *CE* 2: 105). Importantly, the fundamental change in the subject matter which rather than on the outward human existence concentrates on the inner life of the mind necessarily calls for a new form. Thus „at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors.“ (“Modern Fiction” *CE* 2: 105)

⁵⁴ Roger Fry, “Art and Life” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 10.

Regarding the visual arts, it can be claimed, that Woolf began her quest towards a new aesthetics with the exploration of the possibilities of literary Impressionism. The turn inwards she called for in fiction involved recording the processes of inner thought and in attempt to capture these, Woolf exploited certain principles employed by the Impressionist painters. She suggests the new direction the literary method should take in the following frequently cited statement:

Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms. ... Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. (“Modern Fiction” *CE* 2: 107)

Throughout her entire work Woolf seems to be holding on to her aim to transfer onto her page the ‘myriad of impressions’, which seems to be her corrective to the descriptive realism, her way of rendering the surface appearance of reality, giving the reader not a detailed description of the outside world but offering merely certain impressions and sensations the mind experiences. Yet, even in the above quoted passage which has often been considered a proclamation of Woolf’s Impressionist optics she makes it clear that apart from recording “the innumerable atoms” of impressions the mind is showered with in touch with the surface of reality, her method also involves a search for a certain pattern or some deeper meaning hidden under the surface appearances. This is where we hear the

echo of Fry's aesthetics with its stress on a design, or meaningful pattern in a work of art which will be discussed in greater detail in Chapters 7 and 8. First, however, let us consider Woolf's use of the principles of Impressionism.

6. The Impressionist Moment

It is perhaps not necessary to repeat what has been made clear many times that the basis of an original means of expression of the Impressionist painters was the attempt to record certain impressions and sensations, to capture the fleeting moment. The aim was to transfer onto their canvas the transient effects of light and atmosphere of an observed scene or in other words to render visually the first impression in such a way as to be sincere and honest to the appearance of a motif under a single and unified light.⁵⁵ The first concept of central importance to the Impressionists and from which the very name the group of artists were denominated with was, of course, that of the *impression*. It was understood as either a kind of rough sketch, normally made on the spot or, more importantly, as the initial impression a scene made on the mind of the painter.⁵⁶ The second important concept in the Impressionist aesthetic theory was *sensation*. In 1874, a critic described Impressionist painters by saying that “they were Impressionists in the sense that they rendered not the landscape, but the sensation produced by the landscape.” The two words were used by the critics almost interchangeably.⁵⁷

Edmond Duranty, one of the few defenders of the Impressionist painters at the dawn of their fame, describes the aim of an Impressionist painter observing a scene on the street. “They [the Impressionists] have tried to render the walk, the movement, the tremor, the intermingling of passerby, just as they have tried to render the trembling of leaves, the

⁵⁵ Paul Smith, *Impressionism: Beneath the Surface*. (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1995) 19.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 20.

shivering of water, and the vibration of air inundated with light, and just as, in the case of the rainbow colorings of the solar rays, they have been able to capture the soft ambiance of a grey day.”⁵⁸ This account is largely reminiscent of the technique in some of Woolf’s early fiction, the most prominent example being her “Impressionist” story “Kew Gardens” in which innumerable evanescent impressions are captured within a single moment on a summer’s day when light dissolves the outlines of objects and people into patches of colour and we feel the vibration of the summer heat on the trembling leaves and petals of the flowers:

The petals were voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour. (“Kew Gardens” *CSF* 91)

or:

They walked on past the flower-bed, now walking four abreast, and soon diminished in size among the trees and looked half-transparent as the sunlight and shade swam over their backs in large trembling irregular patches.(“Kew Gardens” *CSF* 91)

The semi-transparent colours, the importance of light, the blurred quality of vision have been often commented upon as the Impressionist instruments Woolf used in her writing. Most importantly, however, just as the Impressionist painters tried to transfer upon their

⁵⁸ Linda Nochlin, *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism 1874–1904*. (London : Prentice-Hall International, 1966) 7.

canvas the impression of a scene experienced in a particular moment and communicate certain sensations, Woolf attempts to capture the present fleeting moment trying to render the impression, the physical sensation a particular scene or a situation provokes. In her much cited essay “The Moment: Summer’s Night” Woolf says that “the present moment is largely composed of visual and of sense impressions.” The following passage is an interesting example of the way she renders the particular impressions and sensations one experiences in the heat of the summer’s day:

The day was very hot. After heat, the surface of the body is opened, as if all the pores were open and everything lay exposed, not sealed and contracted, as in cold weather. The air wafts cold on the skin under one’s clothes. The soles of the feet expand in slippers after walking on hard roads. Then the sense of the light sinking back into the darkness seems to be gently putting out with a damp sponge the colour in one’s own eyes. Then the leaves shiver now and again, as if a ripple of irresistible sensation ran through them, as a horse suddenly ripples its skin. (“The Moment: Summer’s Night’ *CE* 2: 293)

As opposed to the painter, Woolf has the advantage of working both with the visual and the auditory impressions. Her fiction, and not only her early works, abides with situations in which the reader is showered with images and sounds, this being Woolf’s way of showing rather than describing. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, Woolf shows a single moment of Clarissa Dalloway standing on the street of London. Venturing the use of a rather vague metaphor we might add that her fragmentary syntax is reminiscent of the short strokes of the Impressionist brush:

“In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motorcars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.” (*MD* 6)

Thus it is not just Woolf’s use of the traditional tools like light and colour, semi-transparent vision and blurred outlines that make her fiction Impressionist. More importantly, she works with the Impressionist moment in the sense that she tries to give shape to the myriad of visual, auditory and physical impressions, the subjective mind of her characters encounters at the point of intersection with the exterior reality. Similarly, the Impressionist painters spoke of their impressions as personal and subjective and their interest in them was understood as “the experience that marked the meeting place of the individual, interior self and the outside world.”⁵⁹

It can be argued that Woolf applied the concept of rendering impressions also in her theory of character. To impart a character was for Woolf one of the chief tasks of a novelist. (“Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” *CE* 1: 319) In his account of impressionism in literature Ford Madox Ford explains that one of the main objectives of Impressionist prose is cancelling the traditional “realistic” character. He stresses the importance of the power of the writer to make the first impression: “Always consider the impressions that you are making upon the mind of the reader, and always consider that the first impression with which you present him will be so strong that it will be all that you can ever do to

⁵⁹ Paul Smith, *Impressionism: Beneath the Surface*. (London: George Weidenfeld and Nicolson Ltd, 1995) 21.

efface it, to alter it or even quite slightly to modify it.”⁶⁰ Ford provides as an illustrative case Maupassant’s treatment of the character of Henry VIII. Instead of flooding the reader with all possible details of the king’s life to make him alive like “his parentage, his diseases, the size of his shoes, his relation to his wives or his proficiency with the bow”, he simply says that the king was “a gentleman with red whiskers who always went first through a door.”⁶¹ That, argues Ford is an impression that will stay imprinted in the reader’s mind.

To introduce a real character, says Ford, rests in defying the seduction of providing a detailed description of personality. The writer should rather “strike the keynote with a speech or with an action”⁶². Woolf seems to adopt this tactic in her attempt to bring her characters to life. And, importantly, her characters are as a rule rendered through the eyes of other characters, or rather they are presented through the series of impressions the other characters have of them. Thus Mrs. Dalloway’s friend Sally, is introduced to the reader through the eyes of Clarissa: “She sat on the floor – that was her first impression of Sally– she sat on the floor with her arms round her knees, smoking a cigarette.” (*MD* 37) Similarly, Septimus Warren’s doctor Sir William Bradshaw is portrayed through his patient’s eyes: “The fellow made a distasteful impression. For there was in Sir William, whose father had been a tradesman, a natural respect for breeding and clothing, which shabbiness nettled; again, more profoundly, there was in Sir William, who had never had time for reading, a grudge, deeply buried, against cultivated people...” (*MD* 108)

⁶⁰ Frank MacShane ed., *Critical Writings of Ford Madox Ford*. (University of Nebraska Press, 1964) 37.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, 38.

⁶² *Ibid*, 39.

Also, all the six characters of *The Waves* are built almost exclusively through their soliloquies and the way they are mirroring each other. In *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe contemplating Mr. Ramsay feels that all she knows of him is an avalanche of impressions: “Suddenly, as if the movement of his hand had released it, the load of her accumulated impressions of him tilted up, and down poured in a ponderous avalanche all she felt about him.” (*TTL* 41) And this makes her wonder: “How then did it work out, all this? How did one judge people, think of them?” (*TTL* 42) Clarissa Dalloway also feels that it is not possible to know others except by their utterances and the surface appearance: “But to go deeper, beneath what people said (and these judgments, how superficial, how fragmentary they are!” (*MD* 134) The desire to go beyond, to penetrate deeper echoes here again.

It could be argued that Woolf uses the impressionist moment or rather works through a series of such “present” moments when trying to render the interaction of the mind with the outside world, as opposed to the situation when “the mind’s eye” is turned inwards or upon itself in what Woolf calls the moments of vision. Woolf’s idea of the moments of vision seems closely related to Fry’s aesthetic theory, especially his theory of vision.

7. The Bronze Body beneath the Gleams and Lights

Fry and Woolf associated most closely at the time Woolf was working on her novels *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the turn Woolf's writing took after *Jacob's Room* (1922) was to a considerable extent affected by Fry's aesthetics. In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf even reflected the development in the visual arts, voiced in Fry's writings, from the sensible Impressionist world of momentary impressions towards the primacy of formal elements like geometry, structure and pattern of the Post-Impressionist art. The painter Lily Briscoe embodies (though naturally in a simplified way) the principles of the Post-Impressionist art which are voiced in the novel in the very language of Roger Fry, the language he used in his critical writings on Post-Impressionism, as has been suggested earlier and as the following passages will illustrate.

In her painting of Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son James Lily is struggling to realize her vision. Although the contemporary fashion "since Mr. Paunceforte's visit" was to see everything pale, elegant, semitransparent (like the Impressionist paintings), Lily sees that "beneath the colour there was the shape; she could see it all so clearly, so commandingly when she looked. (*TTL* 32) For Lily the challenge is one "of the relation of masses, of lights and shadows". She is haunted by the vision which she, however, cannot transfer onto her canvas:

She could have wept. It was bad, it was bad! She could have done it differently, of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the

shapes etherealised; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that. She saw the colour burning on the framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral. Of all that only a few random marks scrawled upon the canvas remained. (*TTL* 75)

As has been pointed out, Fry's long contemplation of the Post-Impressionists taught him to conceive of art as depending for its effect solely on the relations of forms and colours, irrespective of what the forms and colours might represent. Woolf echoes this in the scene on the lawn where Mr. Bankes and Lily look at her picture together:

What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape, "just there"? he asked. It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection—that no one could tell it for a human shape. But, she had made no attempt to likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed?—except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace as it was, Mr. Bankes was interested. Mother and child then – ... – might be reduced, he pondered to a purple shadow without irreverence. (*TTL* 81)

Fry's scientific mind stressed and appreciated in the new art the significance of some underlying deep structure of formal relations which, he claimed, had direct effect on the faculties of the viewer. The emotion experienced in front of a work of art was, according to Fry, "a reaction to a relation and not to sensations or objects or persons or events", it rested primarily in the agreement of forms, "in the recognition of order and of

inevitability in relations”.⁶³ The more complex the relationship, the greater, Fry believed, was the pleasure excited in the spectator. According to his theory the artist can use various methods to arouse emotions in the spectator which he calls emotional elements of design – rhythm of the line, mass, space, light and shade and colour – which “are connected with essential conditions of our physical existence”.⁶⁴ In other words, the artist ultimately arranges forms in a certain order creating a particular design which is able to move the spectator’s emotions due to a reference to the fundamental necessities of human nature. The following passage reflects the idea:

[T]he sea changed slightly and the boats altered their positions, the view which a moment before seemed miraculously fixed, was now unsatisfactory. The disproportion there seemed to upset some harmony in her own mind. She felt an obscure distress. (*TTL* 282)

Working with colours, lines, masses, lights and shades the artist strives towards order and unity on which, any work of art depends for its effect. Similarly, Lily is concerned with the problem how to compose the masses and colours in her painting into a meaningful whole:

There was something perhaps wrong with the design? Was it, she wondered, that the line of the wall wanted breaking, was it that the mass of the trees was too heavy? (*TTL* 283)

and:

⁶³ Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 21.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 23–24.

It was a question, she remembered, how to connect this mass on the right hand with that on the left. She might do it by bringing the line of the branch across so; or break the vacancy in the foreground by an object (James perhaps) so. But the danger was that by doing that the unity of the whole might be broken. (*TTL* 83)

In a picture, says Fry, the unity is caused by a “balancing of the attractions of the eye about a central line of the picture. The result of this balance off attractions is that the eye rests willingly within the boundaries of the picture.”⁶⁵ The parallel with the final scene of *To the Lighthouse* where Lily finally resolves her struggle with the design of her painting by making a line in the centre is evident:

“With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there in the centre. It was done; it was finished” (*TTL* 306)

Inspired by Fry’s theory (and also adopting his language) Woolf began to consider her work with the eye for design, rhythm, texture and unity, the formal elements Fry saw as most significant in the Post-Impressionist paintings. From around the time Woolf finished her novel *Jacob’s Room* her diaries and letters frequently testify to her growing occupation with and careful contemplation of structure or rather what she in Fry’s language calls design of her works. One of her diary entries records the encouragement Fry gave her in that direction having read *Jacob’s Room* (1922): “Last night we dined with Roger & I was praised wholeheartedly by him, for the first time; only he wishes that a bronze body might somehow solidify beneath the gleams & lights– with which I agree.”

⁶⁵ Ibid, 25.

(D 2: 214) In the following diary entries Woolf admits that she “could have screwed Jacob up tighter if [she] had foreseen” and says that she wants to think out her next novel more than the others. (D 2: 209) Her further comments on her next novel *Mrs. Dalloway* confirm her resolution: “The design,” she says, “is certainly original, & it interests me hugely.” She finds it “masterful” and even so important that she feels it shapes the very contents of the work. “I’m always having to wrench my substance to fit it.” (D 2: 249) “I think the design is more remarkable than in any of my books.” (D 2: 272)

The remarkable design in *Mrs. Dalloway* rests primarily in what Woolf called her “tunnelling process”. (D 2: 272) In this process the past is revealed by installments casting light on the present. The rhythm of the novel is measured by the striking of Big Ben which is heard at particular moments throughout the story. Woolf continued to experiment further with structure in *To the Lighthouse* in which Part I (The Window) is connected with Part III (The Lighthouse) by means of the transitional section II (Time Passes). Again Woolf consciously works with the rhythm, this time it is the sound of the sea beating through the pages. The experiment with structure reaches its climax in *The Waves*, which Woolf herself comments upon as “the furthest development so far” and “is much checked by the extreme difficulty of the form”. (D 2: 301) In the novel Woolf works with a series of dramatic soliloquies and the most important thing is “to keep them running homogeneously in & out, in the rhythm of the waves.” (D 2: 312) And “[t]his rhythm (I say I am writing *The Waves* to a rhythm not to a plot) is in harmony with the painter’s.” (D 2: 316) Jack F. Stewart sums up Woolf’s achievement of formal organisation in the novel: “In a perpetual rhythm of ‘shattering and piecing together’ (*TW* 191), the separate selves diverge to form ‘a splintered mosaic’ (*TW* 175), or converge to

form 'a six-sided flower' (*TW* 162) The form of the novel is, ultimately, that of images in dynamic interrelation.⁶⁶

Woolf's experiments with the formal structure of her novels testify to the fact that she embraced certain aspects of Fry's formalism. Yet, it must be stressed that her attitude towards formalist approaches to novel was rather careful. C.J. Mares points out that on the one hand, Woolf suggests that both novelists and critics need to give more attention to the purely formal or aesthetic aspects of fiction and notes for illustration her criticism of Forster's tendency in his *Aspects of the Novel* to view fiction as "more intimately and humbly attached to human beings than the other arts", which may explain his "persistent neglect or dismissal of the novel's aesthetic functions". ("The Art of Fiction" *CE* 2: 53) On the other hand, Woolf herself observes that "one element remains constant in all novels, and that is the human element; they are about people, they excite in us the feelings that people excite in us in real life." ("Phases of Fiction" *CE* 2: 99)⁶⁷

Woolf was well-aware of the limits of extreme formalism. She did not conceive of form as "an end in itself". In her understanding form in the novel is always closely associated with emotion. In this respect, she agrees with Fry who conceived of art as a means of communication of emotions between the artist and the spectator in the realm of what he described as "imaginative life". This is one of the key points of his aesthetics which, as he makes clear in his "Retrospect", was inspired by Tolstoy:

⁶⁶ Jack F. Stewart, "Spatial Form and Color in *The Waves*" *Twentieth Century Literature* 28. 1 (1982) 86-107.

⁶⁷ C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective" *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (1989) 342-343.

Tolstoy saw that the essence of art was that it was a means of communication between human beings. He considers it to be par excellence the language of emotion. ... What remained of immense importance was the idea that a work of art was not the record of beauty already existent elsewhere, but the expression of an emotion felt by the artist and conveyed to the spectator.⁶⁸

Woolf sees even a closer link between form and emotion than Fry. She also feels that form in the novel is not as easily explicable as form in the visual arts: “A book fades like a mist, like a dream. How are we to take a stick and point to that tone, that relation in the vanishing pages, as Mr. Roger Fry points with his wand at a line or color in the picture displayed before him?” (“The Art of Fiction”, *CE* 2: 54) Unlike in painting where form is created by harmonious organisation of what Fry called elements of design, in literature form is, according to Woolf, created by the harmonious relations of emotions:

When we speak of form we mean that certain emotions have been placed in the right relations to each other; then that the novelist is able to dispose these emotions and make them tell by methods which he inherits, bends to his purpose, models anew or even invents for himself. Further, that the reader can detect these devices, and by so doing will deepen his understanding of the book. (“On Rereading Novels” *CE* 2: 126)

⁶⁸ Roger Fry, “Retrospect” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 205.

In *Mrs. Dalloway* such harmonious relation of emotions is established by the opposition between Clarissa and Septimus. The basic 'emotional design' underlying the book rests in the way the two characters (who, however, can be and often have been interpreted as two sides of one person) complement each other. Clarissa Dalloway loves life. She is enamoured of the beauty of daily, ordinary things like flowers, city walks and parties. Septimus, shattered inside by his war experience, fears life and its horrors. In the course of the novel the mutual relation between them is worked out into great complexity. Clarissa encounters several times the feeling of doubt, desperation and fear of death yet she meditates upon death with curiosity: "Did it matter then, she asked herself, walking towards Bond Street, did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely; all this must go on without her; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely." (*MD* 11) Septimus just before he "flings himself" out of the window on Mrs. Filmer's railing" wavers in his resolution to end his life: "He did not want to die. Life was good." (*MD* 164) While Clarissa's intense sensibility makes her feel startlingly aware of life's beauty, Septimus, although he also has great capacity to perceive beauty is being driven mad by it.

The two emotions complete each other to form a whole; one attitude cannot, within the limits of the novel, exist without the other.⁶⁹ It is in this way that Clarissa and Septimus become "one and the same person." They are united through a number of subtle links one of them being, for instance, the Shakespearean refrain "Fear no more the heat of the sun", which echoes several times through Clarissa's mind and finally enters in only a slightly recognisable form Septimus's thought just before his suicide "The sun was hot." (*MD* 164) The refrain is only one of the subtle links which brings the two personalities

⁶⁹ John Hawley Roberts "Vision and Design in Virginia Woolf" *PMLA* 61. 3 (1946) 837.

together revealing the fact that they “two expressions of the same thing, opposites, each of which nevertheless shares in the quality of the other”.⁷⁰ The links are only partly discernible in the rich texture of the book and certainly do not put themselves forward. The reader is not aware of these links in the course of the book. As Fry suggested, the more complex the design is, the greater pleasure it excites. Yet, on finishing the book they should stand out and make themselves at least partly clear. As Woolf said, the reader should be able to detect them and thus come to a deeper understanding of the novel itself.

Similarly, in *To the Lighthouse* form is created through setting in a particular relation certain emotions. There is an opposition established between Mrs. Ramsay and her husband. Her occupation with the daily trivialities, her acute awareness of reality with its ‘here and now’ problems and relationships is balanced by the over-theoretical and abstract mind of her husband who is occupied with the eternal and permanent. Yet more than this relation, the basis of Woolf’s design in the novel seems to be the parallel she establishes in her discussion of art and life.⁷¹ It rests in the analogy between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily. Mrs. Ramsay tries to “resolve everything into simplicity”, bring order upon things and human relationships, despite the eternal problems – suffering, death, the poor. She tries to protect her son James from his father’s peevishness, attends to the poor in the village, strives to bring about the wedding of Paul and Minta, hopes to bring together Lily and Mr. Bankes.

Lily parallels Mrs. Ramsay’s effort in her struggle to impose order upon the masses, lines and colours on her canvas. The major difference between Mrs. Ramsay and Lily, though, is that while Mrs. Ramsay’s efforts to create order fail – Paul and Minta’s marriage ends

⁷⁰ Ibid, 837.

⁷¹ Ibid 839.

in a failure, Lily remains single and James cannot bring himself even after years to love his father, Lily finally achieves her vision by drawing the line in the centre. However, at the moment of her own vision Lily also realizes the triumph of Mrs. Ramsay who for Lily becomes the symbol of what is permanent in life. “In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing . . . was struck into stability.” (*TTL* 237) Thus the lasting values in life and art are found, then, in the shifting details on the surface of things but rather in the formal and permanent pattern that both life and art must try to achieve.⁷²

To sum up we could say that Woolf was equally interested in form and content or, in other words, in what art is supposed to convey and the way in which it is supposed to convey it. Life and its rendering in literature, she believed, was not such a clear case as the formal organization of elements on a canvas:

For the most characteristic qualities of the novel— that it registers the slow growth and development of feeling, that it follows many lives and traces their unions and fortunes over a long stretch of time – are the very qualities that are most incompatible with design and order. It is the gift of style, arrangement, construction, to put us at a distance from the special life and to obliterate its features; while it is the gift of the novels to bring us into close touch with life. The two powers fight if they are brought into combination. The most complete novelist must be the novelist who can balance the two powers so that the one enhances the other. (“Phases of Fiction” *CE* 2:101)

⁷² Ibid 839.

It seems that in her attempt to render both the powers in her fiction Woolf finds inspiration in the visual arts and aesthetic theories of her day. And with regard to what has been said in the previous chapter about Woolf's use of the Impressionist principles we might add that in doing so she makes use of the principles characteristic of both Impressionist and Post-Impressionist styles. She tries to bring the reader in "close touch with life" through the series of impressionist moments, making him feel life, showering him with myriads of visual and auditory impressions and sensations, offering him impressionist vistas of shivering light and patches of colours. Simultaneously seeking to put the reader "at a distance from life" "obliterating its features" she relies on the formalist approach promulgated by Fry always keeping in mind the important aspect of his doctrine that formal integrity is a basic prerequisite if a work as a whole is to produce aesthetic emotion, yet never forgetting the human element in her novels.

8. Moments of Vision

Woolf strove to express in her work something she felt was of infinite importance, “the essence of life”. Her novels are imbued with the desire to reach beyond of the everyday and to ‘pin down’ the elusive something, which transcends the margins of commonplace existence. The question how to communicate in her works what is true and enduring in life, how to arrest “the essential thing” which was hidden among the changeable surface appearances, how to uncover the pattern in the “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” (“Modern Fiction” *CE* 2: 106) haunted Woolf unceasingly. She felt that there were moments in which one experienced a sudden illumination, moments when life, “the luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (“Modern Fiction” *CE* 2: 106), became momentarily transparent and the hidden meaning of things revealed itself. The following passage (as well as a number of others) from her diary casts light on the nature of such moments:

What is it? And shall I die before I find it? Then (as I was walking through Russell Sqre last night) I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; & the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great and astonishing sense of something there, which is ‘it’— It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing is in itself enough: satisfactory; achieved. (*D* 3: 62)

Woolf transferred her personal experience of similar moments onto the pages of her novels. Among the impressions, sensations and fragments of the reality of their daily lives, Woolf’s characters experience moments of a sudden deep insight, illumination or

revelation of meaning which Woolf has called moments of being or moments of vision. Woolf was not the only writer to employ in her work the concept of sudden flashes of revelation among the ordinary everyday experience. There were other modernist writers who used this literary device, most notable example being James Joyce and his *epiphanies*.

The fact that Woolf's moments of illumination are moments of *vision* suggests their close association both with the 'visionary' as well as the 'visual'. In attempt to render the quality of such moments Woolf has recourse to the visual or to the "kingdom of paint" which, as has been suggested in chapter 2, she felt capable of expressing more freely and more completely what she found difficult to express in words.

...to catch and enclose certain moments which break off from the mass, in which without bidding things come together in a combination of inexplicable significance, to arrest those thoughts which suddenly, to the thinker at least, are almost menacing with meaning. Such moments of vision are of unaccountable nature; leave them alone and they persist for years; try to explain them and they disappear; write them down and they die beneath the pen. ("Moments of Vision" *E* 2: 250–251)

C.J. Mares notes Hugh Kenner's observation that certain writers are drawn to "the becalmed world of visual arrangement" because they believe that it is "the painter who has developed the only feasible relationship of the sole man to the mute universe. The painter's works cling to its dimension, the visual, and share in its muteness."⁷³ And as

⁷³ C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective" *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (1989) 335.

Mares notes Virginia Woolf clearly belongs to such writers. The following discussion of the Woolfian moments of vision will refer to what Torgovnick defines as the interpretive use of the visual arts, i.e. the ways in which characters in the novels experience art and pictorial objects and scenes in such a way that stimulates their conscious or unconscious minds.

The moments of vision which are marked with the sense of revelation, illumination reaching almost to a “religious feeling” (*MD* 40) come as an answer to the question which Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse* is faced with and which in different forms presents itself to Woolf’s other characters:

What is the meaning of life? That was all – a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps did never come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark. (*TTL* 236–237)

Dealing with the visual quality of the moments Woolf again seems to draw inspiration from Fry and his theory of vision. In his essay “The Artist’s Vision” Fry distinguishes between different kinds of vision which the human eye can utilize comparing them to “the different gears of a motor-car”.⁷⁴ He explains that as opposed to the biological vision which we use when we look at things merely for their utility value, in looking at a work of art we rely on the aesthetic vision, i.e. impassioned, disinterested contemplation of the work of art through which we apprehend the relation of form and colour to one another

⁷⁴ Roger Fry, “The Artist’s Vision” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 37.

and we appreciate their harmony. The contemplation happens in the sphere of the “imaginative life” which, as has been explained earlier, was, according to Fry, freed from the necessity of instinctive reaction one feels bound by in the actual life and also characterised by a greater clearness of perception and greater purity and freedom of emotion. While, says Fry, in the actual real life we must cultivate those emotions which lead to useful action, and we are bound to appraise emotions according to the resultant action, in the imaginative life “we can both feel the emotion and watch it”.⁷⁵

Sitting at a dinner with her family and guests Mrs. Ramsay drifts away from the conversation going on at the table between her husband and their guests about Scott’s novels into the sphere of such detached vision:

Now she need not listen. It could not last, she knew, but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. So she saw them; she heard them; but whatever they said had also this quality, as if what they said was like the movement of a trout, when, at the same time, one can see the ripple and the gravel, something to the right, something to the left; and the whole is held together; for whereas in *active* life she would be netting and separating one thing from another; she would be saying she liked the Waverley novels or had not read them; she would be

⁷⁵ Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 19.

urging herself forward; now she said nothing. For the moment hung suspended. (*TTL* 160–161)

In her detached vision of the table scene Mrs. Ramsay is freed from the necessity to say or do something. She contemplates the situation at the table almost as if it were a work of art and from her disinterested perspective she perceives things “without attachment”, almost as ends in themselves. The moment of illumination hangs suspended and Mrs Ramsay suddenly feels endowed with the capacity to “unveil everybody’s thoughts and feelings” without any effort.

The above mentioned passage confirms Mares’s claim that Woolf’s characters often look at pictures that are works of art or look at life as if it were a picture.⁷⁶ The state of mind induced by doing so is, according to Mares, associated with the sense of freedom, rapture and also certain immunity. During these moments her characters briefly step “outside the sequence”, outside “the world of men and women”, “the world of speech” into the “zone of silence” like Lily Briscoe who when painting her picture is “drawn out of gossip, out of living, out of community with people” into the presence of the other reality, “the other thing”. (*TTL* 232) The moments in which the world is briefly experienced as “satisfactory, achieved” (*D* 3: 62) are sparked off by looking at reality from the disinterested perspective. The view in front of the character is struck into stability and “everything, life itself stands still”. (*TTL* 236) The characters find themselves in the sphere of what Fry calls the “imaginative life” and experience the “greater purity and freedom of emotion”.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ C.J. Mares, “Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter’s Perspective” *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (1989) 337.

⁷⁷ Roger Fry, “An Essay in Aesthetics” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 19.

Woolf strengthens the impression that in the moments of vision the characters look at the world 'as if it were a work of art' by her frequent use of a *frame* which for a moment arrests the view in front of them. McLaurin comments on the significance of *framing* in Fry's theory. The function of the frame is that it can remove a scene from the sphere of practical activity and thus remove the viewer from the everyday instinctive vision which is dominated by practical purpose. The result is that things are seen in a new and unfamiliar way.⁷⁸

At the end of the story characteristically called "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points'" Fanny Wilmot experiences a sudden flash of illumination of the life of Miss Craye. The moment is sparked off by the strong visual image of Miss Craye sitting at the piano:

"She sat there, half turned away from the piano, with her hands clasped in her lap holding the carnation upright, while behind her was the sharp square of the window, uncurtained, purple in the evening, intensely purple after the brilliant electric lights which burnt unshaded in the bare music room."
("Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points'" *CSF* 220)

On the deep purple background framed by the "uncurtained" window the sight of Miss Craye is evokes a portrait of a lady, a work of art. To Fanny, who looking for a pin on the floor raises her eyes toward Miss Craye "[a]ll seemed transparent for a moment, as if looking through Miss Craye, she saw the very fountain of her being spurt up in pure,

⁷⁸ Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*. (London : CUP, 1973) 195.

silver drops. She saw back and back into the past behind her". ("Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points'" *CSF* 220) In the sudden flash of insight Fanny feels that the whole life of Miss Craye, which so far was disclosed to her in mere fragments through their conversation lies prostrate and complete in front of her.

Clarissa Dalloway experiences a similar moment of extraordinary exaltation and deep insight in which things unite watching her own reflection in the mirror:

[A]s if to catch the falling drop, Clarissa (crossing to the dressing table) plunged into the very heart of the moment, transfixed it, there— the moment of this June morning on which was the pressure of all the other mornings, seeing the glass, the dressing table, and all the bottles afresh, collecting the whole of her at one point (as she looked into the glass), seeing the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party; of Clarissa Dalloway; of herself. (*MD* 42)

In her moment of vision Clarissa experiences a sense of completeness when she collects "these selves of which we are built up" (*O* 192) into one. Also she can see everything afresh. Woolf's allusion here touches the familiar artistic concept of the "innocence of the eye" which had been championed by generations of artists and movements including those of Monet who wished "he had been born blind and then had suddenly gained his sight so that he could have begun to paint [...] without knowing what the objects were before him"⁷⁹ or Cézanne who advised that the painter should "see like a man who has just been born" and was convinced that "the day was coming when a single carrot, freshly

⁷⁹ Paul Smith, *Impressionism: Beneath the Surface*. (London : George Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1995) 27.

observed, will set off a revolution”⁸⁰. Again in an interesting and subtle way Woolf works with the function of frame. The portrait of Clarissa seems arrested in the frame of the mirror as if she herself were a work of art.

Woolf makes use of the frame also in Part I of *To the Lighthouse* where in Lily’s perspective Mrs. Ramsay sitting and reading to James is “framed” by the window. Characteristically, Part I itself is called Window which could possibly be interpreted as a frame outlining the picture of Mrs. Ramsay and James. Mrs. Ramsay and her son are being contemplated (almost as a work of art) by other characters. Mr. Bankes is overcome by the sight not knowing “why that woman pleased him so; why the sight of her reading a fairy tale to her boy had upon him precisely the same effect as the solution of a scientific problem, so that he rested in contemplation of it” drawing satisfaction from the sight as if “he had proved something absolute about the digestive system of plants, that barbarity was tamed, the reign of chaos subdued.” (*TTL* 74)

At the end of *To the Lighthouse* Lily experiences the artist’s moment of vision: “Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision.” (*TTL* 306) She seems to reach for what Fry calls “creative vision”. In moments of creative vision, he says, the artist contemplates the particular field of vision, and the “aesthetically chaotic and accidental conjunction of forms and colours” begins to crystallise into a harmony. “Certain relations of directions of line become for him full of meaning; he apprehends them no longer casually or merely curiously, but passionately, and these lines begin to be so stressed and stand out so clearly from the rest that he sees them far more distinctly than he did at first. Similarly colours, which in nature have almost always a certain

⁸⁰ Ibid, 28.

vagueness and elusiveness, become so definite and clear to him owing to their now necessary relation to other colours, that if he chooses to paint his own vision he can state them positively and definitely.”⁸¹

Lily achieves her moment of vision when the chaos of forms on her canvas is tamed and it crystallises into harmony. The moments of vision are marked among other things by this heightened sense of order, harmony and unity subduing the chaos of the everyday life. After Mrs. Ramsay’s death Lily feels “as if the link that usually bound things together had been cut, and they floated up here, down there, off, anyhow. How aimless it was, how chaotic, how unreal it was, she thought, looking at her empty coffee cup.” (*TTL* 215) Words like “alone” and “perished” haunt her mind and she wishes “if only she could put them together, write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things. (*TTL* 215) Lily recognizes that her painting will make sense only when formal harmony of the individual parts is achieved and she also realizes that in a similar way Mrs. Ramsay was able to create a sense of harmony and order in human relationships – “she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable silliness and spite ... something”. (*TTL* 236) Lily’s revelation rests in the recognition of Mrs. Ramsay’s capability “to make of the moment something permanent”. (*TTL* 236) “In the midst of chaos, there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsay said.” (*TTL* 237) Mrs. Ramsay was able to bring about for Lily moments which “stay in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art” (*TTL* 240) in which among the flow of impressions and sensations the pattern reveals itself, though only for a little while. Moments, in which as Mrs. Ramsay feels, “there is a coherence in

⁸¹ Roger Fry, “The Artist’s Vision” in: J.B. Bullen, ed. *Roger Fry: Vision and Design*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) 36.

things; a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out (she glanced at the window with its ripple of reflected lights) in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby ... Of such moments, she thought, the thing is made that endures. (*TTL* 158)

Thus just like the artist's moment of creative vision when contemplating a particular field of vision is characterised by the recognition of some underlying design and pattern which suddenly crystallises among the formal elements, the moments of vision in life of Woolf's characters are marked with the sudden revelation of some pattern or design underlying the everyday reality. In dealing with the moments of vision in her work Woolf's formalist aesthetic makes itself felt yet in another respect. The moments of vision seem to be a solution to the problem Woolf found herself facing in her novels. She was constantly worried that "the run of events is too fluid and too free" and that the novel might "read thin". "How am I," she asks "to get the depth without becoming static?" (*D* 4: 152)

C.J. Mares points out that it is through the moments of vision Woolf is able to provide depth, "eminences, resting places, consummations" in the elusive, ideated, or what Woolf calls "misty" nature of the novel. Woolf, he says, uses these moments when her characters step "outside the sequence" absorbed in looking at pictures or at the world as if it were a picture because since they "stay in the mind affecting one almost like a work of art" (*TTL* 240) they can give the novel endurance and strength, they help to secure its design, yet their transitory nature helps Woolf to avoid "becoming static".⁸²

⁸² C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective" *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (1989) 343.

Apart from their formal function in the novels the moments of vision, however, also seem to work on the level of content. Although they are, as Mares says, important formal elements, they are attached, albeit often with thin threads, to the texture of the story and help to advance the development of a particular theme or disclose certain motifs or intentions, which Woolf uses further in the story.

Mr. Bankes's moment of vision seems to work beyond its function as an element of formal design Woolf incorporates into the story. Mr. Bankes' rapture over the sight of Mrs. Ramsay reading to her son is not introduced in the story so much with the aim to disclose his personal introspection but rather because it has a deep effect on Lily, who being a witness to the scene, realizes how great a love, respect and admiration Mrs. Ramsay excites in people. Woolf develops in this way the theme of Lily's reverence for Mrs. Ramsay and strengthens her belief in her as symbolic of order in human relationships.

Similarly, Clarissa Dalloway, observing herself in the mirror has a flash of insight into her own personality. She begins to consider her self, the meeting-point of the different selves of which her self is composed, "she alone knew how different, how incompatible" and their attachments at different places and moments in her life. Her vanity makes her see herself as "a radiancy no doubt in some dull lives" and a "refuge for the lonely" and she realizes her own effort to brush aside her "faults, jealousies, vanities and suspicions like this of Lady Bruton not asking her to lunch; which, she thought ... is utterly base!"(MD 40) Woolf manages to evoke an association with many things outside the moment. We are reminded, for instance, of the dull life of Mrs. Kilman, and through

Clarissa's annoyed realization that she is not invited to Lady Bruton's party Woolf helps the reader get back into context of the story and to the theme of Mrs. Dalloway's party.

The realization that the moments of vision work both as part of the formal design of her novels but also are weaved into their often very dense thematic texture leads us back to the argument that Woolf's occupation with design in her work had its limits, that she always strove for the balance between structural organization of her work and its content.

More importantly, the strong visual quality of the moments of vision, their association with the world of painting and not in the least the fact that Woolf obviously draws inspiration from Fry's aesthetic theories then illustrate yet another level of the way Woolf was able to transform into her 'literary' use the visual arts, aesthetic theories and bring the world of painting and the world of literature together.

9. Conclusion

Virginia Woolf has earned an undeniable position within the context of modernist literature primarily due to her highly experimental literary method. I have tried to argue and illustrate that one of the important innovations Woolf employed in her radical rethinking of the conventional, largely descriptive realism of the nineteenth century rests in her consideration and use of techniques employed and principles underlying the current theory and practice in the domain of the visual arts. I have further tried to show that Woolf's aesthetics was developed largely due to her involvement with the aesthetic theories of her contemporaries, especially those of Roger Fry, the art critic and colleague, whose views on art were to a large extent formative of the aesthetics of the Bloomsbury Group. The fact that I have concentrated in my discussion exclusively on the above mentioned sphere of influence does not, however, imply what would be a violent and undue simplification, i.e. the assumption that Woolf relied in the development of her method exclusively on the aesthetic theories and the visual arts.

In the Introduction I have tried to point out some of the dangers involved in approaches relying too heavily on the concept of "periodization". Yet I have tried to do so without suggesting the irrelevance of context in which a literary or, indeed, any work of art is created. Thus it is necessary to acknowledge that other influences of major importance like the Freudian psychology, Einstein's theory of relativity, Bergsonian concept of time, Nietzsche's theory of perspectivism or the formulation by William James of the concept of "the stream of consciousness" affected Woolf's method just as it influenced other writers

and artists of the time. With regard to the visual we might add what Maggie Humm stresses in her study of the modernist visual cultures that “the late nineteenth and early twentieth century scientists and natural philosophers set about appropriating visible and invisible worlds through new technologies of vision such as photography, stereoscopes, X-rays”⁸³ and these largely affected and challenged the artists offering them new ways of seeing and thereby also expressing reality. Yet, to specify in what ways and to what extent the new revolutionary ideas in science and philosophy were incorporated in Woolf’s writing is not possible without a careful and detailed study of each of the particular influences.

Therefore I have tried to keep the discussion of Woolf’s method within the limits proposed, i.e. to concentrate on the way Woolf’s theory of fiction and her practice reflected her knowledge of and interest in the visual arts. I have made use of Marianna Torgovnick’s delineation of the possible uses of the visual arts in literature – the decorative, ideological and interpretive use.

Virginia Woolf’s deep interest in the parallels between literature and painting as well as her pre-occupation with the problem how to bring them together is manifest in her writings. In chapter 2 I have tried to illustrate her rather unresolved attitude towards the strengths and powers she associated with each medium suggesting that her acute awareness of the limits of language lead Woolf to consider painting more capable of expressing more “complete and flawless statements of life”. (“Walter Sickert” *CE* 2: 236)

⁸³ Maggie Humm, *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 3.

I have tried to show that Woolf's employment of the visual does not stop at what Torgovnick defines as the "decorative use" of the visual arts in literature, the mere painting with words. The "ideological use" is discussed in terms of Woolf's derivation of important aspects of her theory of fiction from the theories in the visual arts, particularly those of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Although critics usually emphasize in Woolf's work the progress from Impressionism to Post-Impressionism, I have tried to illustrate that the principles of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist art work side by side and complement each other in Woolf's fiction. Woolf uses the impressionist technique in attempt to render the visual experience of the outside reality. She works through a series of "present" moments showering the reader with impressions and subjective sensations of her characters in order to record as 'realistically' as possible the world as perceived through the eye by the human mind. This seems to be Woolf's 'corrective' to the descriptive technique she criticised in the works of the Edwardian writers like Bennett, Arnold and Wells. It is necessary to point out that just like these authors Woolf strives to achieve a sense of reality. The substantial difference, however, is that while the Edwardians focus on the external reality Woolf's point of departure is the human mind.

I have tried to stress Roger Fry's role in Woolf's understanding and employing principles of the Post-Impressionist art. In his unrelenting defence of Post-Impressionist painters Fry formulated the basic objectives of the new art stressing the significance of refuting the criterion of conformity to appearance in favour of establishing the purely aesthetic criteria and the principles of structural design and harmony. Thanks to Roger Fry (and also other contemporary art critics) a radical change occurred in understanding of art as well as in the vocabulary of art criticism, which evolved, to a large extent due to Fry's

effort, in the formalist direction working with concepts such as ‘rhythm’, ‘movement’, ‘decorative power’ or ‘expressive colour’ to translate visual experience into language. The Post-Impressionist principles as advocated in Fry’s critical writing are reflected in Woolf’s writing in several ways. Woolf shared some basic assumptions of Fry’s aesthetic doctrine. She agreed with Fry’s conviction that art should be autonomous and no longer dependant on a truthful imitation of reality and also with his view that the new period called for new methods, which involved refutation of some accepted conventions. The attention of the artist should turn from the external towards the internal. It is necessary to point out that specifically in this respect their respective theories were conditioned by the revolutionary activity in the field of science and philosophy.

Fry taught Woolf to look at the novel with the eye for rhythm, design and unity. Informed by Fry’s stress on form in painting Woolf began to consider her work in formalist terms. She turned her attention to the structural organization of her novels and began to experiment with it, however, she guarded against extreme formalism and insisted that unlike in painting form in literature consisted in the relations to each other of certain emotions. Although she embraced in many ways Fry’s formalist approach to art and acknowledged that the aesthetic emotion produced by a work of art depends largely on the formal aspects of the novel, she transformed it to her own use always insisting that a successful novel must be a balanced combination of carefully thought out design with “a close touch with life”. The two powers seems to be rendered in Woolf’s work with the help of both the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist principles.

Finally I have tried to illustrate in Woolf’s work the third level of the use of the visual arts, which Torgovnick calls the interpretive use. In her attempt to trace a certain pattern

or deeper meaning among the myriads of impressions the mind is disposed to Woolf employs in her work moments of deep insight or moments of vision. Her characters experience certain moments marked by the sense of revelation and illumination, deep introspection and rapture in which the meaning of things is momentarily revealed. In these moments her characters are drawn into the “kingdom of silence” or the world of the visual. Here again Woolf draws heavily from Fry’s aesthetic theories of vision.

The moments are usually triggered by what Mares calls looking at the world as if it were a work of art. Woolf’s characters usually contemplate a particular field of vision in a detached and disinterested way, which Fry called aesthetic vision. In that way they step into what he calls “imaginative life”, i.e. a sphere where there is no need of instinctive reaction as in the actual life and therefore it is marked with heightened sense of perception and freedom of emotion. Woolf makes use of *frame* as a device, which cuts out the particular field of vision out of the commonplace existence and allows the character to view it as a work of art. In this disinterested perspective the characters shortly experience a sense of unity and completeness. Woolf uses the moments of being as important formal device, which give the novel endurance and strength and help to secure its design.⁸⁴ Yet their function is not limited to this as they also often help to advance or illustrate certain themes and events within the larger context of the novel.

The discussion of Woolf’s uses of the visual arts and the aesthetic theories of her day leads to the following conclusion: Woolf was perfectly aware that although “painting and writing have much to tell each other: they have much in common”, still “they must part in the end”. Yet, in her struggle to incorporate into the novel the strengths she associated

⁸⁴ C.J. Mares, “Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter’s Perspective” *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (1989) 343.

with painting without betraying the purposes of her own medium, she continued to be striving not to “fuse” the arts or the different powers she associated with them, but to “balance” them, so that their differences would be preserved and would “enhance each other”. (“Phases of Fiction” *CE* 2: 101) She always kept searching for the “common ground” between the two territories haunted by the conviction that if the maps of the two worlds overlap for a while, the result can be the most remarkable ‘palimpsest’.

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11. Résumé

Virginii Woolfové bezesporu patří její významné místo v rámci moderní literatury především díky její experimentální literární metodě. Jedním z důležitých faktorů, které ovlivnily povahu autorčiny textů, byl její zájem o vizuální umění a vztah mezi psaným slovem a obrazem. Ambicí práce bylo nastínit různé způsoby, jimiž Woolfová uplatňuje ve svých dílech aspekty soudobých estetických teorií a principy vizuálního umění a vizuality. Pomocí těchto prostředků dosahuje autorka významné stylistické inovace, jejímž prostřednictvím se odklání od konvenční reprodukce reality, a vymezuje se tak vůči popisnému realismu 19. století.

V úvodu práce jsou nastíněna některá teoretická východiska interdisciplinárního studia. Zájem o paralely mezi literaturou a výtvarným uměním sahá daleko do historie. Současná kritika opět věnuje zvýšenou pozornost tomuto tématu především díky vývoji v oblasti kritické teorie v posledních desetiletích, jehož výsledkem je narůstající přesvědčení o relevanci mezioborového studia, a tudíž i stoupající počet zajímavých mezioborových prací. Marianna Torgovnicková rozlišuje dvě nejčastější metody aplikované při současném studiu paralel mezi literaturou a vizuálním uměním.⁸⁵ První z nich se zabývá obecnějšími vztahy mezi uměním, literaturou a ostatními formami intelektuální činnosti v rámci daného období, druhá metoda se soustředí na konkrétního autora a skrze důraz na konkrétní umělecká díla, která se v textech autora vyskytují, dokumentuje jeho vztah k vizuálnímu umění. Oba přístupy mají svá úskalí. První z nich se opírá o teorii tzv. „periodizace“, která v návaznosti na princip *Zeitgeist* vychází z přesvědčení, že literatura a vizuální umění, stejně tak jako ostatní výsledky umělecké a intelektuální činnosti, jsou

⁸⁵ Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf*. (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1985) 11.

výrazy dominantních kulturních modelů určitého období a sdílí tedy určité tematické a stylistické znaky a kvality. Přestože tento přístup byl v průběhu minulého století postupně zavržen jako značně zjednodušující pohled na komplexnost forem výrazu autorů a umělců v rámci jednotlivých období, nutnost uznat význam kontextu při vzniku uměleckého díla se projevuje i v novějších koncepcích. I v nich ale někdy dochází k zjednodušujícím hodnocením, která opomíjejí často protichůdné tendence a zvláštnosti existující v dílech daného časového úseku. Druhá metoda, která se zaměřuje na konkrétního autora a jeho vztah k vizuálnímu umění prostřednictvím analýzy explicitních či implicitních referencí v textu ke konkrétním uměleckým dílům, je svojí povahou výrazně dokumentární a nezachycuje ostatní možné způsoby využití vizuálního umění v literatuře, které je možno zkoumat.

Torgovnicková tedy navrhuje vlastní koncepci, která poukazuje na další možnosti. Jedná se o ustanovení *kontinua*, v jehož rámci jsou způsoby užití vizuálního umění v literatuře rozděleny na dekorativní, biografické, ideologické a interpretativní. Dekorativním užitím se míní krátké deskriptivní pasáže, které vyvolávají vizuální představu uměleckého díla vytvořeného v určitém uměleckém stylu. Biografické užití odhaluje v textu vztah autora k vizuálnímu umění a jeho kontakt s konkrétními uměleckými díly. Třetí způsob spočívá v autorově využití principů soudobých estetických teorií při formulaci vlastních teorií fikce. Interpretativní využití pak zahrnuje způsob, jímž postavy v dílech vnímají umění a umělecká díla. Předpokládá se, že jednotlivé úseky se více či méně ovlivňují a doplňují. Na základě tohoto rozdělení se práce snaží demonstrovat, že Virginia Woolfová užívá ve svém díle především posledních dvou zmiňovaných způsobů práce s vizuálním uměním.

Ve druhé kapitole je pojednán hluboký zájem Virginie Woolfové o paralely mezi literaturou a malbou, který vyplývá z jejích deníků, dopisů a esejů. Zároveň je zde nastíněn její ambivalentní postoj k přednostem i omezením těchto jednotlivých forem uměleckého projevu a rivalita, kterou mezi nimi Woolfová cítí. Vzhledem k tomu, že si je velice naléhavě vědoma limitů jazyka a jeho vyjadřovací schopnosti, neskrývá své přesvědčení, že malba dokáže lépe než jazyk podat „kompletnější a bezchybnější výpověď o životě“.

Třetí kapitola se snaží demonstrovat charakter nového trendu ve vizuálním umění, který v prvním desetiletí dvacátého století pronikl do Británie a který prostřednictvím Rogera Frye ovlivnil i estetiku Woolfové. Díla kontinentálních umělců zprvu velice obtížně dobývají přízeň britského publika. Post-impresionismus, jak tento nový směr nazvali britští kritici, si postupně získává pochopení především díky úsilí kritiků v čele s Rogerem Fryem, členem Skupiny Bloomsbury a mentorem Virginie Woolfové v oblasti umění. Fry neúnavně hájí nové umění před ostrými výpady kritiky a zdůrazňuje modernost přístupu kontinentálních malířů k uměleckému dílu, která spočívá především v opuštění klasických principů *mimesis* a zdůraznění významu čistě estetických kritérií a principů geometrie, designu a harmonie. Díky Fryovi a ostatním kritikům hlásajícím principy a ambice post-impresionismu dochází postupně k důležité změně nejen v chápání umění, ale především v jazyce umělecké kritiky, která se postupně vyvíjí směrem k formalismu a začíná pracovat s pojmy jako „rytmus“, „design“, „pohyb“ „dekorativní síla“ či „expresivní barva“ ve snaze převést vizuální zkušenost do psaného slova. Tento jazyk se pak projevuje i v dílech Virginie Woolfové.

Principy formulované v estetických teoriích Rogera Frye nacházejí odezvu v teoriích fikce Woolfové hned v několika úrovních. Čtvrtá a pátá kapitola se snaží demonstrovat vzájemný profesionální vztah Woolfové a Frye a zároveň nastítnit jejich společná teoretická východiska týkající se umění. Woolfová sdílí s Fryem základní předpoklady o nutnosti autonomie umění a jeho odklonu od tradičních principů napodobování reality. Malířství i literatura se mají vzdát snahy o fotografickou reprodukci reality a obrátit svůj zájem od vnějšího k vnitřnímu, od objektivního k subjektivnímu. Tyto paralely v obecnějších názorech na povahu umění a jeho vztah k životu jsou demonstrovány na základních textech, v nichž Fry a Woolfová formulovali své teorie. Jedná se především o Fryovu „Esej o estetice“ z roku 1909, která byla původně otištěná v *New Quarterly* a vydaná znovu v souborném díle *Vision and Design* v roce 1920, a eseje Virginie Woolfové „Pan Bennett a paní Brownová“ (1923) and „Moderní fikce“ (1924).

Kritici často komentují vývoj v rámci literární techniky Virginie Woolfové směrem od literárního impresionismu směrem k post-impresionismu. Šestá kapitola se věnuje tématu literárního impresionismu v díle Woolfové a snaží se poukázat na fakt, že principy tohoto stylu nejsou v jejích textech postupně vytlačeny principy post-impresionistickými, ale že tyto dva styly existují spíše ve vzájemné harmonické symbióze. Woolfová využívá impresionistické techniky ve snaze zachytit realitu přítomného okamžiku. V sériích těchto momentů zahrnuje čtenáře vlnami impresí, dojmů, vjemů a pocitů, které její postavy zažívají. V raném díle je tato technika velice patrná. Příkladem je povídka *Kew Gardens*, kde Woolfová mistrně navozuje atmosféru parného letního dne. V záplavě chvějících se listů, mihotavých stínů a světla, které rozpouští obrysy předmětů a rozpíjí je do barevných skvrn, se čtenář ocitá v atmosféře, která připomíná impresionistická plátna. Woolfová ukazuje realitu tak, jak ji vnímá mysl skrze oko. Tuto techniku si uchovává i v

pozdějších dílech, kde je již patrný vliv post-impresionismu a jeho důrazu na harmonii forem.

Sedmá kapitola poukazuje na to, jak Fryovy post-impresionistické teorie a jeho formalistický přístup inspirovaly Woolfovou především ke zvýšené pozornosti vůči formálním aspektům jejího díla jako rytmus, forma či design. Woolfová začala pod vlivem Frye experimentovat se strukturou svých textů, avšak nikdy nepřijala ve svém přístupu extrémní formalismus. Přestože souhlasila s Fryem, že estetický dojem díla závisí z velké části na jeho formálních aspektech, ve svých esejích, kde formulovala svoji teorii fikce, jasně trvala na tom, že úspěšnost románu vždy spočívá ve vyvážené kombinaci formy a obsahu. Tyto dvě síly tedy Woolfová kombinuje s využitím principů nejen post-impresionistických, ale i impresionistických.

Poslední kapitola je věnována již zmiňovanému interpretativnímu způsobu využití vizuálního umění v literatuře. Woolfová pracuje s tzv. „moments of vision“, které, jak sama připouští, jsou jen těžko popsatelné slovy. I proto se Woolfová ve snaze o jejich zachycení uchyluje do ticha vizuální zkušenosti, které, jak již bylo řečeno, podle jejího názoru dokáže vyjádřit to, co je jen těžko postižitelné řečí. Postavy jejích románů zažívají okamžiky prozření a iluminace, kdy v toku impresí a dojmů, kterým je vystavena jejich mysl, náhle získávají větší vhled do smyslu okolních událostí i vlastní existence. V těchto okamžicích jsou postavy vtaženy do vizuálního „království ticha“, jak ho sama Woolfová nazývala. Povaha těchto momentů je, jak samo označení naznačuje, silně vizuální a Woolfová čerpá při jejich popisu opět z teorií Rogera Frye. Tyto okamžiky prozření jsou velice často vyvolány tím, že se postavy dívají na realitu kolem sebe jako na umělecké dílo. Uplatňují tedy způsob pohledu, který Fry nazýval estetickým způsobem pozorování,

kdy divák vstupuje do sféry tzv. „imaginativního života“. V něm je na rozdíl od „vlastního života“ oprostěn od potřeby reagovat na události kolem sebe a soustředí se tedy na vnímání a emoce, které v něm dílo vyvolává. Fry zdůrazňoval funkci rámu jako prostředku, který má schopnost vyjmout určité pole, které oko nazírá, ze sféry normálního života a přesunout je do sféry „imaginativního života“. Při popisu okamžiků bytí Woolfová uplatňuje tuto funkci rámu, když se její postavy například dívají na scénu „zarámovanou“ oknem nebo se vidí v zrcadle. V situacích, kdy jsou postavy tímto způsobem odtrženy od reality, zažívají pocit souladu a harmonie.

Momenty prozření jsou „obrazy“, které fungují v rámci děl Virginie Woolfové jako důležité formální prostředky, záchytné body v plynoucím toku románu, které upevňují jeho celkový design a poskytují mu hloubku.⁸⁶ Zároveň jsou ale důmyslně zakomponovány do textu tak, že rozvíjejí jednotlivé motivy a témata románu.

Woolfová využívá vizuálního umění způsobem, který přesahuje pouhé malování slovy. Při formulaci vlastní teorie fikce a její aplikace v literární praxi těží ze soudobých estetických teorií, především z teorií impresionismu a post-impresionismu. Formativní je pro ni v tomto ohledu hlavně kritické dílo a myšlenky Rogera Frye, jejího přítele a kolegy ze Skupiny Bloomsbury. Navzdory přijetí některých důležitých aspektů Fryova formalistického přístupu k umění si Woolfová zachovává odstup od čistě formalistického přístupu k literatuře a trvá na tom, že její romány jsou v první řadě o životě. Autorka se inspiruje uměním a estetickými teoriemi Rogera Frye i na úrovni „interpretativního užití“ umění v literatuře, kdy jsou její postavy odtrženy od reality a zažívají okamžiky prozření.

⁸⁶ C.J. Mares, “Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter’s Perspective” *Comparative Literature* 41.4 (1989) 343.

Woolfová si byla dobře vědoma toho, co napsala v jednom ze svých esejů: přestože malířství a psaní mají mnoho společného, musí se nakonec rozejít. Přesto se však s vytrvalostí pokoušela spojit ve svých dílech sílu jazyka a sílu, kterou přisuzovala vizuálnímu umění, a uvést tak obraz a slovo v harmonii. Nikdy nepřestala věřit, že pokud se moc verbální a vizuální zkušenosti na chvíli překryjí, mohou vytvořit ten nejpozoruhodnější „palimpsest“.