



Jamesian and Freudian Rhetoric and Themes in Virginia Woolf’s Literary Manifestos

Alexander Venetis
Department of English
University of Amsterdam

Abstract

In her seminal work “Modern Fiction” (1925) Virginia Woolf asserts that the most interesting and fruitful way for the modernist novelist to proceed is to appropriate what she calls “the dark places of psychology” into literary writing. The image of “dark places”, especially when put into the context of the psychology of the 1920’s, almost immediately conjures up a Freudian perspective. However, as this paper argues, in addition to the Freudian overtones there is more to a full appreciation of Woolf’s psychology-related assertions in “Modern Fiction.” Taken in conjunction with her previous text, “Character in Fiction” (1924), it seems possible to read Woolf’s manifestos through the lens of the empiricist psychology of William James. Primarily relying on rhetorical analysis of Woolf’s vocabulary, this paper aims to disentangle the dynamic relationship between the distinct Jamesian and Freudian psychological schools influencing Woolf’s programmatic writings.

To cite as

Venetis, A., 2017, ‘Jamesian and Freudian Rhetoric and Themes in Virginia Woolf’s Literary Manifestos’, *PsyArt* 21, pp. 20–37.

I

As is well known, manifestos written on aesthetics usually contain a programmatic outline for a new kind of art. While Virginia Woolf’s seminal works “Character in Fiction” (1924) and “Modern Fiction” (1925) are often referred to as essays, as indicated by their collection in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, both can justifiably be called literary manifestos – with the principal difference between the manifesto and the essay being the polemical nature of

the first and the more explorative nature of the latter.¹ Indeed, both works are characterized by a discontent of the kind of novelistic writing Woolf calls ‘Edwardian.’ The loosely connected authors constituting the ‘Edwardians,’ Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy, are credited as well as chastised by Woolf for their sincere intentions in writing prose fiction on the one hand, while not having been able to live up to the full possibilities of fiction writing on the other. At the root of Woolf’s polemics one finds an attack upon the Edwardians’ supposed lack of fully apprehending what fiction writing can entail.

This is not to say that Woolf’s manifestos are mere provocations meant to establish herself as an author of significance. Somewhat contrary to popular belief, Woolf reasons coherently and consistently, in addition to being well-informed about psychological and philosophical disciplines of her own day.² Her discontent about the Edwardians is neither superfluous nor gratuitous. This paper takes these assumptions as its starting point, and delineates the contour of psychological and philosophical themes and rhetoric in the two selected manifestos.

The argument of this paper, then, is that Woolf’s manifestos can primarily be viewed as attempts to counter the historically-oriented fictional narratives written by the Edwardians by both rejecting pre-meditated writing strategies and assigning a new place to individuality in novelistic writing. In literary discourse this rejection and reassignment go hand in hand: novels should not aim at mapping the individual as an extension of its material circumstances; it cannot be assumed that psychological interiority is to be inferred from external data such as one’s socio-historical and economic environment. Rather, the novel should aim at representing human psychology by focusing upon the complexities of internal states of mind, which are, strictly speaking, not governed by the same laws as those governing external reality. As I will elaborate upon below, this does not amount to writing novels just by means of introducing new stylistic features; it is for Woolf a genuinely ontological question: “[Bennett] says that it is only if the characters are real

¹ Woolf wrote several versions of “Character in Fiction” and “Modern Fiction”, the earlier ones entitled “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” and “Modern Novels,” respectively. My reading in this paper is based upon the final versions of the essays that contain the most extended lines of thought. In what follows, I will use the abbreviation CiF after quotations from “Character in Fiction” and MF after quotations from “Modern Fiction.” Other writings by Woolf I will consult include “More Dostoevsky” and “An Introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*,” which I will abbreviate as “MD” and “IMD” respectively.

² My selection of these manifestos obviously implies that I believe them to be relevant for critical analysis. However, this should not be taken as an *a priori* defense of Woolf’s position in relation to her literary predecessors, but it does imply a suspicion towards many literary historians’ all too easy dismissal of the manifestos as opportunistic. Cf. Chris Baldick in his *The Modern Movement* in which Woolf’s essays are dismissed as “demonstrably slanderous” and bearing no “defensible critical judgement” (Baldick 2004, 11).

that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?" (Woolf CiF, 426).

In addition, while rejecting pre-meditated literary methods, or literary grids if you will, Woolf proposes to take the novelist's own idiosyncrasy as the starting point of writing, which amounts to a renewed stance of the novelist towards the dynamic between reality and human character. This is to say that Woolf rejects the idea of reality being "out there" while the novelist's objective should be to represent it as fully and exactly as possible. Woolf's invocation of the term 'character' functions to designate the incorporation of something other, something far more elusive and indefinite in literary writing. I have chosen to frame this alternative appropriation of the term 'character' as Woolf implicitly saying that the literary author should take his own idiosyncrasy, and not some assumed external reality, as the focal point of writing. Woolf, namely, aims at rethinking the novelist's relationship to reality based upon the idea that reality is a product of one's desire. Unlike Bennett, Woolf thus dissociates character from reality. It will become clear that her usage of the term 'character' signifies the instigation, the motor force, of the novelist's desire, whereas reality is subsumed under it.

In proposing these theses, Woolf's contention is nothing less than that late nineteenth century and early twentieth century philosophy and psychology opened up a space to renew characterization in novelistic practice – a renewal aimed at moving away from literary characters molded upon the historically contingent circumstances of a particular era and towards the representation of a more abstract representation of individuality, at the level of the literary character as well as the literary author. As I will elaborate upon, this abstraction is to Woolf's mind not only the essence of literary characterization but also the truth of literary narrative. In order to defend these theses, Woolf invokes a considerable amount of ideas and terminology from the dynamic psychologies of William James and Sigmund Freud. Methodologically speaking, this paper traces the contours of the Woolfian enterprise by looking into its terminological references to the Jamesian and Freudian edifices, while at the same time contextualizing the manifestos within these discourses in order to elucidate thematic intertextuality. Since a fair amount of terminological references in the manifestos can demonstrably be traced back to Woolf's contemporary, philosopher Bertrand Russell, who in turn had been influenced by both James and Freud, Russell's psychological observations will have a considerable share in the following analysis as well.

II

A few words on the background of Woolf's manifestos are necessary, in particular the somewhat heated debate she indulged in with her direct literary predecessor, Arnold Bennett. In their back-and-forth quarrel, documented in papers and periodicals such as *Cassell's Weekly*, *Nation* and *Athenaeum* and

Evening Standard, it soon became clear that although Woolf and Bennett agreed upon the centrality of characterization in good novelistic writing, they dismissed each other's ideas of how to concretely shape literary characters. While both asserted the importance of the notion of 'character,' they used the term in their own way, that is to say, they conceptualized the term differently. In his article "Is the Novel Decaying?" Bennett lauded Woolf's novel, *Jacob's Room*, for "bursting with originality" and being "exquisitely written" (Bennett 1923, 113), but reproached it for lacking characters that one could label as "real." Bennett writes that the novel needs to be real, needs to pertain to truthfulness, and thus states:

It [the novel] cannot seem true if the characters do not seem to be real. Style counts; plot counts; invention counts; originality of outlook counts; wide information counts; wide sympathy counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters. If the characters are real the novel will have a chance; if they are not oblivion will be its portion. (Bennett 1923, 112)

A bit later in the same article Bennett writes that a successfully created character "is a genuine individual that all can recognize for reality" (Bennett 1923, 113). Bennett thus equates the reality, or realness so to speak, of a literary character with readers being potentially convinced that the characters depicted correspond to a type of person one might encounter in empirical reality. As is clear from the above quotation, the other virtues of a well-written novel, which include narrative techniques such as style and plot, are subsumed under the primacy of a hypothetical linkage between the depiction of characters and readers being enabled to picture or imagine them in experiential life. This shows that Bennett's method of literary characterization is permeated by the notion of probability. Perhaps needless to say, this does not mean that Bennett believes that a predominantly phantasmal character cannot be convincing. The point, rather, is that only if a reader is able to construct a mental image of a given literary character, whatever the proportion between the imagination and real life experiences on the reader's part may be, one may grant such literary representation an aesthetic success, the underlying premise being the necessity of identification. In addition to these claims, Bennett claims in his article "Another Criticism of the New School" to have not been able to see a "moral basis" (Bennett 1926, 189-190) in Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway*. One sees here Platonic ideas repeated: Bennett equates an aesthetic achievement with being a copy of truth, which in turn might serve as a good. For Bennett, Beauty, Truth and Morality – the Platonic virtues – are intimately intertwined in the work of art.

Woolf, though, takes another route in her manifestos. As a self-proclaimed Georgian – grouping herself together with experimental writers like James

Joyce and T.S. Eliot³ – she avows renouncing the alleged ‘materialism’ of the Edwardians. The term ‘materialism’ is the central word upon which Woolf builds her critique of the Edwardians, who she claims to “write of unimportant things”, due to their “spend[ing] immense skill and industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (Woolf MF, 159). To Woolf, they are thus concerned “not with the spirit but with the body” (Woolf MF, 158). Amongst the Edwardians, Bennett is singled out as the worst offender because, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, he is the most talented – “by far the best workman” (Woolf MF, 158) – while “he is trying to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house [for Woolf the image of materialism], there must be a person living there” (Woolf CiF, 430). She concludes that “[h]ouse property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy” (Woolf CiF, 431).

As I have pointed out above in relation to Bennett’s statements, the idea of probability based upon identification that underlies his working method returns in Woolf’s text in the metaphor of tyranny:

The writer seems constraint, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour. (Woolf MF, 160)

From these remarks one might infer Woolf’s first claim against the Edwardians: prescriptive literary devices such as plot, characterization in the sense of creating identifiable literary figures, and assumptions about the causal relation between people’s material conditions such as their houses and the intimacy of their minds, lead to novels being too predictable and formulaic. Such a technique simply does not constitute “the proper stuff of fiction” (Woolf MF, 161). The accusation of Bennett’s work being too mechanical is reaffirmed in the statement that a novelist should be careful not to take “too much delight in the solidity of his fabric” (Woolf MF, 159). Whereas being preoccupied by constructing a literary text as tightly woven as possible might point to craftsmanship, it nonetheless leads to novels functioning as windows upon reality in which those realities are too smoothly and neatly depicted. No irregularities and discrepancies can be seen through them (Woolf MF, 146). It thus becomes clear that Woolf’s case against Bennett’s approach to novel writing transcends a dispute about literary style: by rejecting Bennett’s basic

³ Woolf writes on this point: “[T]o make a clearance before I begin, I will suggest that we range Edwardians and Georgians into two camps; Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy I will call the Edwardians; Mr Forster, Mr Lawrence, Mr Strachey, Mr Joyce, and Mr Eliot I will call the Georgians” (Woolf CiF, 421).

beliefs about the necessary features of successful novels Woolf claims her own writing practice to be fundamentally different from his.

Unsurprisingly, Woolf's view on what constitutes valid ways to write novels deviates from the Edwardians'. This is not to say that Woolf jettisons any and all kinds of stringent literary architecture. On the contrary, she defends a highly sophisticated form of design in literature, a literary logic, if you will, based upon the psychological and epistemological rigor of her contemporaries James, Freud and Russell. The main difference Woolf sets up between herself and the Edwardians is twofold: on the one hand, Woolf views that full potential of literary construction is not realized by *prescriptive* sets of methodological devices. For her, such an approach is too repetitive and leaves too little room for invention – time and again reality is depicted in the same way, through the same lens. So much I hope to have made clear by now. On the other hand, there is her second claim that the Edwardians select the wrong kind of objects to focus upon in novelistic writing. Part and parcel of their materialism is their effort spent on describing the material conditions their fictional characters live by, which is at the expense of effort spent on the presentations of their internal worlds, their psychological functioning. A paradigmatic example of Bennett's 'materialistic' reasoning can be found in his book *The Author's Craft* in which he puts forward his view on the essentials of literary writing. There Bennett argues that the human psyche develops according to the exterior circumstances in which individuals find themselves, not the other way around. Human beings are for Bennett primarily responses to environments. And, conversely, if one wants to attain knowledge of human psychology one has to study people's environment as closely as possible. Hence, Bennett writes that "[e]very street is a mirror, an illustration, an exposition, an explanation, of the human beings who live in it" (Bennett 1914, 26-27). In addition, Bennett claims that what determine human beings most are the physical and geographical circumstances they live in (Bennett 1914, 24). Striking to this way of thinking is that Bennett supposes the exterior to have primacy over the interior. Whether those exterior determinants are artificial or natural – the streets of cities or the geography of countries – what they have in common is that Bennett believes people's psychological makeup to be inferable from them.

To subvert the Edwardians' approach in writing novels Woolf states her belief in "the moderns," those who retrospectively would be labeled as the 'modernists':

For the moderns [...] the point of interest [...] lies very likely in the dark places of psychology. At once, therefore, the accent falls a little differently; the emphasis is upon something hitherto ignored; at once a different outline of form becomes necessary, difficult for us to grasp, incomprehensible to our predecessors. (Woolf MF, 162)

The opposition Woolf sets up between her own way of writing and the Edwardians' is not of a binary nature. I do not believe Woolf to be interested in dismissing the Edwardians' approach *per se*; Woolf, rather, asserts that the Edwardian method is in need of a supplement. The introduction of "the dark places of psychology" serves as this complementary element. The invocation of psychology to literary discourse is, of course, nothing new. But what bears emphasis is that contemporary psychology opened up a new way to think about the individual. The fact that Woolf writes that those "dark places" should find their consequence in new literary forms suggests an artistic revolution only recently made possible, hence the phrase that this has been "incomprehensible to our predecessors." The ills of a materialistic view on novel writing can be neutralized, filtered if you will, by allowing oneself as a novelist to be considerably guided by psychology's aim for research beyond the immediately observable. To see in the psychologists' objective the cause of a new literature seems to be the injunction. The subversive gesture lies in the idea that the psychological dimension has now gained priority over materialistic description of individuals in their socio-historical and geographical circumstances (and, as I explained above, the presupposed validity of inferring from exterior clues the interiority of the human mind). The much-needed complement of drawing modern psychology into literature should dominate the already established practices of historically-oriented fictional narrative.

In the next sections I will expand on the kind of psychology that is suited to perform this function, the role of James, Freud and Russell in this, and how it might lead to a new form of novel. But before doing so, I want to stress that Woolf builds a terminological network in her manifestos that sustains the injunction of a psychological priority.

Woolf cites James Joyce as one of her most important contemporaries, if not the most important one, who has shown that literature's revolution relies in turning inwardly. In so doing, the form of the novel has arrived at being genuinely able to represent the complexities and intricacies of the human mind. Joyce, according to Woolf, "is spiritual" and "is concerned at all costs to reveal the flickerings of that innermost flame which flashes its messages through the brain" (Woolf MF, 161). He "come[s] closer to life" and dismisses the conventions "which are commonly observed by the novelist" (Woolf MF, 161). Joyce's highly experimental novel, *Ulysses*, serves as an empirical argument against writing novels by way of prescriptive methods. For Woolf, Joyce incorporates that which is neglected by the Edwardian way of writing. Those "flickerings of that innermost flame," which constitute the spiritual function of literature, only thrives when "no perception comes amiss" (Woolf MF, 164).

But what does Woolf mean by modern literary authors' stress on the "spiritual" ? Woolf equates the spiritual function of literature with life itself. She writes that "[w]hether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the

essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (Woolf MF, 160). She continues:

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible? (Woolf MF, 160-161)

The image of life being a “luminous halo” might seem a paradoxical statement the moment one sees that Woolf also makes a case for a sort of atomistic thinking in literature:

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. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small. (Woolf MF, 161)

I would argue that the usage of the term ‘spirit’ – and the terms Woolf interchangeably uses with it such as ‘life,’ ‘truth,’ and ‘reality’ – designate the interiority of the human mind, the “flickerings of that innermost flame.” In addition, Woolf writes of Joyce’s literary spiritualism as producing “sudden lightning flashes of significance” (Woolf MF, 161). The term ‘significance’ is revealing here since it refers to the act of meaning making. Thus, if the ‘spirit’ serves as the antipode of materialism and the first guarantees meaning by way of it being associated with ‘significance’, then what is misunderstood by a materialistic writing strategy such as Bennett’s is that meaning is not something found in external reality but far more a product of psychological functioning. Meaning for Woolf is mental, not physical. The novelist’s objective should, therefore, be to show the reader the mind of literary characters from within, from the perspective as to how it creates sense, and not to tell about it from without. The relation between meaning as registration of sudden, subjective psychological functioning and atomism is, I believe, meant to propose how the novelist concretely should proceed in writing. Although Woolf never makes it explicit, what she underscores is that in renouncing the prescriptive way of working as I explained above – that is, refusing to choose pre-given literary devices for constructing a novel – the novelist should turn to his own perception as the starting point. “‘The proper stuff of fiction’ does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss” (Woolf MF, 164). “The atoms as they fall upon the mind” is another way of saying that it is one’s own impressions that should be arranged and coordinated

into a novelistic design. In an introduction Woolf wrote for her novel *Mrs Dalloway* one encounters her view elegantly summarized:

The novelists of preceding generation had done little – after all why should they? – to help. The novel was the obvious lodging, but the novel it seemed was built on the wrong plan. Thus rebuked the idea [of a new kind of novel] started as the oyster starts or the snail to secrete a house for itself. And this it did without any conscious direction. The little note-book in which an attempt was made to forecast a plan was soon abandoned, and the book grew day by day, week by week, without any plan at all, except that which was dictated each morning in the act of writing. (Woolf IMD, 12)

Novelistic reality – the metaphorical house secreted by the oyster or snail – is carefully but unconsciously built, layer by layer, without any preconceived plan. The only firm and solid feature involved in this process is “the act of writing”. The novelist, one might infer, uses his consciousness as the recording device for external as well as intrapsychic stimuli. All the while, the emphasis of constructing reality instead of mirroring it (like the Edwardians supposedly do) results in a different design of the novel, a design that most strikingly might make use of non-standard logic. Hence, the fact that Woolf writes “Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated, as a boy staying with an aunt for the weekend rolls in the geranium bed out of sheer desperation as the solemnities of the sabbath wear on” (Woolf *CiF*, 434). Breaking open the Edwardian novel results in a new kind of narrative, a blueprint of the novelist’s individuality. Woolf, thus, particularizes the creative process, and in so doing, asserts that clear-cut linear causality should be evicted from the novel. The laws of psychic life are different from the laws governing empirical reality; the modernist novelist no longer believes in the validity of an either/or logic.

III

In order to dispel the myth of an assumed overlap between socio-historical dynamics and fictional narrative, Woolf proposes a view on modern literature based upon the primacy of contemporary psychology. As I said earlier, this assumes that human psychology cannot be reduced to such external dynamics. Yet, this was not a passing fancy or short-lived rebellion on Woolf’s part. According to Judith Ryan, the relationship between psychology and literature during the beginning of the twentieth century has too often been assumed to be of a strictly Freudian kind. Ryan points out that empiricist and elementaristic psychologies hugely influenced the early twentieth century novelists as well. Those new psychologies called for “totally reshaping familiar structures” (Ryan 1991, 4) in literature. Although Ryan never claims that the Freudian tradition did not influence authors like Woolf, she does argue for a view of

psychology's multifarious influences upon modernist literature. This also applies to the multiplicity of psychological schools having been responsible for the modernist novelist's realization that the old world had started to crumble, and therefore had started to seem outdated. The question for the modern-day author was, "If, as the empiricists claimed, the subject was purely evanescent, how could literature be written at all?" (Ryan 1991, 3).

James, although most often cited in relation to literature as the one who coined the term "stream-of-consciousness," influenced Woolf far beyond this particular technique. Even though Woolf clearly used stream-of-consciousness in her novels, the manifestos too display James' influence, albeit at a more rhetorical level. Consider the relevant passage from James' classic book *The Principles of Psychology*:

The traditional psychology talks like one who should say a river consists of nothing but pailsful, spoonsful, quarterpotsful, barrelsful, and other moulded forms of water. Even were the pails and the pots all actually standing in the stream, still between them the free water would continue to flow. It is just this free water of consciousness that psychologists absolutely overlook. Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it, – or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same thing it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood. (James 1890, 255)

The problem of "the traditional psychology" – that is nineteenth century psychology, which assumes the existence of a unified agency, a distinctive subject perceiving and contemplating material objects – is a lack, amongst others, of showing full subjective experience with which consciousness is endowed. The object, as encountered in empirical reality, does not exactly appear in the mind's eye as it is structured in reality. A new and radical psychology, based upon emptying out a coherent subject, asks for a distinctive way the subject experiences objects. The image of an object, thus, is structured differently from the object as physical entity. "The free water of consciousness" constituting "this halo or penumbra" in fact guarantees a relative disjunction between perception and the outside world. Because if this "free water" constantly renders the image of an object in the mind as "dyed" by past experiences (and future ones) whereas the object as empirical fact remains stable, there seems to be a discrepancy between thing and experience of that thing. In itself, this was not something particularly new; debates about the relationship between perspectives upon reality and reality as such had been intrinsic to philosophy for centuries. However, James' view as stated in the

above quotation relates to an earlier statement by which he conveyed his disbelief in the existence of collective thought. Thought, for James, is always personal thought; there exists no meta-level and there is no metaphysical realm predating individual consciousness (James 1890, 225). In this context James writes that “[a]bsolute insulation, irreducible pluralism, is the law” (James 1890, 226). Speaking beings, therefore, never completely understand each other, for the simple reason that thought bears an irreducible element of the personal and idiosyncratic. Objects are really real, so to speak, but since the images of these objects are personally colored by the idiosyncratic past of every individual, there is always an element of incommensurability between individuals, at least when talking about the same objects. If psychological understanding is irreducibly “dyed” with one’s personal experiences, shaped by the relations of thought, then no full communication between people about their environment is possible, although this environment might be identical to one another’s. Here one already sees the germ of the psychoanalytic notion of projection: the same situation perceived by several individuals actually implies a multiplicity of situations, though physically singular.

An interesting relation with regard to Woolf is that, although one might initially think that “the dark places of psychology” mentioned in “Modern Fiction” would refer to Freudianism, an alternative (though not exclusionary) reading would be to understand this phrase as referring to the Jamesian idea of a subject’s consecutive chain of images constructing a mental representation of an object. The fact that James interchangeably uses the term ‘penumbra,’ a term that signifies the gradually fading shadow surrounding an object, with the term ‘halo’ introduces a degree of unknowability to the human mind. Perhaps needless to point out, the term ‘halo’ bears an element of the sacred, perhaps even the occult, since it traditionally served as a visual symbol attributed to the painterly depiction of saints. The fact that James chooses such an iridescent image to refer to the mental process of intrapsychic meaning making attests to his attributing great, almost metaphysical, value to it. For Woolf, it seems that the novelist’s task is to show the reader the shadowy nature of the literary character’s minds. The fact that in Woolf’s novels – especially the later ones – there is no usage of third-person omniscient narrators connects to the idea of these “dark places of psychology”: if neither reliance on external description (as the Edwardians proposed) nor reliance on introspection guarantees clarity of the mind’s content, the usage of an omniscient narrator would be unrealistic. In this sense, the realism of the Edwardians is less real than Woolf’s modernism.

However, this is not to say that the image of “the dark places” does not refer to Freudianism. From evidence found in other essays written before “Modern Fiction” and “Character in Fiction” one can infer that Woolf did have considerable knowledge on psychoanalysis and felt the need to insert it in literary writing. Consider, for example, her essay “More Dostoevsky” written in 1917. Woolf states:

[W]e ourselves are conscious of thinking when some startling fact has dropped into the pool of our consciousness. From the crowd of objects pressing upon our attention we select now this one, now that one, weaving them inconsequently into our thought; the associations of a word perhaps make another loop in the line, from which we spring back again to a different section of our main thought, and the whole process seems both inevitable and perfectly lucid. But if we try to construct our mental processes later, we find that the links between one thought and another are submerged. The chain is sunk out of sight and only the leading points emerge to mark the course. (Woolf MD, 85)

It is almost impossible to overlook the Freudian principle of repression being described here. Woolf's statements about thoughts being "submerged" in conjunction with chain-like thought circling around gaps in our consciousness seem to suggest that Woolf believes in the Freudian notion of the unconscious, hence the phrase that "the chain is sunk out of sight and only the leading points emerge to mark the course." Surprisingly, already in "More Dostoevsky" one finds Woolf's criticism of her predecessors, albeit in a more embryonic form:

This [the above quotation's description of unconscious mental activity] is the exact opposite of the method adopted, perforce, by most of our novelists. They reproduce all the external appearances – tricks of manner, landscape, dress, and the effect of the hero upon his friends – but very rarely, and only for an instant, penetrate to the tumult of thought which rages within his own mind. (Woolf MD, 85)

It follows from both quotations that Woolf believes that the Edwardian approach not only aims at explaining the human mind by inference from exteriority, as I explained in the previous sections, but also that the Edwardians apparently believe that the human mind can be made entirely lucid by novelistic elucidation. This leads to Woolf suggesting that the Edwardians disregard unconscious mental activity, since all thought processes of literary characters can, and perhaps should, be penetrable to the reader. Thus, Woolf employing Jamesian and Freudian rhetoric seems to point at an attempt to discredit the major Edwardian assumptions.⁴

Now, although this is an ingenious strategy on Woolf's part, there seems to arise a paradoxical element to her thinking. In *The Principles of Psychology* James states, namely, that he disbelieves in the existence of unconscious

⁴ An interesting parallel can be seen here as to the views of one of the other Edwardians, only mentioned briefly by Woolf in "Modern Fiction" and "Character in Fiction", H.G. Wells. In his article "The Contemporary Novel" Wells writes that "[b]ecause its [the novel's] characters are figments and phantoms they can be made entirely transparent" (Wells 1912, 10). Woolf would regard this statement with suspicion; even fictional characters cannot be made entirely transparent, since no mind is ever transparent to begin with, whether for itself or another.

mental activity. He claims that the assertion of unconscious mental activity opens up the door to “believing what one likes in psychology and of turning what might become a science into a tumbling-ground for whimsies” (James 1890, 163). There are basically two possibilities that could be seen at play here: either Woolf is being inconsistent, deliberately or not, and merges two kinds of psychological thinking – i.e. the Freudian and Jamesian one – together whereas they are in fact contradicting each other. Being a literary author and not a philosopher or theorist of any kind would perhaps grant Woolf such freedom. Or Woolf has another reason for doing what she does, which I in fact find more plausible. That could be the fact that although James and Freud disagree on the existence or non-existence of unconscious mental activity, they both do belong to the same tradition in psychology, i.e. dynamic psychology. They therefore share some important assumptions. The most important one for my purpose here is the assumption of psychological reality being irreducible to material, external reality. So, despite important differences amongst individual dynamic psychologies, such as the status of unconscious mental activity, the fact remains that for all of them psychological reality is being equated to mental energy, not external reality (Johnson 2006, 3). What seems most important, then, for Woolf is not whether the unconscious, or ‘unconsciousness’, would exist but the idea that the mind is an energized entity, full of relief and shifts in intensity and visibility of its elements. Remember that Woolf writes of “*dark places of psychology*”, not unconscious places necessarily. Similarly, in James’ work one finds an abundance of rhetoric of darkness and invisibility, amongst others the ‘halo’ metaphor as equated with the interplay of light and darkness of the ‘penumbra’ as I pointed out above. In addition, James emphasizes that he does believe in the existence of *subconscious* mental activity and its importance to the actual workings of the mind (James 1890, 227). But perhaps most important for my purpose here is that both James and Freud emphasize the phenomenon of splitting, albeit for the former between consciousness and the subconscious and for the latter between consciousness and the unconscious⁵. One finds according to both James and Freud different localities in the mind. Hence, thoughts might “travel” from one place of the mind to another. This, I believe, is the main

⁵ Although an analysis of all the differences of opinion between James and Freud on the unconscious is beyond my present purpose, what I do want to stress is the following. The difference between Freud’s notion of the unconscious and James’ notion of the subconscious relies in the logic both authors attribute to these notions. As is well-known, for Freud the unconscious is structured according to laws not intrinsic to ego-discourse, such as an indifference to the law of non-contradiction. For James, subconscious mental activity is in effect structured according to the same principles as conscious mental activity. Hence, the fact that James writes that “[...] although the size of a secondary self thus formed will depend on the number of thoughts that are thus split-off from the main consciousness, the form of it tends to personality [i.e. a conscious self], and the later thoughts pertaining to it remember the earlier ones and adopt them as their own (James 1890, 227).

factor, the main reason, why Woolf urged to take up rhetoric so typical to dynamic psychologies.

The relationship between Woolf and Russell is a very intimate yet difficult one. Although it is not my primary objective to reconstruct this relationship here, I do believe it is necessary to mention Russell, whose language and ideas are especially echoed in Woolf's manifestos. And since both Woolf and Russell belonged to the Bloomsbury Group and had frequent personal contact, it is not surprising that Woolf was considerably influenced by his thinking. In addition, in both Woolf's manifestos and Russell's work the elementaristic psychology of James plays a considerable part. In addition, the seemingly equivocal dual influence of James and Russell upon Woolf can be seen in Russell's *The Analysis of Mind* as well. There Russell writes that for him the Freudian unconscious is not something enigmatic or undecipherable; the unconscious is just something that is "actively noticed" (Russell 1921, 39) after a certain wish has been realized in empirical reality. So, it is a matter of corroboration: the influence of James and Freud upon Woolf is reinforced by the fact that they both influenced Russell as well, who in turn influenced Woolf again. This fact would corroborate my assertion that although James and Freud do disagree on the unconscious it is possible to combine them theoretically. For example, in Russell's *The Analysis of Mind* James is mentioned as the psychologist who anticipated a revolution in epistemology. "The view that seems to me to reconcile the materialistic tendency of psychology," Russell writes, "with the anti-materialistic tendency of physics is the view of William James and the American new realists, according to which the 'stuff' of the world is neither mental nor material, but a 'neutral stuff,' out of which both are constructed" (Russell 1921, 6). Whereas the new psychologies such as James', amongst others, had emptied out the subject from its supposed substance – dematerialized the subject if you will – the physics of Einstein had shown that matter is not really all that material. Modern physics had, namely, shown that the event is primordial and not the existence of matter. Matter is a "logical construction" (Russell 1921, 5) built from endless series of events and "[e]verything in nature is apparently in a state of continuous change, so that what we call one 'event' turns out to be really a process" (Russell 1921, 94). My analysis of Woolf's attack upon the Edwardians as being too materialistic can be viewed from the Russellian viewpoint too. Remember that Woolf is suspicious of assuming characters in fiction as extensions of, or responses to, the material world they live in. Hence, she writes that the Edwardians "have given us a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there" (Woolf CiF, 432). In a new world dominated by revolutions in psychology and physics no clear-cut causal relation can be assumed to exist between the world and the mind. Empirical reality is governed by a set of laws and the mind is governed by yet another set of laws, both predated by "neutral stuff." For Russell thus there is a breach between matter and mind: the laws of the material world, researched by physics, "can broadly speaking, be stated by

treating such systems of particulars as causal units. The laws which psychology seeks cannot be so stated, since the particulars themselves are what interests the psychologist” (Russell 1921, 106). Realizing that Russell’s views had been influential to Woolf’s thought taken in conjunction with Woolf’s contention that the Edwardians “have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things” (Woolf *CiF*, 432) thus actually means that the Edwardians are not writing on humans as minds but about humans as things.

Nevertheless, this should not deceive one into too easily concluding that elementarism, whether in its Jamesian psychologized version or in the Russellian epistemological one, asserts that the particles of the mind – the hypothetical smallest things, the ‘atoms’ or minimal impressions Woolf tries to captivate in her writing – can be analyzed in isolation. As Ryan points out, James thought that “[t]he moment-by-moment changes in consciousness are borne along by a sense of continuity that, however factitious, succeeds in overriding the fragmentariness of individual sensations” (Ryan 1991, 14). Indeed, as the above quotation by James states, the flowing of the metaphorical river, guaranteeing the underlying mobility of the chains of images mutually influencing each other, constantly “dyes” the thing perceived and “mak[es] it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood.” The external world, thus, is constantly reinvented, every impression writing itself over the previous one.

IV

Returning to the discussion of character in novelistic writing, Woolf proposes in “Character in Fiction” to rethink Bennett’s approach, as I outlined above, by providing an alternative: a new kind of character, metaphorically incarnated by a fictional lady Woolf calls Mrs Brown. Through recounting a parable, Woolf wants to convey a certain truth, wants us to see “what I mean by character in itself; that you may realise the different aspects it can wear; and the hideous perils that beset you directly you try to describe it in words” (Woolf *CiF*, 423). The parable goes as follows. During a train journey Woolf imagines the encounter with Mrs Brown, who seems to be unfathomable to Woolf. It does not seem possible to pinpoint her exactly; she remains indefinite. She could be “the figure of a man, or of a woman, who said, ‘My name is Brown. Catch me if you can’” (Woolf *CiF*, 420). Mrs Brown is evanescent, fascinating and, most importantly, the image of this lady sitting in front of Woolf forces itself upon her: “What I want you to see in it is this. Here is a character imposing itself upon another person. Here is Mrs Brown making someone begin almost automatically to write a novel about her. I believe that all novels begin with an old lady in the corner opposite” (Woolf *CiF*, 425). Woolf, thus, wants us to understand that the writing process, the insistence to write a novel, primarily springs forth from curiosity. This is no curiosity as to the material conditions

people live by, their achievements, personal history or any other form of adventitiousness. To Woolf's mind, all of this is of secondary importance. Utilitarian qualities in general seem to be of secondary interest to Woolf: "[N]ovelist differ from the rest of the world because they do not cease to be interested in character when they have learned enough about it for practical purposes" (Woolf CiF, 422). Instead, a new novelistic practice, based upon the idea of the novel for the novel's sake, implies an adherence to truth, defined neither as history's impact upon the individual, nor as its constitutional power. In so doing, Woolf is, I believe, talking about a psychological truth. What she wants to convey by showing us the novelist as inspired by a randomly chosen encounter with a stranger is the nature of human desire itself. The novelist does not direct his attention upon the world and in so doing tries to capture it. The movement is made the other way around: curiosity, or desire, is something elicited in the novelist by an element of the world. The novelist, thus, is not pushed into world but rather pulled into it. Desire is the essence of the novel; teaching history simply is a different discipline. For Woolf, the Edwardians mix these two things up.

Now, in order to understand the psychological dimension of Woolf's view on the creative process, I would like to stress the resemblance it bears with Freud's description of phantasy in his article "Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming." Freud proposes that day-dreams and phantasy life alter through time according to the individual's experiences in life. They rearrange themselves in relation to the structure of empirical reality as inscribed into the psyche of the individual. In addition, Freud asserts a peculiar temporality to the act of creation:

The relation of a phantasy to time is in general very important. We may say that it hovers, as it were, between three times – the three moments of time which our ideation involves. Mental work is linked to some current impression, some provoking occasion in the present which has been able to arouse one of the subject's major wishes. From there it harks back to a memory of an earlier experience (usually an infantile one) in which this wish was fulfilled; and it now creates a situation relating to the future which represents a fulfilment of the wish. What it thus creates is a day-dream or phantasy, which carries about it traces of its origin from the occasion which provoked it and from the memory. Thus past, present and future are strung together, as it were, on the thread of the wish that runs through them. (Freud 1975, 147-148)

The typically Freudian temporality involved here is that of deferred action, or retroactivity. The individual's perception is stimulated, or aroused, by an actual experience in the present which attains its meanings, that is, it becomes a meaningful construct, when it attaches to an earlier experienced satisfaction, thus projecting upon the future an image of a new status quo in reality. This formalized view of a psychological process is, for Freud, the blueprint of

individuality in a work of imaginative literature. Although Woolf never states that she refers to a psychoanalytic process per se, and never explicitly writes of the encounter with Mrs Brown as the incarnation of the novelist's psychology, it does seem legitimate to draw a parallel between Freud and Woolf on this point. Ultimately, though, it remains somewhat undecidable whether Woolf views this instigation of desire, as incarnated in Mrs Brown, as conscious or unconscious to the novelist. Most clues, however, seem to lead into the direction of Woolf believing that this must be mostly unconscious, since she speaks of the indefinite status of the attraction and the fact that this curiosity has no tangible object such as people's external circumstances. In addition, corroboration of Freudian principles in Woolf's thinking is found in her statement about the importance of childhood experience for the adult novelist: "Books are the flowers or fruit stuck here and there on a tree which has its roots deep down in the earth of our earliest life, of our first experiences (Woolf IMD, 11). In addition, remember that the Jamesian echo in the manifestos already muddled a linear determinist temporality.

The metaphor of the halo allowed us to see the back-and-forth influences of mental representations, the metaphor of the streaming river being its motor force. Although James did not appropriate the notion of the Freudian unconscious, it in any case is clear that both James and Freud rejected a neat and clear-cut causal temporality, at least seen from the subjective position. In addition, Freud in fact describes the logic of desire as it occurs in those who indulge in day-dreaming and, by extension, the novelist. The lack of a serious estimation of the psychological dimension to human life that according to Woolf renders the Edwardian novel weak can be reformulated by saying that the Edwardians show a lack of interest in the depiction of human desire. Remember that Bennett asserts that his view on the psychological, interior dimension of the individual can be inferred from external observation. Woolf correctly observes this and hence states that if Bennett would encounter Mrs Brown he would just "gradually sidle sedately towards" (Woolf CiF, 429) her, without really understanding her.

So, what the Edwardians evacuate in their attempt to register reality as it ostensibly would be is truth. Hence, in Woolf's parable Mrs Brown interchangeably stands in for truth, eternity and human nature (Woolf CiF, 430). What is eternal to the novelist having his or her desire aroused by a random encounter is the fact that desire is elicited by the subject's encounter with the world, thus making desire no pre-given fact but a retroactively constituted dynamic. The Edwardians writing too much from a position of history's grip upon the individual is to Woolf's mind ignoring the individual's personal history. By isolating this pure point of desire – Freud's "provoking occasion" as the quotation above states – Woolf segregates reality from something that is, by contrast, real. Conversely, Woolf implicitly asserts that the Edwardians collapse the notion of reality with an idea of that something which can be called 'real'. A revolutionized artistic process, then, is to take the

image of Mrs Brown, the image of eternity, as a gravitational point surrounding which the novelist composes a multiplicity of circumstances. “What was it composed of – that overwhelming and peculiar impression?” Woolf asks herself, and concludes: “Myriad of irrelevant and incongruous ideas crowd into one’s head on such occasions; one sees the person, one sees Mrs Brown, in the centre of all sorts of different scenes” (Woolf CiF, 425). One thus sees two different but overlapping psychological processes at work in Woolf’s manifestos: James’ ever multiplying content of images and ideas coexisting with a dissolving subject, swirling around a structural gap that is the Freudian object.

References

- Baldick, Chris. 2004. *The Modern Movement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, Arnold. 1914. *The Author’s Craft*. New York: George H. Doran Company Publishers.
- Bennett, Arnold. 1923. “Is the Novel Decaying?” *Cassell’s Weekly*, March 28. In *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, eds. Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin. 1975. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bennett, Arnold. 1926. “Another Criticism of the New School”. *Evening Standard*, December 2. In *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, eds. Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin. 1975. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1975. “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”. In: *Jensen’s ‘Gradiva’ and Other Works*, Vol. IX, ed. J. Strachey. London: The Hogarth Press.
- James, William. 1890. *The Principles of Psychology*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc..
- Johnson, George M. 2006. *Dynamic Psychology in Modernist British Fiction*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Russell, Bertrand. 1921. *The Analysis of Mind*. London: George Allen.
- Ryan, Judith. 1991. *The Vanishing Subject: Early Psychology and Literary Modernism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Wells, H.G. 1912. “The Contemporary Novel”. *The Atlantic Monthly*, January 1912.
- Woolf, Virginia. “More Dostoevsky”. 1987. In *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol II, ed. Andrew McNeillie. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Woolf, Virginia. “Character in Fiction”. 1988. In *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol III, ed. Andrew McNeillie. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Woolf, Virginia. “Modern Fiction.” 1994. In *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. IV, ed. Andrew McNeillie. London: The Hogarth Press.
- Virginia Woolf. 2003. “An Introduction to *Mrs. Dalloway*.” In *The Mrs. Dalloway Reader*, ed. Francine Prose. Orlando: Harcourt, inc. .