

The waters of the mind: Rhetorical patterns of fluidity in Woolf, William James, Bergson and Freud

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At the beginning of the 20th century, modernist writers such as Joyce, Proust, Mann and Virginia Woolf rejected the traditional realist novel as an inadequate form of capturing the complexity and mutability of reality and human experience. The conventions, strategies and techniques that the modernist novel adopted were closely connected with the great transformations that Europe underwent at a philosophical, political, technological and artistic level, and they owed specifically a lot to the new ideas on the human mind that were spreading across Europe and America. Henri Bergson, William James and Sigmund Freud were among the chief creators of this modern psychology, and their writings, together with Woolf's, constitute attempts to give a novel account of the workings of the mind.

Leaving aside the question of direct influence and knowledge of each other's ideas¹, and taking into consideration the great differences that exist between these authors's systems of thought, the aim of this article is to shed some light on Woolf's metaphorical recreation of the human mind by means of a rhetorical pattern articulated around the notions of container and content, surface and depth, fluidity and change, dissolution and unboundedness, notions that also appear in Bergson's, James's and Freud's descriptions of the mind. A brief reference to feminist theory is obligatory, given the central role it has played in the interpretation of Woolf's writing. Adopting an open and fluid notion of intertextuality,

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¹ Apparently Woolf did not read Freud for herself until 1939, though that is hard to believe since Freud's works began to be translated by James Strachey and his wife Alix in the 1920's, and to be published by the Hogarth Press. Furthermore several Bloomsbury members trained as psychoanalysts, and Melanie Klein delivered her 1925 lectures at 50 Gordon Square, the home of Adrian and Karin Stephen. Freud and Woolf met in January 1939. In any case and without a shadow of doubt, Woolf must have been familiar with Freud's works and theories, which were much discussed in the Bloomsbury group. As regards Bergson's and James's relation, they began a correspondence in 1902 that lasted until James's death in 1910. Though it seems that at the beginning of their careers the similarities between their works were more due to coincidence than to influence, later they must have taken ideas from each other.

this article follows certain poststructural practices that defend a blurring of boundaries between disciplines and genres, and an eclectic dialogue between all linguistic constructions, especially from a purely textual and rhetorical point of view.

In any discussion on modernism – both as a wide philosophical current or as a concrete literary movement – the question of the new approaches to the human mind, human subjectivity and human consciousness is bound to appear. Those approaches took the form of a critique or questioning of old conceptions of the self – as we actually see in Freud, James and Bergson² – and as Sheehan sustains, a rejection of the humanist orthodox certainty about what it means to be human. According to Freud, the first “two great outrages” (562) upon humanity’s “naïve self-love” (562) were the Copernican discovery that the earth was not the centre of the universe and the Darwinian affirmation of the human descent from the animal world. And now

man’s craving for grandiosity is [...] suffering the third and most bitter blow from present-day psychological research which is endeavouring to prove to the ego of each one of us that he is not even master in his own house, but that he must remain content with the veriest scraps of information about what is going on unconsciously in his own mind. We psycho-analysts were neither the first nor the only ones to propose to mankind that they should look inward; but it appears to be our lot to advocate it most insistently (562).

As Dekoven says, quoting Eugene Lunn’s enumeration of modernist features, one of them is “the demise of subjectivity conceived as unified, integrated, self-consistent” (175)³. And Eysteinnsson also defends that one of the modernist paradigms is the crisis of the subject – the “modernist destruction of bourgeois identity” (28) –, which can be observed in “a modernist preoccupation with human consciousness (as opposed to a mimetic concern with the human environment and social conditions)”. That leads to “the use of the stream of consciousness technique”, to “a radical inward turn” and to an “exploration of the human psyche” (26).

Those are exactly the features that Woolf found in Dorothy Richardson’s novels, and that she herself adopted, transformed and improved. Richardson was the first English novelist to consistently use the stream of consciousness method⁴, as she was “concerned with states of being and not with states of doing” (Woolf, *Essays*, 52). Thus the reader “is not provided with a story; he is invited to embed himself in Miriam Henderson’s consciousness; [...] to follow these impressions as they flicker through Miriam’s mind, waking incongruously other thoughts” (*Essays*, 16). Richardson, however, partly fails, since “we still find ourselves distressingly near the surface” (16), and Woolf proposes instead “to be rid of realism, to penetrate without its help into the regions beneath it” (17), as she makes clear in her famous essays – and declarations of principles – “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” and “Modern Fiction”. She rejects the method of the Edwardian writers, whom she calls “materialists”, since “they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body” (158). On the contrary, the modern

² Many of the theories and ideas of the three of them can be related, in one way or another, to what Urdanoz believes to be the general common characteristics of 20th century philosophical currents: antipositivism; a dynamic and evolutive approach to life and the world; relativism and historicism; an anthropocentrism that places the human being as the centre of the universe; irrationalism and pluralism.

³ Dekoven seems to connect this change in the approach to subjectivity with the shift in gender relations that took place at the turn of the century, and which led to an “ambivalence toward powerful femininity that itself forged many of Modernism’s most characteristic formal innovations” (174).

⁴ Showalter considers Richardson to be the most consistent representative of the female aestheticism that was developed by the last generation of Victorian woman novelists. According to Showalter, this new female aesthetics applied feminist ideology to language, literature, perceptions and values, and thus, Richardson’s subject became female consciousness. Richardson “saw shapelessness as the natural expression of female empathy, and pattern as the sign of male one-sidedness” (256) and by means of the stream-of-consciousness technique, tried to present “the multiplicity and variety of associations held simultaneously in the female mode of perception” (260).

novelist is a “spiritualist”, for whom “the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology” (162).

The attempt to reproduce in the novel what happens in those “dark places of psychology” led to an emphasis on subjectivity, to the dissolution of the boundaries between the objective and the subjective, and to the rejection of the single and omniscient narrator and of fixed narrative points of view. In his celebrated book *Mimesis*, dealing with the representation of reality in Western literature, Auerbach devotes his last chapter to Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*, and uses this novel to illustrate the new modernist narrative techniques. He explains how in the literature of the past “there was hardly any attempt to render the flow and the play of consciousness adrift in the current of changing impressions” (535). Woolf’s writing aims at rendering “the continuous rumination of consciousness in its natural and purposeless freedom” (538), since she wants “to fathom a more genuine, a deeper, and indeed a more real reality” (540).

Freud, Bergson and James did also want to deal with the very essence of human life and that led them, as it led Woolf, to the world of psychological phenomena. Indeed Woolf’s wish to penetrate into “the source beneath the surface, the very oyster within the shell” (*Essays*, 15), her interest for what is hidden beneath the mind’s superficial manifestations is linked to Freud’s discovery of the unconscious, of a world in the individual of unseen material that lies under the obvious and the visible, an idea that utterly transformed art and culture in the early 20th century.

This new vision implied a conception of the mind as a three-dimensional space divided into two basic levels, “the upper” and “the under” (Woolf, *Essays*, 163), the surface on top and the room behind it. Woolf frequently refers to the mind as a container and thoughts, ideas, sensations, dreams as the elements contained in it: life as “a bowl that one fills and fills and fills” (*Moments*, 75) and herself as “the container” of feelings (78), in “A Sketch of the Past”; “her mind was like her room, in which lights advanced and retreated, came pirouetting and stepping delicately” (*Stories*, 92), in “The Lady in the Looking-Glass”; words making a “pattern on the floor of the child’s mind” (64) and the mind as “a pool of thought, a deep basin of reality” (203), in *To the Lighthouse*; “the pool of our consciousness” (*Books*, 141), in her essay “More Dostoevsky”; “the walls” (19) and “the lake” (26) of the characters’ minds, in *The Waves*; or “the mind’s sandy floor” (147), in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Freud very elaborately mapped the divided geography of the mind, and in his lecture on resistance and repression, he explicitly describes the mental apparatus in spatial terms:

The unconscious system may therefore be compared to a large ante-room, in which the various mental excitations are crowding upon one another, like individual beings. Adjoining there is a second, smaller apartment, a sort of reception-room, in which consciousness resides. But on the threshold between the two there stands a personage with the office of door-keeper, who examines the various mental excitations, censors them, and denies them admittance to the reception-room when he disapproves of them (566).

His topographical conception of the mind is also based on the surface-depth dichotomy: “consciousness is the *superficies* of the mental apparatus” (700) and the vast region below the surface is divided into the unconscious and preconscious layers. This dichotomy between what lies under and what is upper, and the relations, movements and exchanges that are established between those different mental levels are essential to understand Freud’s rhetorical descriptions of the mind. For example, his seventh lecture, on manifest content and latent thoughts, is completely structured around this idea. He explains how “our method is to allow other substitute-ideas, from which we are able to divine that which lies hidden, to emerge into consciousness” (489); that those substitute-ideas are a means “of bringing into consciousness the unconscious thoughts underlying the dream” (490); and that “resistances invariably confront us when we try to penetrate to the hidden unconscious thought” (490).

This topography of the psyche, which is related to Freud’s three basic personality structures, id, ego and superego, is adopted by Woolf in her essay “The Leaning Tower”, from 1940, where she makes an explicit reference to “Dr. Freud” (*Essays*, 175). Woolf talks about “unconsciousness” as the “state” at which “the under mind works at top speed while the upper mind drowns” (163). She explains how

most interesting perceptions “swam to the surface, apparently of their own accord; and remained in memory,” while “what was unimportant sunk into forgetfulness” (163), and she defends that writers should achieve “a whole state of mind, a mind no longer crippled, evasive, divided” (175), so that they sink into unconsciousness and tranquillity and are able to deal with what is beneath the surface.

If we pay attention to both authors’s words and proposals, we find the idea of the constant movement of mental contents. Freud’s conception of mental processes very clearly depends on the already discussed topographical perspective, but also on the dynamic one: “Psycho-analysis has departed a step further from the descriptive psychology of consciousness [...] Up till now, it differed from academic (descriptive) psychology mainly by reason of its dynamic conception of mental processes; now we have to add that it professes to consider mental topography also” (431). We have seen that as Freud tries to clarify the mental “dynamics”⁵, he describes an interaction of submerged and emerging elements and forces, of material slipping back and forth between the conscious, preconscious and unconscious. Woolf’s metaphors of the mind as “pool”, “basin” or “lake”, Freud’s metaphor of the “iceberg” or Woolf’s account of perceptions as “swimming” and “sinking”, revolve around the element of water, the symbol of mutability and fluidity *par excellence*, which Gaston Bachelard, in *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*, defines as the transitory element. In “A Sketch of the Past”, Woolf reveals how her life stands upon her first memory, that of being in bed in the nursery at St Ives and hearing the waves breaking (*Moments*, 75). Certainly, water as a semantic field and as a rhetorical notion determines and haunts her imagination and vision of reality throughout all her works⁶.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud elaborates a mental world structured around the surface-depth dichotomy and the fluid movement of elements in the “waters of the mind”. He talks about “two trains of thought” that “meet”, “the former on the surface, the latter covered up” (304) and about “dreams that show an accelerated flow of ideas” (336). The “recollection” of “the affective impulses prevailing in dream-thoughts” is compared to how “the bowl of a fountain collects the water that flows into it. From this point the dream-thoughts flow along the following channels” (330). “Annoyance” is said to draw “reinforcement from springs that flow far beneath the surface, and so swells to a stream of hostile impulses” (329). Or we get to know how in the forgetting of dreams, “directing ideas immediately exert their influence, and henceforth determine the flow of the involuntary ideas” (348)⁷.

This last example shows to what extent Freud’s mental dynamics constitute what Bloom has called a “civil war within the psyche” (*Canon*, 377), a battle for supremacy between different forces. Words such as “conflict”, “forces”, “opposition”, “battle” and “struggle” appear once and again in Freud’s language and they are symptomatic of Freud’s vision of the mind as a space in which mutable entities are engaged in a dynamic and usually conflicting relationship: he explains how “a stubborn conflict is going on in the patient between libidinal desires and sexual repression” (624); talks about the “normal struggle between conflicting impulses” (624) and about the “battle of the repression” (627);

⁵ By using constantly this word or derived ones, Freud makes clear that his conception of all mental processes is a “dynamic” one: “the dynamic conception of resistance” (491), “how this discharge through the dream is effected dynamically” (496), “the dynamics of the process of recovery” (634) or “the dynamic relations within the mind” (708).

⁶ As Poole puts it, “water is Virginia’s central symbol. [...] there is scarcely a page of her novels where the sea, or water, does not make a fleeting appearance, as if her imagination was rocked on the swell of an invisible current of water which ran ceaselessly through her thinking” (259). Poole quotes Marie-Paule Vigne’s estimation that water occupies across all her novels a 48% (about 4,500 words) against 52% (4,850) for all the other elements together.

⁷ Notice how Freud’s articulation of the mind as a space in which thoughts, ideas and dreams are living entities in constant movement resembles Woolf’s: “In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains; thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder” (*Essays*, 86); words “twisting about to make Heaven knows what pattern on the floor of the child’s mind” (*Lighthouse*, 64); or “the idea sunk back again” (*Lighthouse*, 202).

makes reference to “how, as each individual resistance is being mastered, a violent battle goes on in the soul of the patient – a normal mental struggle between two tendencies on the same ground” (627); or asserts that “the transference is thus the battlefield where all contending forces must meet” (634).

Freud saw then the mind as irreducibly divided, whereas Woolf proposes in “The Leaning Tower”, “a fusion of the two minds, the upper and the under” (*Essays*, 173), a figuration which resembles Bergson’s and James’s conception of consciousness as an ever changing, mutable and protean stream, flow or continuum⁸. Let us remember William James’s famous words in *The Principles of Psychology*:

Consciousness, then, does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as “chain” or “train” do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A “river” or a “stream” is the metaphor by which it is most naturally described. *In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life* (155).

James defends that “within each personal consciousness, thought is always changing” (146) and “is sensibly continuous” (146). Both James and Bergson go against Locke’s and Hume’s vision of thought as composed of independent and discrete elements juxtaposed alongside of each other. Notice how the following sentences by Bergson, taken from *Creative Evolution*, astonishingly resemble the quoted paragraph by James, since both examples are based on the idea of the flow of mental elements: “Each of them is borne by the fluid mass of our whole psychical existence. [...] Now, states thus defined cannot be regarded as distinct elements. They continue each other in an endless flow. [...] a flux of fleeting shades merging into each other” (3). And later on, we find that “we perceive duration as a stream against which we cannot go” (38).

So, it is precisely this inner flowing stream that leads Bergson to formulate in *Time and Free Will*, his first major work, his famous notion of *durée*, which stands for psychological time or inner duration and which doesn’t lend itself to any logical, quantitative or intellectual analysis: “Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states” (100).

According to Kumar, *la durée* becomes the distinguishing feature of the stream of consciousness novel. Following Bergson’s principles, modernist writers present it as something incapable of measurement and not to be captured by conventional and spatialized representations of time. Woolf abandons indeed the conventional plot and the conception of time as a linear sequence of events, and by means of an extremely lyrical and evocative language, rich in suggestive and beautiful images of transitoriness and openness, based on a fluid and scattering syntax, she articulates her great novels *To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Between the Acts* and especially *The Waves* around the rhythm of her characters’s thoughts, sensations, perceptions and feelings, which constitute this stream of consciousness, this fluid *durée*⁹.

⁸ In Freud, unlike in Bergson and James, we do not find the idea of all mental contents constituting a single stream that flows, though he does describe the different elements in the mind as flowing along the different levels and systems. That is why the expressions “flow of ideas” and “stream of thoughts” appear in his writings and why we find paragraphs like the following one: “During the day there is a continuous stream flowing [...] toward the motility end; this current ceases at night, and can no longer block the flow of the current of excitation in the opposite direction” (354).

⁹ For Auerbach, the “elaboration of the contrast between ‘exterior’ and ‘interior’ time” (538) and “the technique of a multiple reflection of consciousness and of multiple time strata” (544) are key stylistic features of the new narrative. He makes reference to “the modern concept of interior time” (542), although he does not specify to which actual thinkers that idea is owed. What is most interesting for our purposes, is that in Auerbach’s approach to modernist literature, the focus is on how writers’s recreation of internal life depends on the notions of mobility, fluidity, internal time and depth, that is, the very same notions we are examining in this article: “The important point is that an insignificant exterior occurrence releases ideas and chains of ideas which cut loose from the present of the exterior occurrence and range freely through the depths of time” (540).

Woolf's characters undergo privileged "moments of beings", of revelation – it is the famous modernist epiphany, also present in Joyce –, in which the character's senses are especially receptive and an intense connection between the profusion of outer sensations and consciousness is established. And since consciousness is a "stream" or a "river", characters figuratively sink in these moments into themselves, submerging or plunging into the waters of their minds. This leads very often to a dichotomy between private and submerged life and social and public surface life. We find such a moment in *To the Lighthouse*, when in the evening, Mrs. Ramsay is silent and alone. Then, "her life sank down for a moment" (72) and "beneath it is all dark, it is all spreading, it is unfathomably deep" (73). The moment of lyrical climax comes when the lighthouse's ray of light strokes "with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight" (75) and "waves of pure delight raced over the floor of her mind" (76). In a similar scene in *The Waves*, Bernard and Neville, in silence, allow the fin of their thought¹⁰ to "sink back into the depths" and they think "with the unlimited time of the mind" (194). The "wide and dignified sweep of [their] mind" (194) contracts as they hear a clock tick.

These new ideas about the mind implied an entirely different conception of the self, which shifted from being built round a hard and changeless core, from being a monolithic, stable and seizable entity, and turned into a dynamic process and a heterogenous, unstable and elusive entity¹¹. *The Waves* is probably Woolf's most experimental and daring novel in this sense. In it, Woolf "sets in parallel series the reflections of six characters, in such a way as to suggest the permeability or friability of selfhood" (Trotter, 94). The novel consists of a stream of continuous impressions; of the patterns of consciousness of six characters in which mental states flow into one another. In *The Waves*, we experience the "dissipation or streaming away of identity [...] its accumulation, accretion, acceleration, augmentation and sedimentation" (Trotter, 94), as Bernard explicitly conveys it: "I could not recover myself from that endless throwing away, dissipation, flooding forth without our willing it" (198).

We also find this challenge to the old stable ego in Woolf's memoirs "Reminiscences", "A Sketch of the Past" "22 Hyde Park Gate" and "Old Bloomsbury." These memoirs are an attempt at apprehending and recollecting an always elusive and mutable identity, a self that is continuously being re-shaped by the incessant dialogue between the past and the present, a dialogue which is crucial in Freud, James and Bergson.

In his chapter of *The Principles of Psychology* devoted to the perception of time, James asserts that "the knowledge of some other part of the stream, past or future, near or remote, is always mixed in with our knowledge of the present thing" (396-397). Without this simultaneous perception of past, present and future, consciousness could not be considered a stream: "These lingerings of old objects, these incomings of new, are the germs of memory and expectation, the retrospective and the prospective sense of time. They give that continuity to consciousness without which it could not be called a stream" (397).

Therefore when we try to capture the *present* moment of time – James refers to that process as "intuition" –, what we actually perceive is "the *specious present*" (398)¹², a non-static "prolonged present" – borrowing Stein's expression in *Composition as Explanation* – that ceaselessly fades into

¹⁰ This metaphor of thought – or inner self – as a fish appears once and again in Woolf's writings: "as if a fin rose in the wastes of silence; and then the fin, the thought, sinks back into the depths" (*Waves*, 194); her thought-fish "darted and sank, and flashed hither and thither" (*Room*, 7); "our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities threading her way between the boles of giant weeds" (*Dalloway*, 172); "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream" (*Moments*, 93); "a world which one could slice with one's thoughts as a fish slices the water with his fin" (*Stories*, 47).

¹¹ As Moi says, for psychoanalysis the mind is "a multiplicity of structures that intersect to produce that unstable constellation the liberal humanists call the 'self'" (10). The label of "unstable constellation" would also apply to Woolf's, James's and Bergson's vision of the mind.

¹² He borrows this notion from Mr. E. R. Clay.

past and future. James asserts that “the unit of composition of our perception of time is a *duration*” (399) and that “awareness of *change* is thus the condition on which our perception of time’s flow depends” (406). We see how Bergson and James articulate some of their ideas using exactly the same labels, namely those of “duration”, “flow” and “intuition”. As regards the melting relation between past and present, Bergson defends in *Creative Evolution* that “in reality, the past is preserved by itself; automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it” (4).

And though Freud’s approach to the mind differed a lot from James’s and Bergson’s, he was the thinker who actually generalized the view that we never escape from our past and that most psychological problems go back to our childhood. In fact in her paper “22 Hyde Park Gate”, delivered to the Freudian-inspired Memoir Club, Woolf tried to come to terms with her past life. However her compulsion to go inward and downward – as she says in her story “The Mark on the Wall”, “I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts” (*Stories*, 43) – is even stronger in her autobiography “A Sketch of the Past,” where she says that “the past only comes back when the present runs so smoothly that it is like the sliding surface of a deep river. Then one sees through the surface to the depths” (*Moments*, 114). In this example, and in the following one, we see how Woolf beautifully expresses the continuity between present and past through the metaphor of the flowing water: “I write this partly in order to recover my sense of the present by getting the past to shadow this broken surface. Let me then, like a child advancing with bare feet into a cold river, descend again into that stream” (*Moments*, 115).

This simultaneous co-presence of past and present is central to understand Woolf’s method and articulation of her novels. Peach argues that *To the Lighthouse* is structured upon the way in which the past interrupts and disrupts the present, and upon the way in which the present interrupts the past: “*To the Lighthouse* exemplifies ideas about different levels of time co-existing and the way in which the past and the present relate to each other” (135). Hillis Miller defends a similar approach to *Mrs. Dalloway*, though in this case that continuity between past and present is very clearly situated within the characters’s minds: “The present, for them, is the perpetual repetition of the past” (184)¹³.

And memory is the fundamental tool with which the merging between past and present may occur: “Storytelling, for Woolf,” – Hillis Miller says – “is the repetition of the past in memory” (176). Only in memory the self becomes a flowing river of consciousness. Needless to say, memory as a mode of introspection became central in psychoanalysis, but Bergson goes even further, as he defends that “*the formation of memory is never posterior to the formation of perception; it is contemporaneous with it*” (*Mind-Energy*, 128). In Joyce’s and Woolf’s novels, boundaries between past, present and future blur, and Bergson’s *mémoire involontaire*, non-utilitarian and non-intellectualized, becomes the aesthetic material of their art.

In *A Pluralistic Universe*, James devotes a chapter to “Bergson and his Critique of Intellectualism” and explains how Bergson’s philosophy “was that had led me personally to renounce the intellectualist

¹³ It is worth mentioning that throughout the exposition of his arguments, Miller makes extensive use of the same vocabulary and rhetorical structures whose recurrence we are rescuing out of Freud’s, Bergson’s, James’s and Woolf’s texts. Pay attention to his use of the words “continuity”, “flow”, “fluid” or “dissolution”, and the underlying assumption of the movement between the two levels of surface and depth: “her dissolution of the usual boundaries between mind and world” (176); “if one descends deeply enough into any individual mind” (181); “the same images of unity, reconciliation, of communion well up spontaneously from the deep levels of the minds of all the major characters” (181); “deep below the surface, in some dark and remote cave of the spirit, each person’s mind connects with all the other minds” (182); “ease with which images from their pasts rise within them to overwhelm them with a sense of immediate presence. [...] The remarkably immediate access the characters have to their pasts is one such continuity. [...] In another sense, the weight of all the past moments presses just beneath the surface of the present, ready in an instant to flow into consciousness [...] So fluid are the boundaries between past and present” (184).

method and the current notion that logic is an adequate measure of what can or cannot be” (225). The problem with concepts is that they “negate the inwardness of reality altogether” (246), since “our concepts are all discontinuous and fixed” (253), whereas “the essence of life is its continuously changing character” (253). James adopts Bergson’s solution: “Dive back into the flux itself, then, Bergson tells us” (252).

Bergson categorically asserts in *An Introduction to Metaphysics* that materialism, rationalism and positivism only provide us with relative knowledge, and proposes instead that, if we want to attain absolute knowledge, reality must be seized from within, not by means of analysis, concepts or intellect, but by an intuitive identification with it: “I am in sympathy with those states, and [...] I insert myself in them by an effort of imagination” (2). As we have seen with James, the problem is that analysis operates on the immobile, whereas intuition places itself in mobility, which is the very essence of life.

Woolf’s rejection of intellectualism in favour of intuition is the very structuring principle of her narratives, and is embodied in the opposition between characters such as Charles Tansley, Mr. Ramsay, Dr. Holmes, William Bradshaw and Neville, with an analytical and cold spirit, and who only trust concepts, order and fact, and characters such as Septimus Warren Smith, Mrs. Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, Bernard, Orlando, Jacob or Mrs. Swithin, who, given their intense inner life, aesthetic sensibility and creative imagination, are capable of Bergson’s *l’expérience intégrale*.

An opposition between an integrating, intuitive and flowing mode of thinking, which would be specifically female, and the abrupt, logical and dominant male mode of thinking, has been pointed out by much feminist criticism as one of the axes of Woolf’s thinking. Water would be then the element intrinsically connected with female consciousness, as Poole defends: “The quality of the female mind is liquid. Water is the symbol which indicates, all through the pages of Virginia’s novels, that she is thinking as a woman” (265). And in her essay “Professions for Women”, she certainly depicts female imagination as a descent into the depths of a lake:

The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being. [...] The line raced through the girl’s fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber (*Moth*, 152).

Many feminist studies, such as Gilbert and Gubar’s and Horner and Zlosnik’s, have put the fluid element in relation with its opposite one, and have found in women’s writing a constant tension between spatial images of enclosure and of escape, and a preoccupation with boundaries, fixity and fluidity. That would be explained as a response to real female imprisonment and marginal position with respect to the dominant discourse and culture, and hence Woolf’s fluid imagery and syntax could be considered as devices employed for the rejection of the boundedness of woman’s life within society and culture. Thus, many critics have interpreted the end of *The Voyage Out* – when after becoming engaged and hence having properly entered the patriarchal world, Rachel Vinrace falls ill and in her delirium she kind of retreats into the medium of water – as a rejection of social and patriarchal oppression and a return to the foetal state and the matrix of being: “She fell into a deep pool of sticky water [...] She saw nothing and heard nothing but [...] the sound of the sea rolling over her head. [...] she was [...] curled up at the bottom of the sea” (322).

The same argument would explain the spatial images of constraint with which Rachel dreams after she has been unpredictably kissed by Richard Dalloway, who has thus asserted his physical and sexual power: “She dreamt that she was walking down a long tunnel, which grew so narrow by degrees that she could touch the damp bricks on either side. At length the tunnel opened and became a vault; she found herself trapped in it” (68).

Nonetheless it is open to discussion that Woolf actually perceived the differences between the male and the female mode of thinking in such a clear-cut manner and that she saw water and fluidity

as intrinsically associated with women. Her notion of androgyny may be clarifying in this sense. Whereas some critics have seen it as a kind of wishful thinking (Poole) or even as “an escape from the confrontation with femaleness of maleness” (Showalter, 289), I would rather agree with Moi’s position that androgyny is a result of Woolf’s “sceptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity” (9). Following Derridean and Kristevan theory, Moi allies Woolf’s ‘deconstructive’ form of writing with her wish to deconstruct the opposition between masculinity and femininity. Androgyny then “is not, as Showalter argues, a flight from gender identities, but a recognition of their falsifying metaphysical nature” (13). From a very similar theoretical perspective, Jacobus also analyses *A Room of One’s Own* in terms of Woolf’s subversive writing of plurality and rejection of boundaries, as opposed to the dominating phallic “I”, representative of the Law. And what is most interesting is that Jacobus seems to somehow vinctuate that quality in Woolf with a semantic camp of fluidity. Hence, Woolf’s practice is basically one of dissolution: “Virginia Woolf dissolves ‘truth’ (the withheld ‘nugget of truth’) into ‘the lies what flow from my pen’ [...] hard fact dissolves into fluid fiction [...] the subject (‘I’) is dissolved into writing” (19).

Many conclusions may be drawn from this analysis of Woolf’s metaphorical recreation of the human mind around the notion of fluidity, and this study may be further developed along several different paths. The rhetorical notions we have analyzed in Woolf lead us to the flowing language and images of unboundedness that French feminism proposed as typical of feminine textuality, and to the much debated question of whether Woolf was trying to create a specifically feminine language and identity. Or we could go even further and link the use of water as a structuring image with Jung’s or Bachelard’s conception of water as a universal archetype or symbol. Other lines of influence are open, for example Bloom’s interpretation that “Woolf’s sensibility essentially is Paterian” (*Views*, 2), and that it is due to this central influence that she presents “the self as the center of a flux of sensations” (2). In any case and leaving aside ultimate reasons and explanations of influence, which are actually quite obscure, I hope to have shown how Woolf, Freud, Bergson and James developed some of their ideas on the mind along very similar rhetorical and metaphorical patterns.

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