

Insisting on the Self

*The Narration of Self as Problem and
Premise in Three Novels by Virginia Woolf*

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in Three Novels by Virginia Woolf*

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Abstract

This thesis explores the narration of self in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The three novels point to a central problem in modernist fiction in general, and Woolf's authorship in particular, namely the difficulty of representing a consistent, autonomous and essential self - or indeed, the doubt that such a self can exist at all. Yet I claim that these narratives are distinguished by having the articulation of self as their *sine qua non*. The narration of self is the problem and the premise for these fictions.

The study of the self/subject in Woolf's fictions is a small hot spot in Woolf-criticism, and there are several extensive studies done. The thesis presents a "map" of this conversation, and three tendencies within it. The map provides the background for three close-readings, and the thesis' active position in Woolf-criticism. The thesis presents a break with some of the methodology which has dominated Woolf-criticism, notably the tendency to cast away the distinction between author and text. In this thesis, the three novels provide the only source texts, and each reading focuses on one self. I demonstrate that our understanding of these novels benefits from an understanding of "self" that can encompass both Woolf's *articulation* and *disarticulation* of the self, and transgress the post-structuralist claim for the death of the subject as well as the relative neglect of character in narratology.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	V
Acknowledgements	VII
Table of Contents	IX
Abbreviations	XI
Introduction and Map	1
Why “Self” rather than “Character” and “Subject”	2
Mapping the Conversation	5
SWC1: The Problem of the Self is the Problem of (Lack of) Female Subjectivity, or: Woolf’s Problem is a Woman’s Problem	5
SWC2: Unity versus Fragmentation.....	9
SWC3: Dialogism.....	14
My Contribution to the SWC	16
Chapter Outline	17
1 Orlando	18
1.1 Hoaxing Biography: Orlando and the Self as Narrative.....	18
1.1.1 Truth, Fact and Self	19
1.1.2 Life = Self	23
1.1.3 Vita and Non-Vita, Orlando and Non-Orlando	25
1.1.4 Life as (if) Story with Self as (if) Cohesive Protagonist.....	27
1.2 Remaining the Same or Never the Same: Orlando and the Self as Gender or Gendered	34
1.2.1 “He was a woman”: Language, Gender and Self.....	35
1.2.2 Androgyny, Interiority and Exteriority	41
1.2.3 Gender Performing Self or Self Performing Gender	45
2 “I’ll give it you”: Septimus and the Self as Making Sense.....	50
2.1 Subject Formation and Language (Lacan and Kristeva)	50

2.2	My Position in Relevant Debates in <i>MD</i> -Criticism.....	53
2.3	Expanding the Symbolic.....	55
2.4	“Mad” – Says Who? : The Impact of the “Silent” Narrator	58
2.5	Narrative Juxtaposition: Septimus as Clarissa’s Other.....	64
2.6	“Mad” or “Their Idea of Tragedy”?	69
3	The Decentred Centre: Mrs Ramsay and the Self as also “Other”	76
3.1	My Position in Relevant Debates in <i>TL</i> -Criticism.....	77
3.2	Mrs Ramsay as “Other-Self”	79
3.3	Catching and Un-catching Mrs Ramsay	85
3.4	The Death of Mrs Ramsay and the Death of Narrative	90
3.5	The Return to Self, Narrative and Mrs Ramsay	95
	Insisting on the Self.....	101
	Bibliography.....	103

Abbreviations

OOED: Online Oxford English Dictionary

SWC: Self/subject focused Woolf-criticism

OB: Orlando: A Biography

MD: Mrs Dalloway

TL: To the Lighthouse

A Room: A Room of One's Own

TW: "The Window"

TP: "Time Passes"

Introduction and Map

In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), the main character changes sex, but the narrative insists that his/her self remains the same. *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) features two characters who never meet, but their selves are inextricably linked by the narrative structure. The focal character of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) dies mid-narrative, while her self remains central. These observations make it clear that talking about "character" and talking about "self" does not constitute the same thing in the mentioned novels, and that in order to understand fundamental aspects of these narratives it is necessary to make that distinction count. In the article "Selves and Others as Narrative Participants in Woolf's Novels" (2013), Kyle Robertson proclaims that the complexity with which Woolf's novels deals with not only multiple perspectives, but also multiple *selves* requires "a more nuanced approach to character and viewpoint than traditional narratology has provided us with" (201). I think it necessary to start by discussing Woolf's textual beings not as characters, but as literary *selves*. I consider these selves not just "narrative participants", as suggested in Robertson's article title, but what their respective novels fundamentally explore, and which without – they cannot be.

That the self is an imperative of Woolf's writing does not mean that her novels present the self as coherent, autonomous and unproblematic. Jeremy Hawthorn argues for the way modernist novelists like Woolf presented a new kind of self, where: "character can no longer be taken to be self-transparent – more than one character in a modernist novel asks 'who am I?' without receiving a clear answer" (70). In *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (1989) the prominent philosopher, Charles Taylor, outlines this peculiar position for the self in modernism. He considers there to be a simultaneous "slide" towards subjectivism and anti-subjectivism in modernism:

Twentieth-century art has gone more inward, has tended to explore, even to celebrate subjectivity; it has explored new recesses of feeling, entered the stream of consciousness, spawned schools of art rightly called 'expressionist.' But at the same time, at its greatest it has often involved a decentering of the subject: and art emphatically not conceived as self-expression, and art displacing the centre of interest onto language, or onto poetic transmutation itself, or even dissolving the self as usually conceived in favour of some new constellation. (456)

Combining the rhetoric of Hawthorne and Taylor, we can say that despite there being a "slide" towards anti-subjectivism in modernism, a distrust to the self as an essential and "transparent" being; there is a new interest in playing with the question "who am I" – or even: "What is an "I"?" This is evident in the hallmarks of Woolf's writing style, for example the

extensive use of free indirect discourse and the discrepancy between individual experience expressed in discursive time and what happens in clock time. Such narrative techniques foreground, yet problematize the self as a coherent and transparent being. In this thesis, I argue that an investigation of the narration of the self in *Orlando: A Biography*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* facilitates an important and renewed perspective on Woolf's novels, and simultaneously sheds light on central debates in Woolf criticism. I will explore the benefits of looking at Woolf's characters as *selves*, and discuss the relationship between self, narrative and narration. The thesis' overall aim is to demonstrate that the selected novels work to deconstruct their focal selves as well as central notions of self and character, but always return to the narration of self as their premise.

Why “Self” rather than “Character” and “Subject”

The *Online Oxford English Dictionary (OOED)* defines the *self* as: “A person's essential being that distinguishes them from others” (“Self”, def. 1) The definition's emphasis on *essential* suggests something beneath the exterior. A person is generally expected to have multiple characteristics, but despite a person growing older, changing haircuts etcetera, the self of that person is something we assume that we can recognize beneath such alteration. What then about the distinction between talking about literary *selves* and literary *characters*? There is a long tradition for defining *character* in close proximity to plot (or interchangeable terms). Numerous narratologists attest for that, particularly following the influence of structuralism, but dominant already in Aristotle's *Poetics*, character has often been reduced to a function or product of plot. Rather than focusing on characters as selves, attention is on them as *agents* (Aristotle) or *actants* (Greimas) of the narrative action (Hansen 19; Rimmon-Kenan 34-35; Abbott 130-131). Literary criticism still lacks a serious, non-reductive theory that can describe character (Rimmon-Kenan 29-31; Hansen 15-23; Bal 113). In my view, this lack becomes all the more dramatic when combined with modernist literatures, such as Woolf's fictions. As one of my fellow students remarked after we had read *To the Lighthouse* for a BA-course: “But nothing happens!” Although not altogether true, she had a point, and she is not alone in responding to Woolf in such a manner. Modernist literature often features narratives that focus on the inner consciousness and conditions of its characters, rather than outer action (Hawthorn 70). In *The Subject of Modernism: Narrative Alterations in the Fiction of Elliot, Conrad, Woolf and Joyce* (1994), Tony E. Jackson suitably describes modernist narratives as having the impossibility of representing the self as their “enigmatic, groundless ground of being” (14). In other words: The self is a primary *topos* for modernism,

but the very notion of self is put into question; and that question becomes itself the topic of literary exploration. Some might interject that for example the Victorian bildungsroman is as character-driven as modernist masterpieces, like Woolf's novels, are. But the bildungsroman, at large, works under the assumption that the self has an essential core, which nevertheless undergoes a development through maturation (Hawthorn 144, 226). What is in question is the *moral* being of a character, while the being itself is taken to be (relatively) transparent. I find "self" to be a much more fitting term for literary constructions such as Orlando, Septimus and Mrs Ramsay. It enables us to look at them not as by-products of narratives bound for change as the action unfolds, but as the very thing the narratives explore.

In *Subjects without Selves: Transitional Texts in Modern Fiction* (1994), Gabrielle Schwab looks at the "epistemological suspicion concerning subjectivity" (1) dominating approaches to modernist novelists like Woolf. Schwab is advancing from one of the primary assumptions in post-structuralism, namely that the subject is both "constituted through and threatened by the logic of signification" (Leitch et. al. 2067). This adds another dimension to the "simultaneous slide" observed by Taylor. Schwab includes the claim, or rather, observation of the deconstruction of the subject advocated by post-structuralists such as Derrida, Deleuze, Barthes, Butler and de Man, and its imprint on readings of modernist literature. As we will see numerous examples of, this "epistemological suspicion" has had a major impact on how Woolf's novels have been read. Schwab insists on the presence of *literary subjectivity* in modernist texts – placed right in the middle of this suspicion that, as observed by Taylor, started with modernism. Schwab argues that the post-structuralists claim for the death of the subject is based on conventional notions of the subject in the Cartesian tradition, where one imagines a stable, transcendental unity that constitutes the self (Schwab 5). Schwab shows that although the self in the Cartesian tradition is dissolved, and the subject is "threatened by the logic of signification" (Leitch et al. 2067), we still cannot "conceive of language without presupposing a subject" (Schwab 6). I wonder if we further cannot conceive of subject without presupposing a self. For example, the search for a *unity*, which is a dominant area of interest for a branch of Woolf criticism, is not a search for a linguistically constructed subjectivity, but a longing for the self in the Cartesian understanding, or maybe even something beyond that (Taylor 462). I find that in using "subject" rather than "self" I enter the discussion already after its deconstruction is long given. The modernist turn to more "consciousness-oriented" narratives, towards subjectivism yet also dissolving of the self, involves a problematization that subject/subjectivity, in my opinion, does not fully admit. My

reluctance to use “subject” with regard Orlando, Septimus and Mrs Ramsay is founded on the simple observation that subjectivity is *not* what is at stake in Woolf’s novels. Subjectivity is all around in the multiple focalizations, and naturally is an imperative of language that also Woolf’s novels cannot do without.

There is yet another angle that informs my starting point, and also this has to do with how literary criticism has tended to perceive characters in fiction. Per Krogh Hansen’s *Karakterens Rolle: Aspekter af en litterær karakterologi*¹ (2000) and Schlomith Rimmon-Kenan’s (2002) republished classic: *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* outline two primary ways, or two ends of a scale on which character has been addressed. The more dominant in recent years is the *formalist/semiotic approach*.² In this approach, characters are “textualized” – they are “mere words”. One is interested in their place within the sign systems of the novel, but refrains from looking at them as if they were human beings. The other end of the scale is the *mimetic/realistic approach*. Here, characters are seen as imitations of real people which it is meaningful to abstract from their texts (Hansen 15-23; Rimmon-Kenan 31-34). Woolf-criticism appears to be an exception to the formalist tendency. (This is probably a result of the inclination to read Woolf’s fiction (auto)biographically). I wish to place myself on the formalist end of the scale, but nevertheless see the mimetic *potential*, which I think necessary if we are to make much of literature at all. To explain why, I will borrow a phrasing from Roxanne J. Fand: “We can only behave, *as if* our constructs had ontological or epistemological truth value, *as if* a signifier like the “self” referred to a reality or set of experiences to be known” – but, as she points out, this “as if” makes talking about it possible (21). From the grammatical function of *subject* any number of inner selves can be articulated, but these are not ontologically real, but necessary metaphors we use (and need) to “talk about ourselves” (Robertson 202-3). The self is intrinsically and inevitably split due to the fundamental role language plays in constructing our sense of self (Robertson 202-3). I think literary selves are in a particular position as their “as if”- status is obvious. In other words: *Because* they are fiction, we do not need to read Derrida to see that they are linguistic constructions confined by their place in a sign system, but can still survey them *as if* signifiers like “Orlando”, “Septimus” and “Mrs Ramsay” referred to a consciousness behind the linguistically constructed subjectivity. I will scrutinize Orlando, Septimus and Mrs Ramsay in such an “as if-understanding”. I will do so holding on to the double premise that it is possible

¹ Eng.: “The Role of the Character: Elements of a Literary Characterology” (my trans.).

² The theorists use different terms. As I will later use *semiotic* to refer to a particular concept in Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytic theory, I will stick to the term “formalist” to refer to this way of advancing character.

to read these literary selves “as if” they were people we get to know, yet also “mere words” – words that also engage in the same selves’ deconstruction or *disarticulation*. When I say “self” I acknowledge that the self is also a non-self – also a “subject without self” (Schwab), a constructed necessity of language, endlessly deferred to other signs and other forms of subjectivity. But to me, it is clear that just as we abstract story from diverse components of a novel, we can recognize character as a sign system within a sign system, and that the only way to make sense, or rather, *meaning*, of literature is to behave *as if* these characters, these sign systems, were indeed *selves*.

Mapping the Conversation

Louise A. Poresky asserts: “The heart of Virginia Woolf’s work is her search for the Self. Once that fact is acknowledged, her imagery, stylistic techniques, themes, and philosophical theories cohere into a pattern” (15). Poresky sets the tone for a central premise of this thesis, namely that the problem of the self is an important intersection point for many of the issues that has captivated Woolf-critics for a hundred years, and can be scrutinized from a wide spectrum of the novels’ aesthetic and semantic features. Rather than engaging in a general overview of Woolf-criticism, I will map three tendencies in what I identify as self/subject-oriented Woolf-criticism (SWC). Needless to say, such a categorisation will always entail some degree of simplification and generalization, but I have tried to indicate where the issues and critics overlap – the fact that they *do* overlap supports the premise set forth by Poresky,

The first tendency I will address is the inclination to equal the problem of the subject/self in Woolf’s fiction to a “woman’s problem”, often by looking at links between the female characters and the author’s own life. Feminist critics in SWC are also concerned with Woolf’s writing as inscribing a specifically *female subjectivity*. The second tendency surfaces from a long-lived discussion between those who claim Woolf’s writings work towards unity and those who celebrate their dissolution or fragmentation. The last tendency I wish to address is more marginal and more recent than the previous two. Here I will look at two critics who understand Woolf’s narration of the self/subject as *dialogic*.

SWC1: The Problem of the Self is the Problem of (Lack of) Female Subjectivity, or: Woolf’s Problem is a Woman’s Problem

In the highly acclaimed *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (1985), Toril Moi confronts the rejection of Woolf by many feminist critics: “To date she has either been rejected by them as insufficiently feminist, or praised on grounds that seem to exclude her

fiction” (18). The latter implies a tendency to look at Woolf’s overt feminist politics, in particular *A Room Of One’s Own* (*A Room*), and neglect the feminism Moi sees as being essential to Woolf’s modernist aesthetics. But a lot has changed since Moi’s vital survey.³ Alongside Woolf’s place in modernism, feminism has become the most popular approach to Woolf (Goldman, *The Cambridge Introduction to Virginia Woolf* 135). In the following, I will look at a collection of feminist readings that are also fundamental to SWC1.

Minow-Pinkney’s *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject: Feminine Writing in the Major Novels* (1987) in many ways did what Moi called for.⁴ This is one of the most celebrated (and cited) works in SWC, and a central work in Woolf-criticism in general. Minow-Pinkney made advances in a new understanding of Woolf’s feminism, basing her argument on the connection between Woolf’s modernist aesthetics and her feminism. With her book title, Minow-Pinkney makes a move which I consider emblematic for my concern with SWC1. From tracing “The Problem of the Subject” in the main title, the subtitle suggests a particular *feminine* writing paradigm: “Feminine Writing in the Major Novels”. To such a title it is important to ask: “What problem?” “Which subject?” Minow-Pinkney does not restrict feminine writing or feminine subjectivity to a corresponding biological gender. Rather she claims that novels like *TL* work to ceaselessly undo such binaries as phallos-womb, rational-irrational, philosophy-literature, symbolic-semiotic, object-subject, as for example *TL*’s Mrs Ramsay “outdoes her spouse in both directions”, “having the best of both worlds” (96, 98). Importantly, Mrs Ramsay can outdo such oppositions as she as a female subject “was never a unified sealed self in the first place” (95).

Minow-Pinkney refrains from staging Woolf’s *feminine writing* as purely semiotic (as *Écriture féminine* in Hélène Cixous’ restricted sense), but rather urges that we see Woolf’s poetics as a “*dialectic* of symbolic and semiotic, of man and woman” (189). This is Woolfian androgyny “in practise” according to Minow-Pinkney (189). She convincingly explains how Woolf’s fiction, through the combination of feminist and modernist aesthetics, works to challenge phallocentrism and the thetic subject (5). In so doing, Minow-Pinkney suggests that *gender* is the central problem for the selves in Woolf’s fiction; either as the male-experienced

³ The publications of Herbert Marder’s *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* as early as 1968 and *New Feminist Essays on Woolf* (edited by Jane Marcus) in 1981 even suggest that this celebration of Woolf’s literary feminism was already starting to take place prior to Moi’s vital address.

⁴ Besides from a couple of references, Minow-Pinkney makes no sign of consciously responding to Moi, but the book certainly carried the conversation a step further in the direction set forth by Moi. Note that with one specified exception, all references to Minow-Pinkney are to this book.

destruction of the thetic subject (189), or as the female lack of subjectivity.⁵ That this constitutes *the* problem for characters like Mrs Ramsay is clear for example in Minow-Pinkney's reading that Mrs Ramsay's experience of the discrepancy between what she is thinking and what she is doing is "a matter of gender rather than history, of being a woman in *any* society" (Minow-Pinkney 103). Even Minnow-Pinkney's suggested "solution", the new subjectivity of Woolf's androgyny, enforces the gendered dichotomy it is meant to surpass. If the new subject inhabits "the best of two worlds" (Minow-Pinkney 98) – an essentialist divide is still suggested between them.

Contrary to my insistence on a formalist approach, feminist responses to Woolf have often focused on her biography, particularly looking at links between Woolf (as writer-subject), her sister, Vanessa (also an artist), and the female characters in the novels.⁶ Anne Herrmann considers there to be a direct link between Woolf and her female characters:

The female character serves as a fictional subject within a novelistic discourse; at the same time she represents the inscription of female subjectivity within a **female-authored text**. This inscription takes the form of specularization⁷: the character mirrors the author as subject **because she is also female**. (62, my emphasis)

Herrmann suggest a direct mirroring between Woolf, Mrs Ramsay and Lily simply because they are all women.

Another way to reduce the problem of the subject to concern female subjectivity is to see Woolf's female characters solely as champions for female subjectivity – or their hindrance of such a goal. Jane Goldman's reading of *TL* in "But what? Elegy?": Modernist Reading and the Death of Mrs. Ramsay" (1996) can provide an interesting example. Goldman is sparring with Randal Stevenson over the implications of Mrs Ramsay death. Goldman's feminist reading depicts Mrs Ramsay solely as the angel-in-the-house of the old family order whose death is necessary in order for the new female subject (Lily) to fully emerge. She states: "Lily Briscoe is the focal character, the artist at the centre of a *künstlerroman*; and Mrs Ramsay's death a necessary point of transition" (Goldman and Stevenson 177⁸). Goldman reduces Mrs

⁵ Minow-Pinkney greatly relies on Julia Kristeva, and her "feminist-structuralist" re-articulation of Lacan. The thetic subject is within the Lacanian paradigm connected to the male "I" (Minow-Pinkney 191, 193), hence the call for a new subjectivity in Minow-Pinkney's final chapter, and the current lack of a female subjectivity.

⁶ Woolf's dedication of *Night and Day* to Vanessa triggered comparisons between its protagonist and the author's sister. For Vanessa as Lily, see Herrmann (71-72), Kelley (49), Lee (117) and Spivak (39-43).

⁷ Herrmann appropriates Luce Irigaray's concept of *specularization* to an extensive allegory for particularly the relationship between Mrs Ramsay and Lily's "reconstruction" of a new dialogic, female subjectivity (Herrmann 7, 88-9).

⁸ Since Goldman and Stevenson present two very different readings in the article I will throughout the thesis indicate whom I am citing by placing that name first in the reference.

Ramsay to a hindrance in Lily's story of artistic and psychological development, whose "problem" is solved in Mrs Ramsay death.

Critics have also read the literary inscription of Woolf's female subjectivity as a way of solving the author's own "woman problems", eradicating the difference between the crises in Woolf's own life and her writing. In her book *Reconstructing Subjectivity in Woolf, Lessing and Atwood* (1999), Fand explicitly erases the distinctions between Woolf's mental illness as a "problem of the self" and her fictional expressions in the chapter "The Concept of Self in Virginia Woolf's Life and Work" (again, the title illustrates my concern) Fand states:

The condition of being a woman in her time meant inheriting a different kind of ego problem from that of a man...The central problem Woolf's fiction addresses is how to preserve the integrity of the self as multiple subjectivities of the universe **without either feminine ego effacement or masculine ego aggrandizement** in the social world. **Because of suffering from bipolar disorder**, she aimed for the equilibrium of a classic golden mean among dynamically related oppositions rather than the extremes of fixed polarizations. By exploring her own extreme states of bipolarity in her writing, she achieved greater equilibrium. (45, 47, my emphasis)

"The central problem Woolf's fiction addresses" is here put in inextricable relation to her condition as a mentally ill woman, achieving relief through writing. The need for *reconstructing subjectivity* suggested in Fand's title points to two competing theoretical paradigms in the 70s and 80s that strongly influenced the interest in Woolf's feminism. Briefly explained, we find the postmodern claim for the deconstruction of the "unified subject as such" as the result of the accelerating identity crises started by modernism, on the one side; and the feminist urge to rewrite "the traditionally male subject as female", gaining academic ground in the 70s, on the other (Herrmann 1).⁹ Herrmann considers Woolf to stand for the first alternative, whereas we can for example understand Minow-Pinkney's notion of a new subjectivity as a rewriting of the subject as female.¹⁰ I will return to Fand's own position in this debate as I outline SWC3.

It is no wonder that Woolf's essays about being a woman writer have made critics interested in her novels and characters as distinctly female discourses. But perhaps now is the time to answer another call than Moi's (and for that matter, Woolf's own), and ponder on the perspectives overshadowed by the immense focus on feminism since the 80s. The tendency to read Woolf "womanly" risks enforcing the system it tries to criticize, by restricting Woolf and

⁹ Fand also maps this controversy and its implications for Woolf-criticism (23), but the phrasing here is Herrmann's.

¹⁰ Renée Dickinson's *Female Embodiment and Subjectivity in the Modernist Novel* (2009) in several ways continues the line from Minow-Pinkney, combining the emphasis on modernist aesthetics and Woolf's articulation of a new female subjectivity.

her fiction to the “inscription of female subjectivity”, in Herrmann’s phrasing, and does not consider literature’s ability to transcend such labels as “female”, or “bipolar” for that matter. What about male subjectivity in Woolf’s novels? Are the male characters there just to represent the other end of “the polarity of man and woman” (Minow-Pinkney 88)? It will be interesting to see what answers Septimus and Orlando can provide us with.

As to my choice to focus on self rather than subject, it is worth noting that the larger debates framing “feminism’s Woolf”¹¹ makes for a tendency to focus on subject rather than self, as we have seen with the interest in Woolf’s fiction as framing a particularly female subjectivity. Many of the critics in SWC1, and even more so SWC2, are much affected by what Schwab calls the “epistemological suspicion concerning subjectivity”.

SWC2: Unity versus Fragmentation

As *The Palgrave Advances to Woolf Studies* demonstrates, we can trace the debate as to whether Woolf’s novels work towards unity or fragmentation back to the initial responses to her early works (Cuddy-Keane 17-18).¹² While some reviews describe Woolf’s characters as elusive and the novels in general as diverging into “meaninglessness” and “undifferentiated flux”, others saw “a unified vision of life” and a “constant organic development of thought” (qtd in Snaith 4-6). The issue has haunted Woolf-criticism ever since – almost regardless of what aspect of Woolf’s writings one wishes to illuminate (Cuddy-Keane 18). We can for example look at the early feminist critique of Woolf in light of this debate. Moi saw the negative responses to Woolf as a result of a failure to understand Woolf’s “deconstructive form of writing” (9). For Moi this mode of writing “radically undermine[s] the notion of unitary self, the central concept of Western male humanism” (7). Moi’s feminist stand thus also places her among those who celebrate the fragmentation in Woolf’s fiction.

Before moving on to the examples of criticism, I think it necessary to point out an implicit premise on both sides of this debate, namely that there is something that hinders unity/wholeness in Woolf’s fiction. In SWC2, this has a deep impact on the self, and the relationship between selves. Here there is an intimate connection between the unity vs fragmentation-debate, and the modernist suspicion to the self as a transparent and self-sufficient entity. The modernists questioning of the nineteenth-century’s belief in the

¹¹ I have borrowed this phrasing from a chapter title in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (2010).

¹² Cuddy-Keane describes this “fundamental opposition” in Woolf-criticism under the terms *integration*, *resolution* and *closure* on the “unity side” and *flux*, *indeterminacy* and *open-endedness* (18) under what Wyatt Bonikowski refers to as *fragmentation* (136). *Unity* is often also referred to as “wholeness”, as Poresky does. For convenience I will stick to Bonkowski’s terms.

autonomous ego, where individuality “sat confidently on the throne of the self”, as Michael Levenson phrases it (xi), nevertheless made modernists, like Woolf, insist on a literary form that focused on the self, and could depict it in all its heterogeneity (Hawthorne 70-71). This equipped many modernist novels with a longing for the whole self,¹³ – even within literature where the form works to disrupt the character and the idea of a whole self (Levenson xiii). This longing and its intersections with Woolf’s experimental form is the underlying concern in SWC2.

Contrary to what the title suggests, James Naremore’s *The world without the self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (1973) on the whole, belongs on the unity-side. Naremore makes this clear early on: “Everywhere Virginia Woolf’s fiction implies her need for a union with what she sometimes called “reality.” I hope to show that she attained this union” (4). Although claiming in his introduction *not* to be caught up in the “ultimate causes” of Woolf’s “extraordinary sensitivity” (Naremore 4, 1), Naremore follows a similar logic as Herrmann, connecting the struggles of Woolf’s characters with the author’s own battles with “the threat of the dissolve of the self” (243):

Throughout Mrs. Woolf’s work, the chief problem for her and for her characters is to overcome the space between things, to attain an absolute unity between things, as if everything in the environment were turned into water. (242)¹⁴

Despite of this predominate “flirtation with death”, as Naremore calls it (248), Woolf ultimately “tried to affirm the unity of our lives” (Naremore 248). Naremore’s choice of words such as: “*need for a union*” and “*tried to affirm*” serves to show that also for the unity-side there is something that hinders unity, but the argument is that the texts offer (hope for) solutions. Advancing from the extensive work on Woolf’s narrative voice Harvena Richter did in *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (1970),¹⁵ Naremore sees Woolf’s narrator as instrumental to this pull towards unity. By modulating the fundamental oppositions in the novels and becoming “the voice of everyone and no one” the narrator enabled Woolf to unify the individual experience of the self and what is “outside... and beyond”, as Woolf longed for in her diary (Naremore 75).

¹³ Levenson makes a more particular remark concerning the seven modernist novels he studies - one of which is Woolf’s *TL*. I nevertheless hold that the same is true for *MD* and *OB* as well as many other works by Woolf.

¹⁴ Note that Naremore’s rhetoric mimics his interest in Woolf’s “attraction to a watery element” (2), the dread for “sinking” problematically alluding to Woolf’s suicide - almost as if her novels foreshadow her own death.

¹⁵ This book was probably the first to look extensively at how Woolf’s novels explore the self. Rather than close read selves and novels as I will, Richter presented an overall study, juggling examples from Woolf’s fiction and non-fiction under various, thematic headings, to illustrate (rather than problematize) Woolf’s “inward focus”. It is such a massive, descriptive work that I will not attempt to “map” it.

Poresky's *The Elusive Self: Psyche and Spirit in Virginia Woolf's Novels* (1981) is also on the "unity-side" of SWC2. She traces Woolf's nine novels as a linear development,¹⁶ where a major character for each novel "further the progress of this search for the Self" (16) – and it is "the Self" with a capital "S" Poresky advocates for. Poresky posits "a profound psychic wholeness" within the core of every person (16), and that Woolf's characters search for, and find this wholeness through a "perfect harmony between opposites" (263). Like with Naremore, Woolf's own mental struggle is part of the problem the fiction carries, and the "healing power of love" is offered as a solution (Poresky 263). Poresky connects the search for the Self to the search for God. Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*, conveniently shows this search at its most advanced stage:

Between the Acts demonstrates that love supplies humanity with the only means to regain the psychic wholeness experienced in androgyny and the spiritual wholeness experienced through God's grace. (17)

And only the Self, the psychic core in which opposites coalesce and the divine spirit moves, can generate the healing power of love. (263)

Poresky distinguishes this "spiritual wholeness" from "the self" (small s), which she defines as "one's superficial identity" (15). The "problem of the self" for Poresky henceforth consists in moving from this superficial identity to experience love and God's grace within the greater Self which was always unitary.

In the "classic", *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (1982), J. Hillis Miller makes a deconstructionist reading of *Mrs Dalloway*. He first seemingly follows in the footsteps of Naremore and Poresky, identifying the narrator as a universal "union of each mind" (182). But just at the point where Hillis Miller has convinced us of his position on the unity-side, he turns the table on the narrator as a unifying voice: "To reach this great figure is to be blown to nothingness with the rest" (183). Miller also makes connections between Woolf's own troubled "search for the self", her non-fictional writings and the findings in the novels. He even claims that Septimus' suicide anticipates Woolf's own (197). As we have already seen that Fand, who is a central figure in SWC3, argues for the connection between Woolf's mental health and the problem of the self expressed in her fiction, it is safe to say that this biographical viewpoint penetrates all sides of SWC.

Part of this thesis' salient terminology is adapted from Ruth Porritt's "Surpassing Derrida's deconstructed self: Virginia Woolf's poetic disarticulation of the self" (1992). Porritt investigates how Woolf, and particularly *The Waves*, dismantles the concept of "self". She

¹⁶ Also Richter sees Woolf's novel as a linear development where Woolf's idea of the self gradually progresses "in terms of her increased awareness and understanding of it" (Richter 113).

advances from Derridaian deconstruction, notably the dismantling of the assumption that the “I” equals the self. Porrit claims that Woolf’s deconstruction or *disarticulation* of the self anticipates Derrida’s work, and even goes beyond it. Porrit’s interest in the disarticulation of the self in Woolf is restricted to the disestablishment of the *I=self-equation*, and primarily how this surfaces in *The Waves* as a result of the characters constantly repeating the first person pronoun until it becomes meaningless (or until it reveals it was always already meaningless). With a handful of exceptions, Porrit is one of many scholars in SWC primarily focused on *The Waves*, whereas I think the disarticulation of the self in Woolf’s fiction goes far beyond this dismantling of the “I”, and happens on many levels in many of Woolf’s works. I have already started to make good use of Porrit’s choice of term “disarticulation” rather than “deconstruction”. To me, “disarticulation” suggests a more conscious “picking apart” through constructing than the Derridaian observation about the deconstructive nature of language, causing meaning always to dissimilate in an infinite chain of *suppléments*¹⁷ (Derrida 145, 157). As already stated, this disarticulation is not just an inevitable result of how language works (or does not work), but plays an essential part in what Woolf’s fictions are *about*, and which is directly problematized by Woolf’s narration. Porrit’s article leaves a lot of ground unexplored, especially as Woolf primarily writes in the third person, and such long passages appropriating the dramatic monologue we find in *The Waves* are quite exceptional; most significantly, I think the *articulation* of self proves to prevail in the novels at hand – especially in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*.

In the article “‘But how to describe a world without a self?’ : Feminism, Fiction and Modernism”, Sandra Kemp is interested in Woolf as a distinctly modernist, feminist writer, having the “trope of death” as a characteristic narrative device.¹⁸ Rather than the mimetic principle to make characters “come alive”, Kemp argues that feminist modernist fiction “rehearses the questions of fiction as a particular kind of vision: ‘seen without a self’” (Kemp 100, 104). As Kemp’s choice of textual proof from Woolf’s authorship, some citations from *The Waves*, the middle section of *To the Lighthouse* and ideas from Woolf’s essays, allows no leeway in her argument for the way Woolf’s fictions insist also on articulating the self.

¹⁷ A concept Derrida “molds” from Rousseau, which in French means both “substitute” and “addition” (Derrida 141-156; Leitch et al. 1682). The point for Derrida is that a word is an empty *supplément*, in the French double meaning, for “the thing itself” (Derrida 145).

¹⁸ In “Enigmatic clarity: death, life and modernism” (1993), Kemp singles out Woolf as the modernist writer “most conscious that the imagination is haunted by death (4). Kemp could also be considered one of the SWC1-critics who argue for the deconstruction of the subject as such. We recognize the phrasing “world seen without the self” in Naremore’s book title. It is from *The Waves*, and is a favorite vantage point for SWC2-critics.

Christy L. Burns' "Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tension Between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*" (1994) reads like a compact study of many of the controversies in SWC as well as in Woolf-criticism in general. Burns argues for how *OB* as fictional biography deconstructs essentialist notions of what constitutes a self, what constitutes a man or a woman, the absolute divide between inner and outer bodies; but also presents us to essentialist claims, such as that Orlando remains the same after the sex change. For Burns, Woolf's "search for the self" in *OB* reveals: "the self, or the "essential truths" about one's self, will never be caught, nor in a sense will they ever be lost" (359).

Gayatri Spivak's "Unmaking and Making in *To The Lighthouse*" (1987) also invites a compromise within SWC2. Spivak introduces the antonym to Porrit's *disarticulation* of self, namely *articulation* of self. Using a logic that resonates with my appropriation of Taylor's and Porrit's rhetoric, Spivak looks at the novel as a "catch me if you can"¹⁹ with the character of Mrs Ramsay, focusing on the question: "How does [that] **disarticulation** and undermining take place within the **articulation** of the project to catch the essence of Mrs Ramsay" (31, my emphasis). Spivak makes it clear that despite of the undermining of this project being persistent in *TL*, it is set aside by the novel's "more absorbing pursuit" of its articulation (30).

Whereas the unity-side insists on the self as fragmented, but that Woolf manages to bring hope for the connection of these fragments, the point of examining the problem of the self/subject for critics like Kemp, Porrit, Burns and, to an extent, myself, is perhaps never to "make the catch", or argue for how the texts solve the problem of the self/subject. Further, we can see the critics' in SWC1 and SWC2 allegiances to the two ways of seeing character. Some diminish the problem of the self/subject as they "only" look for the mimetic potential in Woolf's fiction. They focus on the character's attempt to solve the author's own issues, and provide some kind of balance and comfort to her – be it as she was a woman or mentally ill (or, poor Virginia, because of this devastating combination), or as the novels mirrored modernist anxiety, as is more relevant for the unity-side of SWC2. The formalist vantage point is naturally more dominant for the dissolution side of SWC2, and to the (post)feminists who claim the deconstruction of the subject as such. When I insist on combining these basic notions of character it allows me a more flexible position within the SWC – particularly SWC2. Yes, as if they were real people Woolf's characters long for the whole self, but that possibility is also constantly undermined in the narratives. Nevertheless, as they *are* narrated,

¹⁹ As Spivak repeatedly uses the phrase "catch the essence", and thus seems to be alluding to Woolf's notion of the modern novel as a game of "catch me if you can" with its characters (See: Woolf, "Character in Fiction" 37), I am allowing myself this use of Woolf's own poetics.

the idea of the self is allowed to live on – perhaps even despite character-death, as I will return to. Burns’ position may be closest to my own as she allows for *OB* to be the scene of contrary notions of the self without letting one devour the others.

SWC3: Dialogism

In this last mapping, I look at responses to Woolf that highlight Woolf’s depiction of the self as *dialogic*. This approach also tends towards a kind of intertextual look at Woolf that, instead of the traditional comparison to (male) modernist writers, compares her works to novels by female authors writing from the 50s to the 80s. This approach seems to have been initiated by the already cited *The Dialogic and Difference* (1989) by Herrmann, and similar studies followed in the 90s. (Since SWC3 is a much smaller strand within SWC and Woolf-criticism in general than the other two tendencies, I review here only two works).

Judy Little’s *The Experimental Self: Dialogic Subjectivity in Woolf, Pym, and Brooke-Rose* (1996)²⁰ appropriates Bakhtin’s concepts of *dialogism* and *heteroglossia*. Bakhtin claimed that characters can borrow phrasing (discourse/voice) and ideology from each other and from the narrator, causing a dialogic struggle (Little 10-11). But crucially for Little’s argument, this is not a struggle where for example male or female discourse wins (26). Little does not consider Woolf’s discourses oppositional, but *appositional* - expanding on one another in a *dialogic* relationship. Little describes how the experimental characters of modernism challenge the belief in “the stable ego” projected by realism. Rather, they speak out the non-existence of the self, and inscribe a “dialogic play of discourse” not readily or accurately identified in terms of the masculine/feminine opposition (1-2). Here we can see Little’s dialogism as a response to SWC2’s longing for the whole self. For Little, this “world without the self” is not really a problem. Rather the dialogism in Woolf’s texts invites “playing out” the self’s non-existence. Another way to map Little into SWC2 is to regard her dialogism as a contribution on the fragmentation-side, celebrating the *flux*, *indeterminacy* and *open-endedness* in Woolf’s fiction. I would also like to emphasize Little’s dialogue with SWC1. Little points out the limitations of the theories caught up in the “feminine/feminist opposing self” (5). She claims that they miss out on complex social structures where “gender, ethnicity, and economic status mingle and overlap” (6). Appropriating Little’s argument to the rhetoric I have applied, Little refrains from reducing the problem of the self/subject to gender, and instead argues that dialogism manages to encompass the play of discourses across

²⁰ All references to Little in this section is to this book.

traditional views of subjectivity. Rather than Irigaray's absolute claim that any theory of the subject presupposes subjectivity as male, Little argues that for example *OB* features Orlando (as "she") in dialogue with "patriarchal, symbolic ideologies, modifying, reappropriating, and feminizing them" (Little 34). Nevertheless, Little's claim that women have a "built-in dialogism" (15) and her insistence of making an argument "*ad feminam*: to the woman as both writer and reader" (ix) attest for the project's feminist vantage point.

Let us then return to Fand's *The Dialogic self* (1999), which champions Woolf's fictions dialogism, and resonates with Minow-Pinkney's take on Woolf's androgyny "in practise". Fand claims that Woolf's fiction surpasses the concept of androgyny presented in *A Room*, and considers that androgyny *dialogic* in nature. The dialogism suggested in Woolf's peculiar androgyny does not only work to "contain the masculine, but to deconstruct the very terms of gender", says Fand (43-44). She further claims that in so doing, Woolf's dialogic androgyny surpasses the critique directed by Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own* (1977), who saw androgyny as another cover-up for essentialist notions of gender (Fand 42-43). Fand claims that Woolf with *The Waves* increases: "the play of possibilities among subjectivities that make up the self" and "releases women from having to construct "a female subject"" (90). Understanding Fand in light of the debate between feminism's claim for a new female subjectivity and the deconstruction of the "subject as such", Fand urges for going beyond deconstruction (21), but also here seems to reject the dominant strain within feminism to construct a female subjectivity.

Interesting for my purposes here, the dialogic approach suggested by Little and Fand seems like a solution to the problems suggested in SWC1 and SWC2. We can say that they stand in *apposition*, to use Little's term, to central debates within feminism and feminist readings of Woolf, yet they suggest a new path that reconstructs subjectivity, and in many ways releases it from the crisis embedded in the arguments of tendencies 1 and 2. I question, though, how "new" this subjectivity is. The road seems short especially from Fand's argument to Minow-Pinkney's claim for a new subjectivity, and that Woolfian androgyny involves "a *dialectic* of symbolic and semiotic, of man and woman". The major difference is perhaps that Little and Fand are more convincing in showing how this dialogism does not result in a new essentialism that holds on to binaries. As to the "standing" of the term "self" in SWC3, Little's title suggests that Woolf's creations are *experimental selves*, yet her argument readily dissolves this self in favour of dialogic *subjectivity* – as the subtitle takes up.

My Contribution to the SWC

My first contribution to SWC is identifying and mapping it as a distinct, critical conversation. By mapping the SWC-conversation, I inevitably show that investigating the self in Woolf's fiction is nothing new, yet I consider my voice at odds with substantial parts of that conversation and some of its common methodology. The most significant change in method can be summed up in this observation: The editors of *Virginia Woolf: Twenty-First-Century Approaches* (2014) celebrate a "contemporary trend" where Woolf-critics "cross the boundaries between the text and the author, casting aside the mantra of the intentional fallacy" (Dubino et. al. 2), whereas I find the intentional fallacy to have been broken persistently in Woolf-scholarship, though often in sophisticated and no doubt rewarding ways. In fact, to this date I have not read a single piece of Woolf-criticism that leaves Woolf's other writings, be it her essays, diary notes, letters or drafts of the novels, completely out of the discussion. Rather, biographical readings of Woolf's novels have been so dominating that the author's life, her writings about how the modern self ought to be represented, and her literary creations have been made into *one* discourse, where one part of the "text" explains the other. I find it problematic when citations from Woolf's non-fiction are used to explain and make clear what in the novels is ambiguous, or when Woolf's poetic phrases are uncritically applied to describe how her novels "work".²¹ I see the need for more persistent close-readings of Woolf's novels, where her non-fictional writings are not used as "explanatory models".

As I wanted to take an active stand in some of the debate that has shaped Woolf-criticism, it was natural to choose the two novels which have made the greatest impact on it, that is *Mrs Dalloway (MD)* and *To the Lighthouse (TL)*, but which within SWC actually has been in the shadows of *The Waves*. It seems reasonable to explain why I did not choose *The Waves*. Besides from the fact that it has already been well-scrutinized in SWC, I omitted *The Waves* because its prevailing deconstruction of narrative, extensive use of direct discourse and "unbounded subjectivity" (Schwab 19) more or less erases the possibility of looking extensively at the narration's articulation of individual selves. (This perhaps explains why *The Waves* dominates SWC3 and the fragmentation side of SWC2). What triggered me with the three novels I chose is that, despite that there is a move towards disarticulation and decentring of the self, the other direction of Taylor's "simultaneous slide" is also strong. To the extent

²¹ Minow-Pinkney offers an emblematic example when she describes *Mrs Dalloway* thus: "In *Mrs Dalloway* [Woolf] comes close to the view of life recommended in 'Modern Fiction': 'not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged' but a 'luminous halo'" (54). The long paragraph that follows does nothing to explain how exactly Woolf's metaphor explains the novel's form.

that critics have been interested in the *articulation* of self, or most often, *subjectivity*, such arguments have tended to lean on gender dichotomies. I generally wish to depart from the tendency to equal the problem of the self in Woolf's fiction with gender issues, further seeing androgyny as its solution. Part of the fun with *Orlando: A Biography (OB)* is the way it undoes dichotomies and essentialisms. The novel is arguably neglected both in Woolf-criticism in general and SWC in particular (the latter I found quite surprising as it so obviously is about the construction of a self). *OB* has seldom been scrutinized from a formalist perspective, but has been popular in biographical and socio-political discussions. Given this relative neglect I found it rewarding to discuss the work from two vantage points. The way *OB* foregrounds and plays with the connections and disconnections between language, narrative, gender and self gives a "hands on" example of the "as if"- understanding of the self I have attempted to establish in this introduction; the self as a necessary, yet problematic construction of language, *literary selves* which not just function as "participants in Woolf's novels", but what they fundamentally are *about*. That insistence is my most important contribution to the SWC.

Chapter Outline

The thesis contains three main chapters, each focused on one self. I first discuss the ways in which *OB*'s parodic negotiation with the genre of biography undoes the image of the self the genre tends to assume. In chapter 1.2, I explore the role gender plays in the articulation and disarticulation of Orlando's self.

In the second chapter, I discuss Septimus from *MD* in light of psychoanalytic theory. I argue against scholars who consider Septimus "outside language", or fully merged into what Kristeva calls *the semiotic chora*. I argue that the relative silence of the narrator enables the signification of Septimus' self – despite of the disarticulation of Septimus' self which I find to be intrinsic to the narration's juxtaposition of Septimus and Clarissa.

TL was what directed my interest in the self in Woolf's fiction. The image of the many versions of Mrs Ramsay, revealed through the novel's "polyphonic focalization", was my initial motivation for studying the subject further. I will demonstrate that the narrative and the other selves depend on the presence of Mrs Ramsay, and that her death therefore has huge implications, and epitomises the narrative's deconstructive element. Nonetheless, my reading suggests that the narrative returns to the primacy of the relational, yet individual self.

1 Orlando

1.1 Hoaxing Biography: Orlando and the Self as Narrative

How one imagines the self is central for how biographies are constructed (Egeland 110-111; Walton 35). *OB*'s parody with the genre of biography is considered one of the great jokes of literature, Woolf's "witty act of defiance" to her father's great project the *Dictionary of National Biography*, as Peter Ackroyd writes in his introduction (xi). I will argue that *OB* as a metafiction and parody of biography also offers serious insights about the relationship between self and narrative.

OB is generally considered a novel,²² but its juxtaposition of fiction and fact has made it subject to various classifications, such as a roman á clef, künstlerroman, anti-novel, metafiction, magical realism and (auto)biography (Smith 60). There are two main-modes in which one can study *OB* as biography. The first is to look at *OB* as a biography about Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West. Many critics have read *OB* as a "symbolic narrative" (Swanson 186) of the friendship and creative desire between Woolf and Sackville-West (e.g. Sproles, DeSalvo and McIntire). Often, these readings make room for *OB* as *autobiography*, arguing for Woolf's close identification with Vita (Panken 167; Briggs 210). Critics further often note that *OB* is as parody of the biography, mentions how it was a means for Woolf to explore "her alternative model of history" (de Gay 147; see also Naremore), but without further engaging in how that parody works and what kind of poetics of the self is suggested as a result of the text's metafictional play. Ira Bruce Nadel's *Biography: Fiction, Fact and Form* (1985) is an exception. Nadel's book pays significant attention to *OB* as metabiography, satire and fiction, through which the narrative both exposes and transgresses the limitations of the biography (140-7). Where Nadel looks at the narrative form of biography, and the particular "revolution" of the genre *OB* brings to the table (140), I advance from a more formalist-literary stand point, and focus on how the novel problematizes the self as a narrative construction.

The tendency to understand Woolf's fiction in light of her non-fiction is more or less omnipresent in *OB*-criticism. Several critics advance from Woolf's interest in "making people up" (qtd. in Briggs 193), as she called it, and look at that life-long obsession as manifested in her fiction as well as her non-fiction (Ryall 154-5). Rather than looking at *OB*'s direct, in-text manipulation of biography, they often advance from and return to Woolf's ideas, in particular

²² Illustrative of this is that Naremore, Minow-Pinkney and Poresky all include *OB* in their respective books about Woolf's novels.

“The New Biography”. Minow-Pinkney’s reading of *OB* in *The problem of the Subject* is a case in point, but she should be credited for enhancing academic interest in *OB*.

It is my stand that *OB* as a problematization of biography, and the articulation and disarticulation of the self that takes place as a result of the text’s serious play, remains a much neglected aspect. I will explore *OB* in light of some key assumptions about the biography genre, specifically in terms of how it presupposes proximity between life, truth, fact and self. I will argue that *OB* rearticulates and disarticulates its “origin”, Vita Sackville-West, exposes the self’s dependence on narrative structures, and problematizes the genre of biography’s imperative to offer true and coherent narratives about a self.

1.1.1 Truth, Fact and Self

Making narratives about ourselves can be considered a fundamental human activity which not only serves to represent reality, but actively shapes our understanding of the world and who we are (Abbott 1; Kindt 29; Brooks 3). Narratologists often cite David Herman’s “rule” that narrative logic is an “unreplaceable resource for structuring and comprehending experience, a distinctive way of coming to terms with time, process and change” (23). Despite that *the narrative turn* has demonstrated that narrative constructions define us as cognitive beings, we expect something fundamentally different when we read *literary* narratives – in short: We expect fiction (Audet 12; Abbott 145-6). The first key assumption about the biography rests on the very opposite – namely that they tell stories that are “*factually true*” (Abbott 145). Nadel writes that: “[F]acts are to biography what character is to the novel – a fundamental element of composition providing authenticity, reality and information (4). In *Hvem bestemmer over livet?: Biografien som historisk og litterær genre* (2000),²³ Marianne Egeland gives a substantial overview of the history and methodology of the biography. Egeland appropriates Lejune’s concept of the *autobiographical pact* to *the biographical pact* (Norw: *Den biografiske pakt*). In writing a biography, the biographer is “sworn in” with the reader that the things s/he relates have in fact happened (Egeland 86-7). Woolf plays with this premise already in the preface. Woolf²⁴ poses as a hard-working academic-biographer, thanking those who have helped her research. J.J. Wilson is interested in *OB* as anti-novel, and declares that already in the preface “the mask drops, the hoax is obvious; the arbitrariness and acerbity of sentiment and tone are unmistakable to anyone accustomed to the habits of the rabid anti-novelist” (176). (However, Wilson demonstrates that many critics have indeed

²³ My, direct translation: *Who Decides over Life? : The Biography as Historic and Literary Genre*.

²⁴ I think it necessary “to confess” that Woolf takes on her own voice in the preface.

failed to see the “hoax” he considers so obvious). I do not think Woolf’s list of names is by any means arbitrary, but certainly agree that the “mask drop” of the preface is very significant. I find the “acknowledgements” emblematic to the text’s metafictional play:

Many friends have helped me in writing this book. Some are dead and so illustrious that I scarcely dare name them, yet no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott, Lord Macaulay, Emily Brontë, De Quincey, and Walter Pater... Others are alive, and though perhaps as illustrious in their own way, are less formidable for that very reason. (*OB* 1)

Woolf is not only engaging in anti-novel writing here, but also a parody of biography. To thank long-dead *friends* whom she obviously has never met in real life, Sir Walter Scott (biographer as well as celebrated father of the historical novel), Lord Macaulay (politician and historian) on the same line as, presumably, *Daniel* Defoe (novelist and journalist) and Emily Brontë (novelist), suggests a double allegiance to the realm of the novel and the biography, as well as to fiction and non-fiction. Similarly, the index in the back mimics an academic text, but the inscription of “THE END” afterwards shows that also this seeming pedestal to fact was part of the book’s “hoax”, as Wilson calls it. Little argues that the effect of *OB*’s parody is to “remind us that norms are fictions” (*Comedy and the Woman Writer* 68). The preface and index undermine the very distinctions we like to place between these realms, and suggest the narrativity and fictionality of any story – be it *history* or literary stories. *OB* features both as anti-novel, by simulating the setup of a biography; and as anti-biography/parody of biography, by lending so heavily from fiction. This crucially effects the representation of Orlando, who becomes both a pseudo-biographee, who is modelled on Woolf’s friend and lover, Vita-Sackville-West; and as protagonist in a novel which also (re)tells almost 400 years of English history, partly populated by real, historical figures. The hyperbole of living over 300 years, yet not aging more than to the age of 36, ridicules the historicity of “the biographee’s” life - it shows it is “just” a narrative. Indeed, only the briefest knowledge of *OB*’s plot readily establishes it as a work of fiction that parodies the biography. It simply cannot be true, and hence “biography” must be parodic. Clearly, it is, but I intend to take *OB*’s parody very seriously. In its “obvious hoax” resides also its truth, I say. Again, this is so partly because of the way parody works. Jonathan Culler and Margaret A. Rose can help explain the matter:

When a text cites or parodies the conventions of a genre one interprets it by moving to another level of interpretation where both terms of the opposition can be held together by the theme of literature itself... Part of this effect is no doubt

due to the fact that parody is an imitation and that by making its model explicit it implicitly denies that it is to be read as a serious statement... (Culler 178-9)

Already in its “form”, the sub-title, preface, index, footnotes and the use of illustrations; *OB* “makes its model explicit”. The challenge to see the joke and the hoax necessarily invites us to read on multiple levels, as Culler talks about. Rose emphasizes this metafictional function of parody (13, 61-96). Parody combines resembling an original (for example a seemingly conventional preface/introduction), with “estranging” that discourse (Rose 61). This estrangement seems equivalent to Culler’s “making its model explicit”, but parody as a metafictional function is more serious than Culler seems to argue. Through its “obvious hoax” *OB* points to its relationship with “the original” genre of biography, estranges that original and meta-poetically points to the impossibility of telling the truth of a person’s life.

One of the problems assumption of the biographical genre Egeland identifies is the tendency to forget that biographies, along with other so-called non-fictional texts (Norw.: “Sakprosa”), also are constructions. Egeland makes the important point that no text is really a transparent, mirror of reality, though the biographical pact assumes such a relationship to the lived life of the biographee (73).²⁵ Also the notion of the self is affected by this expectation directly to write reality and fact in language. There are many aspects of a life that can never be fully accessed by a biographer. Even if direct “mirroring” in language was possible, a radical narrowing must have taken place, as a biographer cannot enter the mind of the biographee (Walton 35).

Suggesting that biography is finally an “art” admits the fictional nature of the genre, but the biographical format promises not fiction but some kind of truth. These difficulties are inescapable because life is not art, thoughts are not documents, beliefs are not actions. (Nagourney 102)

What then makes up the truth about a person’s life is hard to tell – in both meanings of the phrase. Already on page 5, *OB*’s narrative voice explicitly contemplates on this dilemma, namely what to do with “undocumentable” sides of Orlando’s life, such as thoughts and emotions:

[W]e glance at Orlando standing by the window... Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore. Sights disturbed him, like that of his mother, a very beautiful lady in green walking out to feed the peacocks with Twitchett, her maid, behind her; sights exalted him—the birds and the trees; and made him

²⁵ Nadel makes a similar point when she observes that readers of biographies tend to treat the text “transparently” (3). One can take this a step further than Egeland and Nadel do and question whether reality is ever “transparent”. Structuralists and poststructuralists have argued that reality is always already discursive - that is, it is constructed by language (Parker 50-51). A biography presents yet another layer of construction.

in love with death—the evening sky, the homing rooks; and so, mounting up the spiral stairway into his brain—which was a roomy one—all these sights, and the garden sounds too, the hammer beating, the wood chopping, began that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests. But to continue – Orlando slowly drew in his head... (4-5)

What is “detestable” to the biographer/narrator²⁶ is that Orlando does not *do* anything, and nothing is directly *happening*, yet his life is only *seemingly* in still stand as Orlando’s mind wanders on. This challenges the biographical pact of telling the life of a biographee truthfully. The biographer plays the truth-card, saying “we have to admit” these “disagreeables” to be present. The text both plays with what a biography “does best to ignore” by actually telling about such things, yet also reinforces the paradigm of the biography as the true rendering of actions and events in a life by moving on to what can be described in terms of what “actually happened” (“But to continue...”).²⁷ In the world of fiction, we are familiar with omniscient narrators, and henceforth may not consider the narrator’s access to Orlando’s thoughts and emotions problematic. If we instead read on the level of *resembling* biography, and think of the narrative voice as biographer, the question of reliability necessarily becomes more troubling. As no human can fully access another human’s thoughts, the biographer must here be drifting away in his own associations of what possibly could go on in Orlando’s mind. The text thus points to its own construction. We realize that the idea of mounting up the stairway to another person’s brain is not possible – only in fiction. As very often is the case in *OB*, this “hoax” has yet another implication; the entire scene is fiction, not just the content of Orlando’s thoughts. There is no Orlando sitting there, thinking (but maybe a Vita?). It is in citations like these where I consider *OB*’s truth to lie in its “hoax”, its “as if”. Exactly because it points to the inevitable presence of fictional and narrative devices when telling a life, it can say something true about it.

The biography’s demand for truth is literally “blasted out” in the novel’s most important scene: “He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman” (87). The sex-change is presented as an absolute truth, a fact of Orlando’s life that the biographer cannot ignore. It is like new evidence has ascended and the biographer must be loyal to the biographical pact. The extended scene is inscribed with

²⁶ Technically, “the biographer” does not equal the narrator of *OB*, but is a generic figure. “The biographer” functions like a compass marking the direction biographies *ought* to take, but which is at odds with the possibilities available for the “we” who actually narrate as Orlando’s life is so ill-suited for biography. The further implications of this “hoax” I must leave for another occasion.

²⁷ For a problematization of the biography’s notion of “event”, particularly the tendency to perceive it as natural and factual, when it is rather naturalized and discursive, see: Epstein.

elements that break with the rules of the biography, with beings that belong in the realms of fairy-tale and myth, such as the personified Purity, Chastity and Modesty (86). Yet the narrative voice insists on the event's undeniable reality which he²⁸ has no choice but to "confess" has taken place – despite its discrepancy with the imperatives of fact and truth in biographies.

1.1.2 Life = Self

Biography is defined as: "An account of someone's **life** written by someone else" ("biography", my emphasis), but our notion of *life* is inextricably linked to the existence of an individual (Walton 65). An illustrative example: Many a biography have had titles such as: *Robert Plant: A Life* (2014) or *Marie Curie: A Life* (1996) – but it is Robert Plant or Marie Curie we expect to get to know through these books. The focus on *life*, and more particularly *events* in a life, may seem more conceivable with the biographical pact, but, as Peter Nagourney demonstrates, the interpretation of personality is what is primarily implied in the paradigm of biography:

If biography is conceived of as the search for historically verifiable truth, it is a scholarly problem. But when, as is more frequently the case, biography is defined as, or implied to be, a search for the understanding of personality, it becomes an interpretive problem. (88)

The connections the genre assumes between fact, truth, life and self, and the possibility of representing it in language, are constantly at play in *OB*. Julia Briggs puts it well:

It [*OB*] energetically resists the "facts of life" – birth, death and our subjection to the bodies we have been given, and their desires. Instead, it focuses upon what the imagination seizes as truth, giving that priority over more probable circumstance. (199-200)

In *OB*, the truth of imagination and fiction is elevated as a result of the constant play with the impossibility of telling the truth of a person's life. This penetrates the text on every level. For example, the narrative voice multiple times interrupts the narrative about Orlando's life in order to comment on how ill-suited his/her life is for the business of writing a biography:

Life, it has been agreed by everyone whose opinion is worth consulting, is the only fit subject for novelist or biographer; life, the same authorities have decided, has nothing whatever to do with sitting still in a chair and thinking. Thoughts and life are as the poles asunder. Therefore—since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando **is doing now** – there is nothing for it but to recite the calendar, tell one's beads, blow one's nose, stir the fire, look out

²⁸ My choice to say "he" is not unproblematic. Although it is part of the point that we cannot determine for sure the gender of the narrative voice, it seems logical to say "he" because of *OB*'s engagement in mocking traditional biographies (usually written by men about men). The narrator also sometimes discusses women in a way that marks distance from a female perspective (e.g. 97 and 175-6).

the window, until she has done. Orlando sat so still that you could have heard a pin drop. Would, indeed, that a pin had dropped! That would have been life of a kind... Then, at once, we could out with our pens and write. (174-175, my emphasis)

What Orlando's life (unfortunately) consists in is one of the salient, and most outspoken themes of the novel. In a similar way as readers of Woolf's fiction have interjected "but nothing happens!", the biographer is often frustrated by the lack of life and action in Orlando's life. The irony is striking. The events that are supposed to make out "the existence of the individual" that is Orlando, is proclaimed not life at all, despite that "sitting in a chair and thinking" may be one of the most essential activities for Orlando's life and self. The scene also recalls a particular dilemma for author-biographies. Unlike for example a politician or an explorer, a writer's life is often distinguished by "uneventful" activities like thinking and writing (Egeland 109).²⁹ Nevertheless, the biographer in *OB* clearly feels obliged to adhere to the truth-principle, and tells of many of these non-eventful moments in Orlando's life. "If only a pin had dropped" – says the narrative voice, and in so doing insists on the narrative's tight concordance with truth and reality. As if the narrator was actually a biographer observing the biographee Orlando, what did not happen, as pins dropping, cannot be told. The use of present tense should also be noted. With some exceptions the narrative is told in past tense. This can enhance the text's insistence that its story did in fact happen, and necessarily has to be narrated after it took place. Here the shift from past to present tense possibly works to foreground that the illusion of the biographer sitting and writing the life of Orlando, independent of time, is exactly an illusion. The truth, again, is in the hoax.

The scene above suggests a contradiction also between *life* and *self*, as Orlando in his/her perhaps most Orlando-like moments simultaneously displays a lack of life. I think it is possible to relate this contradiction to a central dichotomy in the western understanding of the self. Taylor traces the genealogy of the modern understanding as starting with the construction of the binary inner-outer: "We think of our thoughts, ideas, or feeling as being "within" us, while the objects in the world which these mental states bear on are "without"" (111-114). The self has through the development of this concept been located in a more or less unfathomable interiority (Taylor 111, 177). This stands in great contrast to life as something documentable, as facts and events, as the biographical pact advances from. The biographer wants Orlando to perform a life which is more on the outer paradigm, instead of such "inner activities" like thinking. Such moments bear a strong irony on the part of the

²⁹ That is not to say that many author-biographies have not paid significant attention to other sides of a writer's life. The enormous discourse about Woolf's life and mental agonies is a case in point.

biography. How much more exciting can life get than living amongst people like the Queen of England, the gypsie-leader, Rustom, and intellectuals like Nicholas Greene and Alexander Pope, and even changing one's sex along the way? Even if Orlando's life really was without all these escapades, the biographer's discontent is troubling; is there really no room for the inner self in a biography?

1.1.3 Vita and Non-Vita, Orlando and Non-Orlando

The connection to Vita Sackville-West adds another level to the interrelationship in *OB* between narrative, life, reality and self. Critics are in unison that Vita is Orlando's primary model (Burns 359). There are multiple details connecting Orlando to Vita: The Sackville-West estate, Vita's love affairs, her habit of cross-dressing and her works *The Land* and *Knole and the Sackvilles* (Burns 359; Briggs 189; Sproles 70). Woolf's letters and dedication leaves little doubt that Orlando on some level is a depiction of Vita – she even asked for Vita's permission (Smith 59). Taking *OB* “upon its word” as biography thus necessarily invokes Vita. But my interest in Vita is not so much all the connections between *OB* and Vita's life and family history, but how Woolf in her dealings with Vita in *OB* disarticulated biography and disarticulated Vita.³⁰

Victoria L. Smith argues that in producing this new kind of biography, “[fusing] the substance of truth and the artistry of fiction”, Woolf was able to reveal “essential aspects of her [Vita's] character that a factual biography might not” (59). Similarly, Margaret Reynolds says in her introduction to *OB* that Woolf “made an imaginary biography out of her idea of Vita's life” (xix). Smith's phrasing “essential aspects” [of Vita] is problematic. If essential aspects of a person cannot be caught in a regular biography, this suggests fundamental problems in the genre's idea of the self, and its ability to represent it. We have already seen that it is in the essence of biography to be factual and source-based, so to engage in an “imaginary biography”, highlighting the “artistry of fiction”, suggests rocking the biography at its very core. Thus, (also) in its dealing with Vita, *OB* disarticulates or deconstructs the biography.

Further, I think *OB* disarticulates Vita through the articulation of Orlando, but also threatens to disarticulate Orlando in the same “simultaneous slide”. The most striking example of this is the illustrations. Despite my insistence in keeping Woolf's real life out of it,

³⁰ I owe Burns' article my inspiration for the idea of *OB*'s disarticulation of Vita, but Burns only mentions that “one can imagine” that to write a biography of one's lover also “calls up denials and displacements as well” (342), and does not explain the notion further.

I cannot help but notice that some of these photos must be real photos of real people. Indeed, three of them are of Vita (Briggs 210).³¹ With the help of her husband, her sister and a professional photographer, Woolf staged the illustrations with props that not necessarily made the pictures look more “real”. For example, the illustration of “Orlando about the year of 1840” features a style of clothing that resembles more the fashion of the 1920s, and seems a deliberate mismatch to the time it is “supposed” to represent, as Randi Koppen has pointed out (53). Koppen argues that the photos show to a very curious construction of source material: “*Orlando’s* historiography is conducted through outrageous and deliberate mismatching between writing and illustration, in an iconology that rejects any logic and lets all the seams show” (51). Again, the truth is in the hoax. One of the “seams that show” is exactly that someone has posed for these pictures. That Orlando is not Orlando, but “really” Vita. But also the seams of “reality” shows, as Vita appears so obviously staged, posing for Orlando and in that sense is not really herself in the pictures. Indeed, it is possible to question how *real* these pictures are,³² and if they really are “of Vita”. We can say that in compliance with the expectations to biography, *OB* presents source material, but, I argue, it manipulates those sources to such an extent that they refer more to the construction of Orlando, than to the representation of Vita. The text beneath the pictures, such as “Orlando about the Year 1840” (152), works to construct the body we see, which “in reality” is Vita, to become Orlando. Nevertheless, the final picture threatens to make the seams rupture completely, as the image of the relaxed, comfortable Vita in picturesque surroundings shows little resemblance to the current Orlando of the text, who is in great emotional and existential turmoil (Koppen 53). Here I would say that the illustration points more to the Vita who is *not* in the text, than the Orlando who is.

We can also see the illustrations as means to the disarticulation of both Vita and Orlando. We realize that the pictures have to be of *someone* (else) because we know that Orlando is not real. When we realize that that someone is Vita, the rearticulation of Vita as Orlando, through use of costume, props, light etcetera, as well as the text beneath the pictures, as quickly deconstructs Vita. This is the mode of the text. Always letting “the seams show”, the self being deferred to parodic representations, to multiple versions of selves and identities;

³¹ This includes: “Orlando on Her return to England”, “Orlando about the year of 1840” and “Orlando at the present time”. The one of the Russian Princess is of Angelica Bell (Woolf’s niece). The rest are reproductions of paintings of Vita’s forefathers, collected by Woolf from the Sackville-Wests estate (Koppen 51).

³² This is, in a sense, not just true for the pictures of Vita/Orlando. It is a fact well acknowledged that photography, much like language, hardly is a transparent mirroring of reality. Still, the text here sets up multiple layers of “apparent realities” which most photos do not.

but also to construct meaningful connections, which have the representation of self as their premise.

1.1.4 Life as (if) Story with Self as (if) Cohesive Protagonist

H. Porter Abbott argues for an important distinction between life and narrative fiction that can shed light on how *OB* foregrounds its own “as if”, its reliance on constructions. In order to distinguish life and narrative, Abbott applies the term *story*. Despite that a story in a novel does not really exist before it is conveyed, we imagine story as something that precedes the narrative which conveys it (Abbott 36; Genette 15). The novel and the biography differ in the way they relate to story. In a novel, we do not expect the story that we can abstract from the discourse to have happened in a historical sense. The story is nevertheless conveyed in narrative *as if* it happened (Abbott 36). Christoph Bode emphasizes how to understand the seeming gaps in stories of fiction: “There is always something that such a composition does *not* say, as opposed to “leaves out” – for after all, fictional characters exist only in fiction and what is not said about them isn’t “there”” (98). This is different with biographies. Here something *is* necessarily left out, as I have already touched upon. But, importantly, something is also added. As stressed by Nagourney, “life is not art” and biographies “make more sense of life than any life as lived” (Nagourney 102). Stephen J. Walton’s discussion of the chronologic structure of biographies is a good concretization of the way biographies “makes sense” out of lives. A chronological structure assumes a contextualization of the lived life, connecting stray facts in order to construct a coherency that the life itself does not grant (Walton 61). We can say that the genre of biography assumes a form and “storyness” on life that no life inherently possesses. *OB* plays with these distinctions. It has seemingly “left out” crucial details about Orlando’s life (his birth for example), and makes connections between the “facts” available:

For though these are not matters on which a biographer can profitably enlarge it is plain enough to those who have done a reader’s part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person...– it is plain then to such a reader that Orlando was strangely compounded of many humours—of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love of solitude, **to say nothing of all those contortions and subtleties of temper which were indicated on the first page, when he slashed at a dead nigger’s head; cut it down; hung it chivalrously out of his reach again and then betook himself to the window seat with a book.** The taste for books was an early one. As a child he was sometimes found at midnight by a page still reading. They took his taper away, and he bred glow-worms to serve his purpose. They took the glow-worms away, and he almost burnt the house down with a tinder. To put it in a nutshell, **leaving the novelist to smooth out the**

crumpled silk and all its implications, he was a nobleman afflicted with a love of literature. (43, my emphasis)

The biographer emphasizes that this is not a novel, he is not caught up in implications of silkworms, or Orlando's dreadful act on page one; rather, he is just putting forth a consistent fact in Orlando's life – namely his love of literature. As biographies often do, a characteristic of the biographee is traced back to an early experience. But “the hoax” of the parodic tone, the narrator again saying the things he says he will not say (“to say nothing at all...”), pulls the rug beneath the feet of the facts presented, and shows that it is exactly the biographers who are the ones “smoothing out the silk” by ordering facts into a chronological, causal construction of a life. The shock of the opening page offers this logic in reverse. Here the silk of Orlando's life is left purposely crumbled. What seems to be an extremely important fact, a (horrible) action in the middle of the supposedly annoyingly still life, is told in a way that the reader, at best, stumbles over it, and possibly does not understand its implications before s/he reaches this page, which, despite its claim to the opposite, emphasizes the same action.

We have seen that the imperatives of biography often are at odds with the nature of Orlando's “actions”, making the story of Orlando at odds with the life and self of Orlando. The biographer's comment on how to deal with Orlando's week-long sleep offers a striking example. The biographer does not even know if his biographee is alive (something one would think an absolute minimum that a biographer should know), and after having pondered on the issue “over half an hour” moves on and lets the story take precedence over life and self:

Had Orlando, worn out by the extremity of his suffering, died for a week, and then come to life again? And if so, of what nature is death and what nature life? Having waited well over half an hour for an answer to these question, and none coming, **let us go on with the story**. (40, my emphasis)

The final chapter of *OB* offers a series of confusing, lyrical reflections about the nature of literature, marriage, life and Orlando herself. Especially the question of what life is is central.³³ But after having cried out: “Life, Life, Life!” (177), the biographer admits: “back we must go and say straight out to the reader who waits a-tiptoe to hear what life is – alas, we don't know” (177). But Orlando herself returns to the question: “What then, was life? The thought popped into her head violently, irrelevantly...” (184) The question, one would think, is of course everything but irrelevant in a biography. In *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (2005), Briggs maps Woolf's life through the process of writing her novels. The chapter dedicated to Woolf and *OB* is entitled: “The secret of Life is...”. The quote is the final line of Woolf's first

³³ See especially pp 174-5, 177, 184 and 186.

draft for *OB* (Briggs 208). To me, it stands as an emblem for what *OB* plays with saying, but importantly *does not say*. Not only is the sentence itself left incomplete, but “the secret of life is...” is not in the published work. Though the question of what life is is *OB*’s alfa and omega, it refuses to tell the meaning or secret of life, but makes us constantly wonder.

OB dramatizes that the construction of story upon life often is at odds with the “reality” of the self and its lived life. The biography’s often explicit promise to tell the *essential story* of a person necessitates that that self is tangible (Egeland 115) – and “writeable” as a coherent story – often based on chronological of events. This stands in great contrast to the modernist’s experience, questioning the possibility of such a transparent and uniform being. The most straightforward example of this collision between modernist thought and biography is the book’s title. “Orlando” equals both the title of the book and the name of the narrative’s protagonist. The title suggests that not just will this book be about Orlando, but that the narrative equals that self. But through the course of the narrative the very flexible character of Orlando suggests perhaps that the only “essential” about Orlando, the only thing holding the idea of that individual together, is Orlando as a constructed narrative, collected under the heading “Orlando”. What else do the young Don Juan of the first part and the married, “fine Lady” of the end have in common? Possibly, only a love for literature.

Modern self-understanding is based on the assumption that: “we do not know already who we are” (Taylor 178). This stands in great contrast to the image of the self assumed by traditional biographies. Anka Ryall is among the critics who take substantial note of Woolf’s play with biography, but her argument implies that she regard *OB* as more or less consistent with the genre’s favour of the coherent and whole self. She states for example that: “About 350 years differentiates the first portrait – of Orlando as boy, dressed in renaissance clothing – and the last, where **the same Orlando** appears as a modern woman anno 1928” and claims that the fictional Orlando and the real Vita are “identical” (162-3, my translations and emphasis). It may just be an (imprecise) figure of speech, but I nevertheless think it necessarily to question if we can talk of a “same Orlando” in this narrative (that Vita and Orlando should be identical is close to absurd). *OB* not just implicitly suggests a multiplicity of selves,³⁴ but firmly argues for its presence – *despite* the demands of the biographical genre:

³⁴ Richter also uses the term *multiplicity of self* (113) with regard Woolf’s characters, but contrary to my base in the way language in general and Woolf’s narration in particular works to articulate and disarticulate selves, Richter argues for the *emotional* nature of the multiplicity of Woolf’s literary selves (114-115), and reduces the narrative technique to “a logical outcome” of Woolf’s “apprehension of man’s psycho-physical totality” (xii), which made it possible for her “to make the act of reading approximate the experience itself” (x).

...everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him – and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned in print at all.

So Orlando, at the turn by the barn, called “Orlando?” with a note of interrogation in her voice and waited. Orlando did not come.

“All right then,” Orlando said, with the good humour people practise on these occasions; and tried another. For she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand. Choosing then, only those selves we have found room for, Orlando may now have called on the boy who cut the nigger’s head down; the boy who strung it up again... or she may have called upon the young man who fell in love with Sasha... or she may have wanted the woman to come to her; the Gipsy; the Fine Lady; the Hermit; the girl in love with life; the Patroness of Letters; the woman who called Mar (meaning hot baths and evening fires) or Shelmerdine (meaning crocuses in autumn woods) or Bonthrop (meaning the death we die daily) or all three together – which meant more things than we have space to write out – all were different and she may have called upon any one of them. (202)

There is much more than sex which distinguishes these selves. Most biographies of course do not account for “six or seven selves”, but stick to their essential story of *one* (or possibly two who can fit neatly into the beloved two-volume format). The “nature of writing a life” as Nagourney phrases it (88), calls for a narrowing down of the self which is contrary to, at least, Orlando’s self or *selves*. *OB* continuously explores the impossibility of finding a form that can catch Orlando, yet also works from the assumption that this indeed is nothing less than the true story of Orlando in all his/her shapes (and also, in a sense, the true story of Vita Sackville West). To the “rant of selves” cited above the narrator adds:

Orlando was certainly seeking this self as the reader can judge from overhearing her talk as she drove... we only copy her words as she spoke them, adding in brackets which self in our opinion is speaking, but in this we may be wrong. (202-203)

The single self is here suggested a creation for the sake of the reader. The citation thus shows the narrative’s reduction of what “in reality” is a multiplicity of selves to a singular one. The last sentence opens up for the possibility that the narrator may be “wrong” in his indication of “who’s who”.

Burns (SWC2) claims that *OB* “weaves together two competing approaches to biography”, based on two different ways of seeing the self. The first is the essential self and the second “the modern project of retracing the construction of a changing subjectivity” (344). Whereas the former mode is the heritage of 19th-century biographers such as Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, the latter takes up changing ideas about the self urged by thinkers like Freud.

These modes have, according to Burns, resulted in two main positions in how critics understand Orlando's subjectivity:

Frederic Jameson, on the one hand, using *Orlando* as an example of a novel that portrays an unchanging, constant personality passing through centuries, bearing the marks of only *external re-shapings*; Makiko Minow-Pinkney on the other hand, argues that "social and historical factors are... fully admitted as constitutive for the human subject in the novel". (343)

I agree with Burns' contrary argument that *OB* plays with *both* these notions – that the narrative juggles an understanding of an essential self that remains the same through shifting times, *and* a self which changes depending on historical and social factors. We can see this in the scene where Orlando muses over her relationship with the "spirit of the age". Through her peculiar version of marriage she feels that she has passed the "examination" of the spirit of the age: "Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself" (175). Passages like these doubtlessly can be interpreted both ways. On the one hand we have Orlando remaining herself *despite* that the spirit of the age changes through the course of her long life, but Orlando also confesses to be "of it", and, for example by "putting on a ring", has made a "deference" to the spirit of the age (174). Yet Orlando's changing exterior, her clothes, the ring on her finger, even the sex change itself can be regarded as simply exterior, as Jameson does. The trouble is that Orlando proves an exceptionally flexible character, so what "remained the same" beneath these only exterior changes is hard to say. Possibly, Orlando's pensive nature can be considered a consistency of his/her self, but by now we all know how ill-suited such activity is for biography and life. Orlando's epiphany that: "After all... nothing has changed" (153) – is countered 20 pages later: "She had been about to say... nothing changes. And then, in the space of three seconds and a half, everything had changed – she had broken her ankle, fallen in love, married Shelmerdine" (172). Again, the construction of the narrative of Orlando may be the "reality" the text points to. It does not take "three seconds and a half" to fall (in love) and get married, but it does not take longer to change the cause of a narrative, "from nothing changes" to "everything had changed".

Contrary to the 19th-century biography's focus on the biographee as a completed whole with a distinct personality that the chronology of his or hers (usually his) life unravels (Walton 30), Orlando is "at the end" not at the end.³⁵ She is not dead or in any way defined as

³⁵ This is of course further emphasized by placing the "THE END" after the index.

a whole. That is, we do get a kind of definition - one which resides in exactly the impossibility of pointing to the *one* self of Orlando:

So she was now darkened, stilled, and become, **with the addition of this Orlando, what is called, rightly or wrongly, a single self, a real self.** And she fell silent. For it is probable that **when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand)** are conscious of disseverment, and are trying to communicate, but when communication is established they fall silent. (205)

The simulations slide of modernism described in the introduction, that is: an increasing interest in finding new expressions for a new subjectivity, yet also an inclination to anti-subjectivism; leaves an interesting gap that *OB* resides in. Just at the point where Orlando becomes Orlando, “a single self, a real self” (205) the self seems to be dissevered into “more than two thousand selves”. The switch between the intimacy of the moment where we think we are finally about to learn who Orlando has become, to speaking generally about “when people talk aloud” is almost painful. Contrary to the alleged silence of the scene, the discourse here is polyphone and multi-layered. I say Orlando’s self *seems* to be dissevered, because the generic tone started by “For it is probable...” confuses whether the narrative is speaking of Orlando or generally – and this confusion may be exactly the point. Orlando becomes “a real self” at the cost of admitting that the real self is a matter of “what is called” a self. What is constructed “when people talk” or narrate. Orlando is here also split from self. She is “*with the addition*” of this darkened Orlando a “single self”. This is exactly the nature of the self; to be “singular” and “in addition” all at once. A changing subjectivity with various character traits and roles, yet identified as “remaining the same”.

In a kind of visionary state Orlando has a sight that reassures her that she can live her life again, but just as she is about to come to some great revelation, the narrator interrupts her:

I am by the Serpentine, she thought, the little boat is climbing through the white arch of a thousand deaths. I am about to understand....

Those were her words, spoken quite distinctly, but we cannot conceal the fact that she was now a very indifferent witness to the truth of what was before her and might easily have mistaken a sheep for a cow, or an old man called Smith for one who was called Jones and was no relation to her whatever. (211, original ellipsis)

The narrator here turns the tables on the question of his reliability, by questioning whether Orlando’s words for her own experiences are credible. He distinguishes between Orlando’s visionary experience and the “truth of what was before her”. Orlando is considered only an “indifferent witness” to that “truth”. Orlando is thus reduced to an indifferent witness to her

own life and its “truth”. The reader is in consequence left with very few clues as to what is really before us in this ending, and must choose who and what to believe.

Despite having questioned the reliability of Orlando’s vision, the narrator continues to trace Orlando’s glance into the “pool or sea in which everything is reflected” (212) (even whether it is a sea or a pool is not determinable). Orlando makes the profound conclusion that: “everything was partly something else” (212). But even that phrase is already subject to *différance*³⁶, to use Derrida’s term, as we have seen it in two slightly different forms earlier in the narrative: “Everything was different” (12) and: “Everything, in fact, was something else” (90). This indeterminacy is maintained to the very end of the narrative. The last thing that “happens” is the curious hunt for the wild goose:

“It is the goose!” Orlando cried. “The Wild goose....”

And the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight,
Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen hundred and Twenty Eight. (215)

Vita’s response to the ending sums up its central problem: “What does the wild goose stand for?...The symbolism doesn’t come off” (qtd. in Briggs 211). The ellipses reminds us of what, in Bode’s phrasing, simply “is not there”. *OB* does not tell Orlando’s life “from crib to grave” – as the biography is supposed to. What is the goose? What is the “essential story” of Orlando’s life? What part of Orlando, except the name, remains the same? The narrative only plays at answering these questions. The only tangible, only real or “essential” left of Orlando which is not deferred into “everything was partly something else” is his/her name.³⁷ But not that either, as the name, as we know, is also the name of the narrative. What is “essential” about Orlando is his/her construction as narrative. Its truth is in its fiction.

OB is a novel about the business of writing a biography. It is told *as if* it was a biography about Orlando (but also Orlando as (if) Vita), constantly playing with the biography’s promise to tell a coherent, essential and true story of life and of a self – as if that was possible. Its constant play with what constitutes a life, a story, a self and what is the realm of fiction foregrounds that selves cannot be written just as they “are”, as there is no way of accessing a self in such a manner. By pointing to the problems of the genre, yet insisting on writing in it, *OB* manages through its “hoax” to say something true about what it means to

³⁶ With this neologism, which combines the French words *defer* [Eng. postpone] and *difference*, Derrida made the point that despite that the two words in French are pronounced the same, the word is in itself *différance* – its meaning deferred and multiplied (Parker 96).

³⁷ Though I reached this conclusion on my own, it should be noted I am not the first to point out that the name can be considered the only consistency of Orlando’s self. See e.g. Burns p. 358.

narrate a life. It manages to be a biography exactly because it fails to be.³⁸ “Orlando” is narrative and self – the one not possible without the other. The lesson learned from taking *OB* seriously as a parody of biography is that every life, every self has an element of that. Not more “real”, or in better words: *Just* as real as we narrate it. A self is always already entered into language and into narrative.

1.2 Remaining the Same or Never the Same: Orlando and the Self as Gender or Gendered

OB presents this striking paradox: The protagonist is first “no doubt” (3) a “he”, then one day “he was a woman” (87), and yet she remains “fundamentally the same” (153). In this section I will discuss how gender and “gendered language” work to articulate and disarticulate Orlando’s self. I will look at what Orlando’s androgyny and the debate about it can tell us in terms of whether the self is only interior or if it is a matter of exterior *performance*. The underlying concern will be whether signifiers of gender, from pronouns to clothing, presuppose Orlando’s self, or whether Orlando’s self can be considered prior to such notions.

First I would like to make some observations about the gender-related criticism of the novel. It seems like *OB*’s “negotiations” with gender is often mentioned, but not often subject to in-depth, literary analysis. It is with surprise that I note that key works to bring to light gender issues in Woolf’s authorship, such as Moi’s *Sexual/Textual Politics* and Goldman’s *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf* (1998), hardly mention *OB*, or do not at all. Many of the articles and book chapters that *are* dedicated to *OB* wind up discussing *A Room*, Woolf’s relationship to Vita and the novel as a playground for Woolf’s (suppressed) same-sex desires and only make plot-level remarks about the text and gender. Though it has come to be a much favoured work on reading lists for courses about modernism and feminism, Minow-Pinkney’s statement that “Orlando has been perhaps the most neglected of Woolf’s novels” (117) may still stand. *OB* and gender in turn occupies an even more limited space within SWC. As stated in the introduction, part of my motivation for discussing the novel here is the way it undoes dichotomies and essentialisms that the SWC in part presupposes.

³⁸ Walton makes a similar conclusion his brief note on *OB*. He argues that Woolf’s work is a rolemodel for the modernist biography exactly as it is not a biography, but a text about biography-writing (33). Also Egeland makes explicit mention of *OB*. For her, Woolf’s play with intermingling fiction and fact in *OB* works to the disestablish convention – also Woolf’s own rules for the biography as mapped in “The New Biography” (Egeland 69, 92-3). That Egeland and Walton both include discussions about *OB* shows the significance of the book as a kind of criticism of biography.

1.2.1 “He was a woman”: Language, Gender and Self

The play with gender is at work from *OB*'s first sentence: “HE – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion did something to disguise it, was...” (3). From the very first word of the novel, Orlando is “singled out” as a subject that signifies a stable, essential self, who remains the same through the “disguise” of changing times and fashions, and whom the narrator can point to and say “he”, and “no doubt” mean that particular Orlando. And already the narrative suggests that the “singulation of self” it is meant so set up, because of the conventions of biography, but also as it is required in any description of a person, is problematic. When the narrator notes: “for there could be no doubt”, he of course creates the doubt he denies. In other words: Through a reading of the opening sentence we can see how the signifiers available for the narrator, such as “he” or “she”, attempts to cover the complex self which is Orlando, but in so doing does not “uncover” who Orlando is. It may even suggest that beneath the one disguise of changing fashion there is another disguise and another one, and that there may not be a stable “HE” beneath them all.

In the article “Spectacle Binding: On Character”, John Frow writes about how proper names and pronouns work to “bind” characters:

The *fixity* of character is given in the “mimetic” correspondence (a problematic and difficult equation) between the unity of the body and the unity of the proper name. The plasticity of character is given, we could say, in the noncorrespondance between the proper name and the system of pronouns, which shift one ‘person’ between three grammatical ‘persons’. (244)

This finds its extreme in *OB*'s play with the shift from “he” to “she”. The plasticity of Orlando's character is emphasized as s/he exactly vacillates between “he” and “she” – sometimes even “I”, as the narrator on occasion takes the final step up “the spiral stairway” to Orlando's mind. I have already mentioned that Orlando's name may be considered the only consistency of his/her self. Several critics have paid attention to the meaning of the name Orlando, and it may not be exemplary to Frow's “unity of the proper name”. Robertson puts it well: “Woolf 's characters multiply under scrutiny, such that referring to them by name is ambiguous (which Orlando?)” (201). Names often signify sex, but Orlando's name does not immediately signify a certain sex, but is arguably of “indeterminate sex”, as the definition of *androgynous* in the *OOED* stresses (“androgynous”). Briggs brings attention to the name's “hesitation between ‘or’ and ‘and’ (as in ‘male and/or female’, or ‘married and/or lesbian’)”, the similitude to Vita's poem *The Land*, and that “Orlando” has several literary forefathers

(193-4).³⁹ Briggs particularly mentions the connection to Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and Ludovico Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (194). Maureen M. Meltia demonstrates that Ariosto's Orlando also has a literary forefather, namely Matteo Maria Boiardo's unfinished *Orlando Innamorato* (1495) – which again has precedence in *La Chanson de Roland* (ca 1115) (Meltia 123). For my purposes, the fact that the seemingly so particular name not by any means is unique is as interesting. It shows that the fixity of “Orlando” is only apparent. Even the name plays the language game where signification is deferred to multiple meanings and identities.

In a similar fashion as the narrative plays with saying, yet *does not say*, the meaning of life and the goose, the meaning of the name “Orlando” is played with in the scene where Orlando is “dead” and Shelmerdine calls upon her:

[Shelmerdine] saw her, and heard her coming to him with crocuses and the jay's feather in her breast, and cried “Orlando”, **which meant** (and it must be remembered that when bright colours like blue and yellow mix themselves in our eyes, some of it rubs off on our thoughts), first the bowing and swaying of bracken as if something were breaking through; which proved to be a ship in full sail, having tossed a little dreamily, rather as if she had a whole year of summer days to make her voyage in; and so the ship bears down... (169, my emphasis)

The endless sentence “waves on” following the image of the ship, and without letting the meaning of the name “break through”. In contrast, the narrator offers an explanation of what “Bonthrop” means: “when she [Orlando] called him by his second name “Bonthrop, it should signify to the reader that she was in a solitary mood” (168). I would like to draw attention to that “Bonthrop” here signifies something about Orlando and *her* mood – not about Bonthrop Shelmerdine himself. Putting these two readings together, we can observe that the meaning of Orlando is deferred and does not give a clear signification, whereas the reader is let known that Orlando is partly who is signified in the name “Bonthrop”. Indeed, in an already cited paragraph on page 202, both “Shelmerdine” and “Bonthrop” are among the selves that Orlando can “call upon”. The “truth in the hoax” here is that names, despite their assumed fixedness, are arbitrary and have multiple meanings (or, whispers Derrida, *inherently* none at all). The name “Orlando” does not particularly mean that particular Orlando, but is also a city in Florida, the title of a novel (and/or biography) by Virginia Woolf, recalls Vita's text, an ancient French legend (Orlando can even be Roland), and at the same time does not really signify any of these things; it is our understanding of prior discourses that offers signification to words – names included.

³⁹ That we are talking about *forefathers* may incline an interpretation of the name as male if one is familiar with these prior texts.

OB's play with the indeterminate meaning of the name can also be considered a specifically female discourse. This takes us to Minow-Pinkney's main argument in *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*, namely that Woolf's feminism and her modernist aesthetics are inextricable. For Minow-Pinkney, Woolf's experimental language and form can be seen as "feminist subversion" that challenges phallogentrism (x, 5). How this may be the case with the play with names and pronouns is made clearer with the help of Annette Kuhn's summary of what makes a discourse feminine. She states that a feminine language challenges and subverts the Western, masculine, goal-oriented discourse by "posing plurality over against unity, multitudes of meaning as against single, fixed meanings, diffuseness as against instrumentality" (11).⁴⁰ One way to read the multiple origins and endlessly deferred meaning of the name "Orlando" is to see it as such a feminine discourse "posing plurality over against unity". The name Orlando, with its long "male", literary history, can also be considered "feminized" as Woolf's Orlando goes from being a man to being a woman. On that note it is perhaps tempting to see *OB* as a female *künstlerroman* and a celebration of feminist-aesthetic practices – especially considering that Orlando is only able to finish "The Oak Tree" as a woman. But we must not forget that Orlando's poetic practice goes back to the very beginning of the novel. Orlando reviews the almost 300-year long process of writing "The Oak Tree", and feels that it shows exactly "how little she has changed":

She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then she had been amorous and florid; and then she had been sprightly and satirical; and sometimes she had tried prose and sometimes she had tried drama. Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons. (153)

From this citation it is no wonder that critics have been so assured in Orlando's "sameness" (Hargreaves 75-77; Lee 153-4; Jameson qtd. in Burns 343). Writing certainly is here claimed to be a constancy of Orlando's self, prior to historical changes and her altered gender; or, as Tracy Hargreaves argues: Writing is proof of Orlando's consistent, androgynous self (75-77). But again I have trouble believing in the text's *insistence of sameness*. Of the consistent qualities Orlando lists I only recognize the "brooding meditative temper". The latter mentioned "passions", which in my opinion have little or no precedence in the text, also seem more superficial compared to the more important differences between a young boy "in love with death" and a "florid" woman. Also the changes in Orlando's writing styles are hardly

⁴⁰ In her introductory chapter to *Women's Pictures: Feminism and Cinema* (1982) Kuhn's takes the pulse on French, post-structuralist feminism, here particularly based on Luce Irigaray's work. This is also vital breeding ground for SWC1 and *TL*-criticism, as I will return to.

insubstantial. So when Orlando defines poetry as “A voice answering a voice” (213), I am more inclined to see Orlando’s writing as uniting a polyphony of voices, than that Orlando finds the one, consistent voice of the self. In that manner, Orlando’s writing possibly expresses a female writing paradigm, but hardly fixates an androgynous or female self.

Gender issues in *OB* also have important economic and legal dimensions. As a consequence of Orlando’s legal status as woman, her estate is entailed to either a male heir, if she can produce a legitimate one; or to a husband, if she chooses to take one. Orlando’s gender subjectivity is literary speaking “on trial” in *OB*:

“The lawsuits are settled,” she read out... “Children pronounced illegitimate (they said I had three sons by Pepita, a Spanish dancer). So they don’t inherit, which is all to the good...Sex? Ah! what about sex? My sex”, she read out with some solemnity, “is pronounced indisputably and beyond the shadow of doubt (what I was telling you a moment ago, Shel?), female. (166, second ellipsis original)

Though with spare moments of comedy, Orlando’s understanding of the charges against her is an overt, feminist criticism with very serious implications:

The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property, whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts much to the same thing; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one Rosina Pepita, a dancer; and had had by her three sons, which sons now declaring that their father was deceased, claimed that all his property descended to them. Such grave charges as these would, of course, take time and money to dispense of... This it was in a highly ambiguous condition, **uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity**... (107-8, my emphasis)

Sproles writes that *OB* “defines gender as socially constructed category that serves the interests of the patriarchy” (73) – nowhere is that as evident as the lawsuits. Orlando’s change from man to woman reduces her to dead and a “nonentity”. Another central idea in post-structuralism may aid our understanding of what is “going on” in the text.⁴¹ In *Foucault, subjectivity, and Identity* (2002) Robert M. Strozier discusses Michel Foucault’s take on the subject. Foucault argued that there is no pre-discursive subject (Strozier 57). The subject is always constituted by cultural discourses and power relations, such as the judicial system. One is never outside *power*, and there are no “margins” for those who break with the system (Strozier 21, 59). In *OB*, there are no “margins” for the peculiar subjectivity of Orlando outside the power discourse of the law. Only a judicial death followed by a “(re-)birth” of

⁴¹ It should perhaps be noted that Foucault is notoriously hard to label, and personally rejected such the categorization as “post-structuralist”, yet my appropriation of his theories here falls within the post-structuralist paradigm.

Orlando *as woman* can make her a subject and “entity” again, but as a female subject she must suffer the restrictions put upon her by the patriarchy. This death and rebirth arguably takes place as Orlando meets Shelmerdine. Shelmerdine finds Orlando on the ground: ““Madam,” the man cried, leaping to the ground, “you’re hurt!””, upon which Orlando responds: “I’m dead sir” (162). Much like the narrative skips the crucial sex-transformation itself, the life event of the proposal is not rendered in discourse time. The narrator only informs us: “A few minute later, they became engaged” (162). Orlando’s proclamation of her “death”, immediately followed by promise of marriage, remains one of the novel’s great enigmas. Does becoming a woman mean dying for Orlando? Or is it the male Orlando who dies? Minow-Pinkney reads the scene thus:

Her [Orlando’s] temporally lameness is the sign of her fleeing from the patriarchal control, but also prevents her from fully escaping it...she has to be more thoroughly derived of freedom to the point where she can be ‘rescued’ by a man. Breaking her ankle is in a sense the ‘death’ of the woman as an independent being. (136)

It is possible to advance from Minow-Pinkney’s reading and Foucault’s thoughts to a feminist critique of *OB*. Despite that Orlando seems to find a version of marriage that suits her purposes the text nevertheless puts the woman Orlando in the familiar “damsel in distress”-position, in need of rescue by a man. If Orlando does not marry Shelmerdine, Orlando as woman and “non-entity” has no rights to the estate. The marriage is in other words both a solution to the problems put upon Orlando by becoming a female subject, yet also reinforces patriarchal power mechanisms, as Minow-Pinkney observes.

In the “name-calling”-scene already cited, Orlando connects saying “Bonthrop” (Shelmerdine’s second name), with death: “the desire for death would overcome her, and so saying “Bonthrop ”, she said in effect, “I’m dead”... After some hours of death, suddenly a jay shrieked “Shelmerdine”... (169). Shelmerdine is Orlando’s way out of death, but also her death. Orlando as man and Orlando as independent woman need to “die” in order to be given new life and self-worth in marriage. Only after the legal re-birth through the settlement of the lawsuits and marriage can Orlando proclaim to be “a real woman, at last” (165). And who does she thank for this “rare and unexpected delight”? Bonthrop (165). The multiple meanings of “Bonthrop ”, both one of Orlando’s selves and death, again plays between the lines.

However, the text’s reinforcement of patriarchy, by letting a man be who makes Orlando “a real woman”, is perhaps not that. Paradoxically, it is following that they both have unmasked the “real sex” of the other (““You’re a woman, Shel” she cried. “You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried” (164)) that Orlando feels that she has become a woman. As Orlando has

just “exposed” Shelmerdine as a woman, the one Orlando can thank for her final transformation is a man, but also a woman. Orlando’s relationship with Shelmerdine may represent what Gilles Deleuze describes in *Difference and Repetition* (1968): “Repetition belongs to humour and irony; it is by nature transgression or exception, always revealing a singularity opposed to the particulars subsumed under laws” (6). The repetition of the law of patriarchy, where man creates woman, is inscribed with *difference*⁴² and singularity. In a similar manner as parodying the biography “makes its model explicit” and through “hoax” can negotiate that model, Orlando and Shelmerdine may transgress the law of the patriarchy through their peculiar repetition.

It is time we come to the frosting of the cake in the narrative’s play with gender and language, namely the sex-change. We are informed of this in the peculiar sentence: “he was a woman” (87). Let us dwell on what convention tells us is a linguistic impossibility. Besides the gender confusion between subject and subject predicative (he = woman), also the past tense verb serves to confuse. If it had been a form of “become” the sentence would perhaps have made more “sense”. In our day and age at least, we can understand that a man can *become* a woman, or *had become* a woman, but that he *was* a woman is arguably a completely different matter. This sentence shows in all its indeterminacy and “impossibility” that Orlando does not move from one essence to another, from man to woman. Rather Orlando surpasses Herman’s “rule” about narrative as a strategy to come to “terms with time, process and change” (23), by letting what in our minds screams “change” apparently not be subject to time at all – and in so doing even questioning that it *is* a change. There are at least two ways to interpret this “was”. Either, Orlando *was* always a woman. Following that understanding, the biographer’s “confession” reads like the mentioned indication that new evidence has surfaced that necessitates a re-classification. Yet the narrative insists multiple times that the change is a change (the debate is rather as to how essential it is), such as: “Orlando had become a woman” (87) and: “Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when she became a woman”, as the narrator so confidently states (88). In these citations we *do* get forms of *become*, which certainly indicate a *change* from one sex to another. The second possibility is to understand “was” as purely a narrative device. *OB* poses as a historical document that is more “credible” in the past tense, as briefly discussed in chapter 1.1. Yet there may be complexities also in this

⁴² Gordon C. F. Beam has argued that Deleuze’s view on repetition and difference should be distinguished from Derrida’s, as repetition for Deleuze *primarily* functions as “positive and affirmative”. Yet Beam also points out that the kind of repetition Derrida focuses on, which derives its energy from “negation, from the necessary impossibility of supplementing an absence”, is recognized by Deleuze (441). Here, I think the two with advantage can be combined in the way repetition and difference/différance works in *OB*.

manifestation of “pastness”. Paul Ricoeur argued that: “a trace of the past only becomes at trace of the past at the moment when its character of pastness is abolished by the atemporal act of rethinking the event in its internal thought” (146). In other words: It is only when we rethink (or rather, imagine) the past of the sex-change moment as immediate that it is meaningful as “past”. The text’s “was” here thus indicates a kind of “present past”, yet also is atemporal in nature, the change a change (a matter of *becoming*) yet also a non-change as it is possible that Orlando *was* always a woman (or always *also* a woman).

Regardless of how we understand the “was”, the sentence involves a play with the insufficiency of language to express self. Words continue to fail to describe the multiple being of Orlando, and takes to “linguistic impossibilities”, such as: “he was a woman”, in order to make up for it. As we have seen, language, particularly in the form of narrative, necessarily is a creative force for every self, yet this is peculiar for literary characters as there is no outside “reality” that we can compare its subjects to (unless we count Virginia and Vita). In other words: When the text insists on that “he was a woman” we have no other choice then to swallow our “linguistic hiccup” and “confess” that language fails to meaningfully cover (or uncover) Orlando, or that Orlando’s self transgresses what we usually understand as meaningful. The narrator for a moment offers space for this multiplicity of selves:

We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman - there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered **their** future, did nothing whatever to alter **their** identity... His memory – but in future we must, **for convention’s sake**, say ‘her’, and ‘she’... (87, my emphasis)

The narrator maintains that the change in Orlando is a minor one, which, unlike earlier changes, does nothing to alter Orlando’s memory or identity. The crucial language matter here is of course the plural pronouns. The narrator seems to “admit” that the plural form better signifies Orlando, but that convention, and only convention, dictates the use of a singular pronoun. As there now is “no denying” that Orlando is a woman the choice falls upon she/her – the “no denying” is of course as easy to deny as the “no doubt” is to doubt.

1.2.2 Androgyny, Interiority and Exteriority

In probably the first book on Woolf’s feminism, Marder calls *OB* a “hymn to androgyny” (111). Marder’s chapter title “The Androgynous Mind” is in many ways emblematic for the way critics have studied Woolf and her fictions as androgynous. Deriving from Woolf’s own (relatively brief) elaboration of Coleridge’s notion of the androgynous mind in *A Room* (1928), the focus has been on the possibility for an “androgynous sensibility”, as Hargreaves

phrases it (75), within the mind of the author as well as her fiction. In this androgynous mind there should reside a perfect unity between masculine and feminine elements (Marder 108). When Marder and critics like Hargreaves, Poresky and Nancy Topping Bazin, insist on the androgynous *mind*, I am implied to ask: What about the body and “exterior signs”? The gap between looking at Orlando’s androgynous *mind* and more commonplace understandings of androgyny is problematically wide. The first two explanations the *OOED* lists are: “Partly male and partly female in appearance; of indeterminate sex”, and: “Having the physical characteristics of both sexes; hermaphrodite” (“androgynous”). The first definition stresses the importance of appearance, the second physical attributes. Neither correspond with the “androgynous vision”⁴³ critics have tended to focus on with regard Woolf’s writings. Marder readily disfavours the exterior, and places androgyny in an interior paradigm:

Orlando’s dramatic change of sex is only a single manifestation, however, of a fact which has been established much earlier. Orlando is androgynous from the very beginning, as the opening scene of the book hints... But the change has had to do with externals, with accidents, not with essences. “In every other respect Orlando remained precisely as he had been” [my ed. 87]. The outer change is, as it were, a parable of an inner reality which is always present. (114-5)

Marder also believes in the text’s insistence of sameness, and considers Orlando’s androgynous essence something which was always there, an “inner reality” which only exterior aspects have been confusing- He distinguishes also between androgyny in the “ideal sense”, and the only superficial, exterior androgyny played out by Archduchess Harriet. To Marder, Orlando and Shelmerdine are “truly androgynous” because:

the two sexes within them [are] **almost evenly balanced**. It is because of the fineness of this balance that Orlando **must constantly be shifting back and forth**, that is confirming her outer sex to changes in the inner weather. (115, my emphasis)

The equilibrium Marder talks of seems to be a discursive construction. It seems to me clear that the text prior to the sex-change features Orlando as predominantly masculine, and predominantly feminine afterwards. In other words: Orlando is either interpreted as a man, although with some female qualities, or she is interpreted as a woman (who sometimes dresses like a man, but remains a woman “beneath”). If we look at the narrative as one, yes, then there is a relative equilibrium between Orlando as a male and Orlando as female. But when we go into the text and investigate which positions are available to Orlando at one particular moment or another, then there is almost always a question of either or. The most

⁴³ I am alluding to Bazin’s book title: *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* (1973), which, emblematic for the relative negligence of *OB*, hardly mentions the novel.

ample “textual proof” of this is the narrator’s use of female and male pronouns – usually exclusively.⁴⁴ Even if the androgynous mind is somehow capable of encompassing the female and the male, the discourse seldom allows for such equilibrium in a given moment – and that we can see in more than the pronouns. One such moment is when Orlando, after the sex-change, takes on clothes she had worn as a young man. Wearing such an outfit Orlando feels: “it fitted her to perfection and dressed in it she looked the very figure of a noble Lord” (138). If the exterior impression is an indication of who we are, then Orlando at this moment is a man, but the phrasing “she looked the very figure” indicates something else. To *look the figure of* indicates similitude (with man), yet to be similar to something necessarily also points to being different from something. Orlando is not = man here, or = noble lord, but she looks like the “figure” of one. Similarly, walking out with this attire, arm-in-arm with a young woman, “roused all the feelings which become a man. **She** looked, **she** felt, **she** talked like one. Yet, having lately been so lately a woman **herself**, **she** suspected...” (139, my emphasis). I wish to point out two contrary points I take from this citation. First, to look the “figure of” and talk “like” both suggest that she is *really* something *else* - namely a woman. But then comes the latter sentence and forces my contrary point. If Orlando “so lately” has been a woman that would entail that she in that moment *is not*. Again a linguistic “hiccup” stands between us and a clear interpretation – the “*herself*” and the “*she*” that follows of course determines that Orlando is a she – or is it that simple? Orlando’s multiplicity of selves has surpassed conventional signification practice. As we have seen, the plasticity of personal pronouns in general, and in *OB* in particular, hinges on the expectation for fixed signification. More than anything the play back and forth between gender significations in this scene serves to disturb the categories of gender. The emphasis on the exterior in the definitions of androgyny also serve to remind us that if we can free ourselves from Woolf-criticism’s focus on the androgynous *mind*, to be able to *look like* both sexes, certainly does matter. Gender theorists such as Judith Butler and Simon de Beauvoir would also agree that being a man is *not* a matter of being = man, but acting like what we interpret as one (Parker 157-8; Butler, *Gender Trouble* 10-11). I will return to this issue later.

We can also investigate whether Orlando’s androgyny results in a new essentialism, as briefly touched upon in the introductory chapter with reference to Showalter’s critique. The first description of Orlando’s body after the sex change certainly seems essentialist: “No

⁴⁴ In the discussion of language and gender I pointed at the places where they narrator refrains from letting one gender take precedence over the other, but uses “they” or linguistic contrarities such as “he was a woman”.

human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace" (87). Orlando's androgyny here combines two stereotypes. The androgynous body seems no more than a simultaneous existence of two essentialisms. But it is also possible to interpret these stereotypes as part of the text's "hoax". The characteristics used to describe Orlando's feminine and male qualities seem so overtly superficial that they hardly should be taken seriously. Paying attention to the level of parody in such instances⁴⁵ will alter their implication from *enforcing* gender essentials and stereotypes to *revealing* them as discursive stereotypes. (Deleuze's reading of humour as a way of transgressing repetition seems another path to reach the same conclusion).

Orlando is one of Woolf's more "physical" characters. Contrary to for example the ideal, almost body-less beauty of Mrs Ramsey, the specificity of Orlando's attractive legs is emphasized numerous times. Although the text does not say in so many words that Orlando now had female genitalia, an actual, physical transformation of the body is suggested. The final "proof" is that Orlando as a woman is able to give birth to a child, whereas Orlando as man fathered children more or less without knowing about it (something obviously only possible for someone of the male sex). Lisa Rado has an interesting interjection to the primacy of the bodily in *OB*. She puts our attention to the favour of the mystical rather than the physical in the sex-change scene:

What is particularly noticeable about the trance-sex change is its de-emphasis on the physical body and emphasis on mystical veils and supernatural resistance. The spirits... while ultimately banished are permitted to postpone the moment of revelation for a full four pages. Even when "THE TRUTH" is made manifest, all we have is the narrator's avowal of Orlando's "ravishing" nakedness, [my ed. *OB* 87] not a direct description of the body. (164)

There is of course a vast difference in describing the naked body of Orlando and simply proclaiming that he is standing in "complete nakedness" before us, and leaving the rest to stereotypical characteristics such as "strength of a man" and "woman's grace". Marder argues that: "**The truth of androgyny** that releases from the bondage of the intellect plays lightly upon scene after scene, **turning everything into fantasy**" (113-4, my emphasis), but, as Rado shows, this is not unproblematic. I wonder if the "truth of Orlando's androgyny" and available gender performances is restricted to fantasy and mind, rather than having an actual, lasting space in the exterior.

Returning to Fand (SWC3), we recall that she argued that the androgyny in Woolf's fiction worked not only to "contain the masculine, but to deconstruct the very terms of

⁴⁵ For other examples of such overt stereotyping, see pp 18-19 and 121-122.

gender” (Fand 43-44). I think this may be the best way to describe Orlando’s androgyny. Though clearly also subject to some restriction by social and linguistic convention, Orlando’s androgyny is a “flight into Orlando” and the multiplicity of selves s/he can alternate between. Minow-Pinkney also champions an understanding of androgyny in *OB* of this kind. She argues that “Orlando’s disposition does not in fact emphasize the fusion of opposites” (121), but rather that Woolfian androgyny equals “the rejection of sameness” (9). Minow-Pinkney here surpasses the criticism I directed against her argument about androgyny in *TL* with reference to Mrs Ramsay. Orlando’s androgyny does not result in a new essentialism here, but evolves from and results in an alternating heterogeneity, rather than sameness and unity. This flexible, ever-changing Orlando is consistent with the intangible, multiplicity of selves that my narrative/biography-focus foregrounded.

1.2.3 Gender Performing Self or Self Performing Gender

The discussion that follows could probably have been looked at in light of numerous post-structuralist theories. In the discussion about self, gender and language in *OB*, I briefly touched upon Foucault’s notion of the discursive subject. Butler is one of many theorists who took Foucault’s observations to good use, and through her deconstruction of the categories of gender and sex can offer a new turn on the issue (*Gender Trouble*, Butler 36-7).⁴⁶

Butler is crystal clear in that there is no pre-existing self that then performs this or that gender: “gender proves to be performative – that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (33). By the same token as I concluded “the self is always already entered into language and into narrative”, a Butler-perspective might go: “A subject⁴⁷ is always already entered into gender performance”. Indeed, it is definitely possible to look at Orlando and his/her gender as various performances subject to change, without a “Key self” (*OB* 202) behind them all. That the name of Orlando’s essential self is itself deferred to at least two other names, “Captain Self” and True self” (202), seems to strengthen such a reading.

It is high time that the terms *sex* and *gender* are distinguished in this analysis. In the aftermath of Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949/Eng. trans. 1953) gender is often understood as a construct of culture, governing the kinds of behaviours or performances defined as female/male, whereas *sex* is a matter of biology and anatomy (Parker 157-8). Burns and

⁴⁶ For a much more substantial “Butlerian read” of *OB* see Rognstad. All referenes to Butler in this chapter is to *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*.

⁴⁷ Butler definitely would prefer the “poststructuralist lingo” “subject” over “self” (Parker 186).

Sproles both argue that *OB* distinguishes between sex and gender, and that that distinction is crucial (Sproles 87; Burns 351). For Burns, this surfaces as Orlando feels the limitation of her new sex. Up to this point, Orlando has “scarcely given her sex a thought” (97), but when she is forced to adhere to the limitations of her new sex she is effectively *gendered*: “Orlando’s body may be altered by the sex change, but her *gender* change cannot be effected until clothing – that external social trapping – pressures her to conform with social expectations of gendered behavior” (Burns 351). That is to say, in *OB* we can talk about the sex-change, as the particular event in the middle of the novel, where something with Orlando’s biological body changes, and we can talk about multiple moments of gender-changes, where Orlando performs a gender or is *gendered* by social norms.⁴⁸ Also Orlando’s physical body can be considered *gendered*. Butler is one of several gender theorists who problematize the dichotomy between gender and sex, by arguing that also how we see sexual anatomy is gendered by social norms. Sex is “always already gendered” (Parker 158). We can say that the view of Orlando’s naked body involves such an already gendered gaze, neatly “recognizing” male and female gender-characteristics upon the physical body.

Let us return to whether Orlando’s self is prior to gender, or if his/her self is a result of gender performances. Critics who insist on Orlando’s sameness often do so by making gender a secondary issue. This is for example clear in Hermione Lee’s interpretation of the sex-change scene: “[T]he sex-change does not alter Orlando’s character, but her perceptions and her social behaviour” (151). Lee’s “but” is a big one. Perceptions and social behaviour are crucial indicators of gender as well as for identity in general, but Lee considers them all irrelevant to the status of Orlando’s character. This clearly shows the tendency to see the self as something essential and interior (as we saw with Taylor and the *OOED*-definition), and distinguished from “mere exterior”, social practises. If we instead think along-side Butler’s performance-theory, these multiple gender-changes, or gender *performances*, cannot have a pre-existing self, but rather are constitutive for various subjectivities. There is then, so to speak, no Orlando just as Orlando, but Orlando as a “noble lord”, ambassador, florid woman and so on.

Some might interject that my interpretation of Orlando’s multiplicity of selves is nothing more than Butler’s performance theory applied to a literary work, with an exchange of “identity/subject” with “self”. But again I think the difference between speaking about the

⁴⁸ Burns pays particular attention to clothing as a “gendering device”, but we have also seen how the power of the law genders Orlando.

self and speaking about identity or subjectivity is crucial. Though I think Orlando's sameness does not amount to more than the narrative construction, that narrative's insistence that we are dealing with the same self is absolutely crucial. *OB* presents a textual space where the "same Orlando" is constantly articulated, yet also constantly questioned and disarticulated through the text's play. Contrary to the constant production of identities Butler's theory urges, the idea of the whole, coherent and transparent self is always the shaping force for *OB* – despite that this *idea* may be difficult to unite with Orlando – indeed, with any self.

I would like to return to the issue of clothing, and how it relates to the interior versus exterior sense of self and gender. Minow-Pinkney is in many ways precise when she connects Orlando's gender identities to what s/he wears. Clothing often figures as the only signifier differentiating between gender-identities. The narrator first holds that Orlando remained the same as he had always been after the sex-change, but he later corrects this impression:

...what was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true... The change if clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they may seem... They change our view of the world and the world's view of us... Thus, there is more support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them... (120)

Sandra M. Gilbert has taken the final sentence of this citation very much upon its word, and considered clothing constitutive for identity in *OB*. From the citation above Gilbert concludes that: "For Woolf, we are what we wear" (391). That certainly seems the case in the above-cited scene. But Gilbert may be missing out on that clothing also features as contrary to gender-subjectivity in *OB*. If we return to the first page, Orlando is "he" *despite* that the clothing may cause confusion in the matter. One might interject that the fashion still signifies male performance within that specific era, and that the narrator only makes the comments so as to make it clear for the ignorant reader (because there is significant distance between the world of the "we" and the governing fashion of Orlando's era). Still, it is clear that Orlando's male identity here is seen as contrary to what his clothing *may* signify, as is also the case with the skater. Gilbert's reasoning may also be a result of reading the particular citation from *OB* as representative for Woolf and her fictions stands in general (as "For Woolf..." indicates). To me, it is not possible to say "for Woolf" "self" or "gender" equals this or that. This is so not only because of the paradigm of the death of the author; even if we could equal what *OB* means with what Woolf meant we would be none the wiser because *OB* does not offer such once and for all explanations – that is, it does at all the time, but never without coming with a contrary one. Just as we have seen that the novel reveals its hoax and illusions exactly through

claiming to be true, the text continuously denies the notions of gender and self it sets up. In one moment, Orlando is “no doubt” (and we all know what that means) a “he” *despite* his clothing, the next it is the clothing that *wears her* and creates the change from one gender to the other; yet towards the end, Shelmerdine reveals that Orlando is a man - which again leads to that Orlando becomes “a real woman, at last” (165). It is tempting then to see both sex and gender features as only exterior changes, subject to norms and constant alteration, whereas Orlando’s self or his/her “Orlondoness” is something “beneath” all this. A consequence of believing in the text’s insistence of Orlando’s sameness seems to be that Orlando’s body, gender and sex are all esteemed as relatively unimportant and certainly secondary to what in contrast is valued as Orlando’s consistent self. But the problem remains that Orlando’s “sameness” is hard to recognize. And of course *OB* also manages to posit sex within the interiority of the self, in contrast to the exterior signification of clothing:

The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. **It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and a woman’s sex.** And perhaps in this she was only expressing rather more openly than usual – openness indeed was the soul of her nature – something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed. For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. (121)

Here, sex and clothing is a matter of choice which only work to emphasize something that is always already “beneath”. In the next sentences, the narrator explains that the exterior of clothing is not always the performance of the inner experienced, but may even be the opposite: “In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above” (121). Contrary to Gilbert’s claim, the performance indicated in clothing here features as the opposite of “what we are”.

I have to include one more citation where the inter-relationship between clothing, gender and self is significant:

If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes... Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same. (120-1)

The narrator definitely defines the self as something prior to gender here, and again Orlando’s changes are claimed to be only exterior. But regardless if we accept that the difference of the two Orlandos only is a matter of clothing, the hoax of parody is at work again. The pictures do not “really” feature “one and the same person”. The one illustrative of “Orlando as

woman” is of Vita, whereas “Orlando as ambassador” is one of the reproduced paintings from the Knole, featuring one Lionel Sackville (1688-1765) (Clarke and Wilkinson; Koppen 51). The narrator is trying to insist on the sameness of Orlando, interiorly unaffected by signification of gender, but even this sameness is part of the text’s hoax.

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OB suggests contrary philosophies about self and gender and which expresses which, in one moment that the sexes are fundamentally different; in the next that it is a matter of a continuum in an every vacillating mind. The problems discussed in chapter 1.1 where the imperatives of biography attempt to render an essential, consistent self, is also at work in the matter of gender. I think *OB* on one level always works against fixing a self to a single self, be it male or female, or even as the androgynous unity of opposites. If we are to describe Orlando’s self as androgynous, our notion of androgyny must suggest constant alteration, as advocated by Fand and Minow-Pinkney, rather than a stable essence where the two sexes are “evenly balanced”, as Marder argues. *OB* always returns to the endlessly deferred, multiplicity of selves that Orlando can “call upon”, yet does not refrain from the mission to narrate and signify “Orlando”.

It turns out to be problematic to reply to the question whether *OB* poses gender as prior or secondary to self, as my two vantage-points demonstrate that both “self” and “gender” are revealed as constructions in *OB*. *OB* always works to disrupt essences such as self and gender, but nevertheless is, as Foucault reminds us, not “outside” such discourses. I agree with Sproles that: “Through its examination of sexuality, gender, and the representation of the subject, Orlando questions the very nature of subjectivity” (89). The play of parody and difference/différance work to let the seams of gender- and subjectivity construction show, subverting and transgressing them rather than confirming essentialisms. Despite the attempts to “single out” Orlando, exercised by conventions of gender, genre and language, I think Orlando is more never the same than remaining the same. Paradoxically, that may be the closest we get Orlando’s essence.

2 “I’ll give it you”: Septimus and the Self as Making Sense

“Septimus is not just “shell-shocked” but insane, separated from sociality, relationships and language” (Bonikowski 133). Bonikowski’s statement about *MD*’s Septimus Warren Smith is dramatic, but not unique. Septimus has often been considered “mad” and his language determined pure nonsensical (in its most literal meaning). In the introductory chapter, I touched upon “the fundamental role language plays in constructing our sense of self”, and chapter 1.1 further enhanced the connections between the self and narrative structures. What are then the consequences for the understanding of Septimus’ self if we label him separated from language as Bonikowski does? In order to shed light on that question, I will apply some basic principles in psychoanalytic literary criticism in the tradition after Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, where the connection between language, self and subjectivity is vital.

Lacan and Kristeva connect subject formation with participating in structures from which we produce meaning. Language is a process “inherent to subjectivity” and the subject is “a being who means” (Keltner 23) in the Lacanian-Kristevian paradigm. I stated in the introductory chapter that I was reluctant to use “subject” with regard Orlando, Septimus and Mrs. Ramsay because subjectivity is not what is at stake in Woolf’s novels. But if we subscribe to Lacan’s and Kristeva’s take on the subject, Bonikowski’s statement shows that substantial voices in *MD*-reception consider Septimus’ *subjectivity* disarticulated – or not articulated at all. This makes it necessary to discuss Septimus’ subjectivity. Exactly because I wish to make it clear that Septimus is a subject of language, I will discuss Septimus’ articulation and disarticulation of both his subjectivity and his self. Applying the Lacanian-Kristevian connection between producing meaning and subject formation, I will argue that Septimus’ peculiar speech articulates his subjectivity, allows him to construct a sense of self, and expands on, rather than is outside the language structures of the novel. I will demonstrate that the relative silence of the narrator facilitates Septimus’ peculiar signification practise, whereas the implied comparison with Clarissa poses both the threat of disarticulation and the possibility for preservation of Septimus’ subjectivity. Lastly, I will explore the possibility that Septimus’ final “speech” involves an articulation of his self through alienation from ideas projected onto him.

2.1 Subject Formation and Language (Lacan and Kristeva)

Advancing from Freud's tripartite model of the psyche, Lacan presented three dimensions that all continuously effect psychological development: *the real*, *the imaginary* and *the symbolic*. The *real* is notoriously difficult to define because it is a reality beyond language; an "impossibility", as Lacan repeatedly called it, which exists *vis-à-vis* reality (Sarup 26; Johnston, "Jacques Lacan"). It can only be studied in its effects on the other two dimensions (Leitch et.al. 1159; Sarup 26). The *imaginary* is also a pre-linguistic order, where there is no distinction between subject and the m/other. This order encompasses what one *imagines* oneself and others to be. Despite the illusory nature of these notions, they are necessary as the foundation for our ability to form core analytical ideas - including the construction of self (Johnston, "Jacques Lacan"). The *mirror stage*⁴⁹ is an intervening stage between the imaginary and the *symbolic* order ("Lacanian literary criticism"). Lacan's description of the mirror phase shows his distinction between self and subject:

This jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child at the *infans* stage... would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject (Lacan 2).

Lacan shows that although we cannot think of language and subject dependent of one another, we can think of an *image* or construction of the self⁵⁰ as something that once preceded language and therefore also the subject. Lacan does not offer an idea of the self which is autonomous and conscious of itself. The self is forever based on the misrecognition of the image in the mirror as = oneself (Jackson 27; Lacan 2). Nevertheless, this self, or *sense of self* is a necessary fiction⁵¹ for the subject (Chiesa 13; Lacan 2-3) - just like in the "as if" understanding I have appropriated from Fand.⁵²

The *symbolic* is the structure of language, which the subject becomes a function of (Lacan 2-3). The symbolic always involve *self-differentiation*, separating oneself from the *Ideal-I* and from the Other (Jackson 27). The question as to if Septimus is able to differentiate himself from his surroundings will henceforth be vital. Lacan stresses that the production of meaning is conditioned by the already "spoken" language order the subject becomes a function of. "The "first word" of the subject is always a response", as Rudolf Bernet phrases it

⁴⁹ Lacan appropriates the mirror image from Hegel, and also uses it metaphorically (Sarup 12).

⁵⁰ Lacan usually prefers the term *ego*, but "self" is often applied by Lacan-critics and occasionally also by Lacan himself (see e.g. Bernet; Lacan 2).

⁵¹ Lacan writes that the mirror phase "situates the agency of the ego, before its social determination, in a *fictional direction*" (Lacan 2-3, my emphasis).

⁵² "We can only behave, *as if* our constructs had ontological or epistemological truth value, *as if* a signifier like the "self" referred to a reality or set of experiences to be known" (Fand 21).

(176). In this Lacanian context, we can see that Bonikowski's statement about Septimus' exclusion from both social relationships and language would be doubly crushing for Septimus' ability to articulate his subjectivity and construct a sense of self.

In her appropriation of Lacan's psychoanalytic theory, Kristeva focuses on the dualism between the *pre-linguistic* self and the symbolic subject. Language is a signifying process which always involves two modalities, the *semiotic* and the *symbolic* (Minow-Pinkney 17). Kristeva's symbolic modality more or less corresponds with Lacan's symbolic order, whereas the semiotic contains features both of Lacan's the real and the imaginary (Keltner 25). The semiotic drive articulates what Kristeva calls the *chora*, and is distinguishable in child babble, laughter, cry and rhythmic patterns (Minow-Pinkney 18). The place of the chora is prior to the severing from M/other into a construction of self and the subject of language. Similar to Lacan's the real, Kristeva describes the chora as a "nonexpressive totality" that precedes and conditions the subject (Kristeva 25). The chora nevertheless is constituted by the semiotic (unlike Lacan's the real which is *not* constituted by the imaginary) (Keltner 29).

As with Lacan's three orders, the dialectic between the semiotic and symbolic is always present in the subject, and it is this tension which is "productive of meaning and the subject's position within language" (Keltner 23). Kristeva argued for the primacy of the semiotic in both madness and poetic language:

The symbolic is an order superimposed on the semiotic. The symbolic control of the various semiotic processes is, however, tenuous and liable to break down or lapse... The semiotic overflows its boundaries in those privileged 'moments' Kristeva specifies in her triad of subversive forces: madness, holiness and poetry. (Sarup 124)

Septimus has been considered a kind of champion for the semiotic (see: Minow-Pinkney, Wang and Abel), and as such subversive of the "symbolic control". His language definitely shows affinities with such "privileged moments"; insane, prophetic and poetic. But I think Septimus' language, to a far greater extent, is what Kristeva calls *thetic*. The *thetic* is a concept Kristeva adapts from Husserlian phenomenology. Kristeva posits *the thetic phase* in the boundary between the semiotic and the symbolic – unlike Husserl, who places the "I" as the origin of meaning (Keltner 25-27). "All enunciation, whether of a word or of a sentence, is thetic", writes Kristeva (43). Speech "requires identification; in other words, the subject must separate from and through his image, from and through his objects" (Kristeva 43) (This is another aspect where Kristeva and Lacan are in great agreement). The symbolic modality is always thetic, but it is not symbolic or meaningful in itself, but rather becomes meaningful as a structure (Leitch et.al. 2068). When a word has become a word, or a sentence a sentence, it

is always a thetic expression taking part in the symbolic modality. The subject who enunciates such utterances is a *thetic* “I”/*thetic subject*, and necessarily is always posited in the symbolic modality, which again always involves a structure from which we produce meaning. This means that in a Kristevian paradigm, it is essential whether or not Septimus stays within a *meaning-oriented*⁵³ discourse; if he “makes sense”.

2.2 My Position in Relevant Debates in *MD*-Criticism

There are particularly three “modes” of looking at *MD* and Septimus that set the tone for my argument.

Regardless of vantage-point, *MD*-criticism nearly always discusses the ways in which Woolf’s narrative technique foregrounds the various characters’ “consciousnesses”.⁵⁴ One of the central disputes in SWC2 is whether Woolf’s “polyphonic focalization” deconstructs the idea of the transcendental self that dominates Western thought after Descartes and Kant, or if unity and wholeness is preserved through the connections between the characters (see e.g. Wang 177; Bloom 2-3). It is my stance that the narration of *MD* nearly always works to distinguish and preserve subjectivities, and therefore neither drives the characters towards “nothingness” (Hillis Miller) nor “unity/wholeness” (Naremore and Poresky). This has vital impact on the articulation of Septimus’ self and subjectivity.

Septimus is doubtlessly one of Woolf’s most enigmatic characters, and his “madness” has resulted in numerous interpretations (and diagnoses). I find Septimus’ place in Woolf-criticism to be shaped by being compared with Clarissa on the one hand (e.g. Poresky),⁵⁵ and being seen as Woolf’s alter ego (e.g. Henke and Wang) on the other; sometimes this happens at the cost of looking at him as a literary self in his own right. I find that the biographical readings sometimes offer perspectives on Septimus which are not clearly present in the text,⁵⁶ and both comparisons incline critics to paint Septimus as a darker and more deconstructive character than I find him to be. Through a closer look at Septimus and the narrative framing of him, I hope to offer balance to this impression.

There have been made substantial psychoanalytic readings of *MD* in general and of Septimus in particular. As such, particularly Ban Wang’s article “The “I” On the Run: Crisis

⁵³ I say “meaning-oriented” because language is not meaningful in itself in Kristeva’s paradigm.

⁵⁴ Critics often use “consciousness” instead of “self” (see. e.g. Bloom), but the uneasiness with saying “self” is not really resolved as the use of “consciousness” readily invokes the question: *Who* is conscious?

⁵⁵ Poresky argues that: “Septimus represents the part of Clarissa’s psychological makeup that has been devastated by the masculine juggernaut of war” (101).

⁵⁶ However, it should be noted that I limit the scope of Septimus’ text to *MD*, and omit his appearance in “The Prime Minister”.

of Identity in *Mrs. Dalloway*” (1992) and Minow-Pinkney’s *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* are important conversation partners.⁵⁷ Wang provides me with a framework to look at the relation between selves and language in a more socio-political context. His opposition between the “semiotic drive”, Septimus, and the symbolic order, personified in Septimus’ doctors, again places Septimus outside meaningful language. I will argue that Septimus is *expanding* the symbolic, rather than solely engaging in semiotic practices.

Advancing from the effect of the narration, Minow-Pinkney argues that: “Woolf’s texts disperse the transcendental unified subject that underpins male rationality and narrative, and open new possibilities for subjective activity” (60). But Minow-Pinkney herself offers very little space for these new types of “subjective activity” – at least what Septimus is concerned. She is also persistent in that: “Whenever we try to pinpoint the locus of the subject, we get lost in a discursive mist” (58). I think it often unproblematic to “pinpoint the locus of the subject” in *MD*. I think the distance between the various selves relatively vast, whereas that between the narrator and the characters is much harder to detect. I will argue that this conditions the survival of the individual self, although one that is not autonomous and authorial, but always conditioned by its function in language.

Little’s *The Experimental Self* (SWC3) “maps” several psychoanalytic readings of Woolf (including Minow-Pinkney’s book). Though primarily focused on *Jacob’s Room* and *The Waves*, Little’s viewpoint is an important basis for my reading. Particularly I take with me Little’s claim that Woolf’s fictions work to *transform* the symbolic, rather than breaking it down (12, 26-7). I have appropriated this to my argument that Septimus *expands* the symbolic. We can sense a dispute between Little and Minow-Pinkney which touches upon a central premise in SWC1 that SWC3 offers a “solution suggestion” to. Lacan’s and Kristeva’s theories are strongly “gendered”, as Minow-Pinkney’s reading of Woolf’s texts as “underpin[ing] male rationality and narrative” attests. Readings focused on the deconstruction of the transcendental self often involve advocacy for a new female subjectivity (as seen in SWC1). I will not discuss Septimus’ as a “victim of patriarchy” (Minow-Pinkney 77), nor *MD*’s narration as a feminization of the subject. Little effectively explains why such reasoning is problematic: “In any case, the totalizing paradigm that reads and writes the feminine as semiotic and dialogic, while the masculine is assigned the monologic and the

⁵⁷ The observant reader may miss the voice of Elisabeth Abel and her *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (1993), but as Abel primarily deals with *MD* as Clarissa’s development story, and takes here theoretical starting-point from Freud and Melanie Klein, her reading was less relevant for my scope here. The same can be said for my outlook on *TL*. Abel is primarily interested in looking at Lily’s painting as “posing a Kleinian challenge to Cam’s and James’ “Oedipal fictions” (Abel 47), whereas I focus on Mrs Ramsay and Lily.

symbolic is not flexible enough for the experimental subjects/selves in the work of Woolf” (17). If anything, the connection between Septimus and Clarissa implies that female and male subjectivity “mingle discourses” and can be as much of a problem in Woolf’s fiction, and I have already discussed in detail how *OB* displaces notions of the self as essentially gendered.

Before venturing into the discussion itself I would like to briefly address the ethical aspect of reading Septimus in such a “constructive” manner. I wish to make clear that it is not my intent to romanticise mental disorders, nor, for that matter, to offer Septimus a clean bill of health. If Septimus were a real person, I would never make this argument, but that is exactly the point. Instead I investigate him as a subject that is *in and of language*.

2.3 Expanding the Symbolic

Modifying her Kristevian reading of Woolf’s novel, Minow-Pinkney argues that Woolf “never destroys the thetic ‘I’ completely, which after all is impossible if one wants to remain within language (and sane)” (59). But as Bonikowski and Wang, Minow-Pinkney seems to disregard the possibility that Septimus takes part in the symbolic, thetic dimension (and thereby articulates himself as a thetic I). In Minow-Pinkney’s argument, Septimus’ “collapse into psychosis” releases him from the restriction of the patriarchal, symbolic order, to a state where he “enjoys colour, rhythms, sounds with extreme intensity as the thetic subject is dissolved into the semiotic *chora*” (63, 78-9). Septimus’ language definitely is peculiar, but is it entirely semiotic? And his subjectivity in consequence completely “dissolved”? Septimus’ language often seems out of recognizable signification practice, “non-responsive”, to paraphrase Bernet, but arguably is not:

He waited. He listened. A sparrow perched on the railing opposite **chirped Septimus, Septimus**, four or five times over and went on, drawing notes out, to sing freshly and piercingly **in Greek words** how there is no crime and, joined by another sparrow, they sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words.^[24] from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death. (26, my emphasis)

The tendency to regard Septimus outside language makes stating the obvious necessary: The distance from semiotic “babble” to Septimus’ focalized discourse is enormous. Although what he is thinking of certainly offers a challenge in terms of *what* it means, his discourse is far from non-thetic as Minow-Pinkney argues. Not only can we recognize traditional syntax, subject and predicate and so on (unmistakable signs of the symbolic), but a closer look at the novel’s language will reveal that what seems rid of context, actually has precedence other places in the text. For example, it may be significant that Septimus hears the birds chirp his

name. Off-hand this seems completely absurd, but if we look closely at the text, there is some “sense” in it. Throughout the novel, many of the selves are compared with birds, including all the major characters (Clarissa, Septimus and Peter).⁵⁸ Through his understanding of the bird’s sounds, Septimus is taking part in a meaningful discourse within the novel’s poetics, where birds can “call on” selves.

Several critics have addressed that Septimus specifically hears the birds chirp in Greek (Lee 96; Briggs 147).⁵⁹ Bonikowski makes an extensive, partially biographical read of the “Greek-passage”, diverging from Woolf’s essay “On not Knowing Greek” (Bonikowski 138-146). Bonikowski points out that Woolf “draws from a long tradition of associating Greek with both madness and meaninglessness (as in the phrase “Greek to me”)", as well as that writing “Greek in English” for Woolf signified a distinct, poetic practise (Bonikowski 140). Although I recognise the poetic intensity, the gap is very wide between Septimus’ sentiments and Woolf’s sentiment that writing “Greek in English” means risking “meaninglessness and death” (Bonikowski 144). Woolf, unlike her more educated brother, regretfully did not speak Greek (Bonikowski 144); but for Septimus the birds’ “Greek” *is* intelligible – they even chirp his name. As often is the case, Septimus finds himself the receiver of vital “messages”, and his interpretation of the bird’s “speech” drives towards the very opposite of meaninglessness and death; the birds sing to him “from trees in the meadow of life”, that “there is no death”. As Septimus identifies closely with Shakespeare, it might also be poignant that the origin of “Greek to me” is from Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* (Armstrong 314, entry 7), and hence that Septimus can be considered to appropriate Shakespeare’s discourse. One can of course interject that it is close to impossible not to cite Shakespeare when speaking English, but that only supports my point that, rather than that Septimus rejects “the structures of language”, as Bonikowski claims (159), Septimus takes something from the semiotic realm and moulds it into the already spoken symbolic structure of English. Septimus’ name can itself be considered a symbol of how his subjectivity mingles conventional and familiar structures (“Smith”) with the unconventional and peculiar (“Septimus”).⁶⁰

⁵⁸Some examples: Clarissa imagines her “ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird’s” (11). She compares her deceased aunt with a bird (178). Septimus reminds Lucrezia of a “young hawk” (160) or “crow” (163). Septimus in turn “could feel her mind, like a bird” (161). Peter’s eyes are described as “a little hawk-like” (179). (Richter and Wang also point out the affinities with the main characters and bird metaphors, but for different purposes).

⁵⁹ Showalter’s annotations point out that Woolf imagined she heard birds singing in Greek upon her first suicide attempt (*ad* 24). Such information, particularly when it is not paired with a close-reading of the text at hand, puts Septimus in a problematically sinister light.

⁶⁰ Poresky makes a unitist-reading of Septimus’ name: “Woolf even names Septimus, meaning seventh, to connote the power of vision he possesses and transforms to Clarissa.... several mythical rituals use the number seven to indicate wholeness” (109).

However, Septimus sometimes moves in the opposite direction – that is, he “translates” symbolic practices into more semiotic ones. This is the case in his interpretation of the aeroplane’s spelling. Whereas the other characters obsess about identifying the signs with familiar letters, Septimus does the opposite: “So, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty” (23). Rather than focusing on what particular letters the aeroplane is spelling, Septimus suggests a meaning that lies beyond words and ordinary signification practise – another “language” Septimus sees in “beauty”. I partially agree with Bonikowski that Septimus communicates in “another sense” (159). It is almost like Septimus reaches out for what Lacan would call the real, and in so doing he necessarily risks disarticulating his self. This is so, because in the symbolic order, there is always a distance between language, the “Thing” and the self, whereas “Septimus’ vision of beauty and truth seeks to regain the lost object” (Bonikowski 156-7).⁶¹ This urge, explains Bonikowski, equals a “drive toward death” (157). In this line of argument, Septimus’ suicide becomes the inevitable outcome of his longing for meaning beyond words and to reverse the separation between his self and the other, but I read his death very differently, as I shall return to.

Wang sets up Sir William and Septimus (paired with Woolf) as representatives for the tension between the symbolic system, “the reign of norms and the normal”, and the semiotic drive that disturbs it (185). Wang considers Woolf and Septimus “fellow travellers in a constant flight from the well-marked territories of language, convention, normality, and the symbolic order” (188) The phrasing that Septimus is in constant “flight” from the symbolic order suggests that Septimus does not rebel out of his own will or conviction, but because he is forced to, as he is “unable to stay in the place of identity prescribed by social convention”, according to Wang (185). Septimus obviously does not fit into Sir William’s idea of normality, but I am not sure that Bradshaw’s normality is privileged in the novel (more on that later), and I find Septimus little affected by such norms. Rather, as argued in the previous paragraph, he seems to desire something beyond relative truths:

[H]e, Septimus, was alone, called forth in advance of the mass of men to hear **the truth**, to learn **the meaning**, which now at least, after all the toils of civilization – Greeks, Romans, Shakespeare,⁶² Darwin, and now himself – was to be given to... ‘**To whom?**’ he asked aloud, ‘**To the Prime Minister,**’ **the voices which rustled above his head replied.** The supreme secret must be told to the Cabinet; **first, that trees are alive;** next, there is no crime; next, love,

⁶¹ Lacan expands on the concept of *the Thing* in both Kant and Freud. For Lacan, it is the forever lost *Real Other* (i.e. the mother), who situates the “fixed vanishing point” for desire (Johnston, “Jacques Lacan”).

⁶² Note what position the Greeks and Shakespeare occupy here.

universal love, he muttered, gasping, trembling, painfully drawing out these profound truths which needed, so deep were they, so difficult, and immense effort to speak out, but the world was entirely changed by them for ever. (74, my emphasis)

Septimus is on a quest, not for the meaning of this or that, but *the meaning*, which he importantly also wishes to communicate. Despite his solitude, Septimus is clearly “responsive” to the other characters and their experiences. We realize that Septimus probably mistakes the speculations about who sits in the mysterious car as an answer to his “to whom?”. Still, as with the bird’s song, what on one hand is indisputable evidence that he has lost his mind, nevertheless also draws Septimus closer to the other characters. The prime minister has jumped into the minds of the various characters through associative leaps following the episode with the mysterious car – this is also the case for Septimus. Thus, Septimus assumes a border position within the symbolic order of the narrative, contributing in his peculiar manner to the dominant discourse shaping the various “consciousnesses”. Bonikowski argues that Septimus’ “rejection of social relationships and the structures of language puts him in touch with an “insane truth” [Woolf’s phrasing] that may not be communicated directly but is communicated in another sense” (159). Again, I think it imprecise to say that Septimus is outside the structures of language as Septimus’ “sense making” clearly is *thetic*, but I agree that his border position gives him both the access to “insane truths”, and hinders him from communicating them in a way that other people can understand. Rather than that Septimus is attempting to escape the symbolic order, I would say that he expands the symbolic and its available subject positions. Septimus’ language is not non-*thetic* – it is often not even unconventional in term of structure. From his border position, Septimus is engaging in an alternative *thetic* practise which, as I will argue in the next section, often is *not* “corrected” by the narrator. Responding to Robertson’s call for a “more nuanced approach to character”, I would say that despite character-Septimus being disturbed or “mad”, the self-and-subject-Septimus “makes sense” within the novel’s signification practise.

2.4 “Mad” – Says Who? : The Impact of the “Silent” Narrator

Aided by Woolf’s intention to construct her novel around the oppositional connection between Clarissa and Septimus,⁶³ many critics presuppose that *MD* presents Septimus as insane. But I am not sure that the narrative deconstructs Septimus and his perspective on the

⁶³ “Suppose it to be connected in this way: Sanity and insanity” (qtd. in Showalter, “Introduction” xxvii).

world. I will briefly present Minow-Pinkney's, Fand's and lastly Wang's readings of the narration, and juxtapose their interpretations with my view.

In his iconic reading of *TL* in *Mimesis* (1946), Erich Auerbach asked: "Who is speaking in this paragraph?" (531). Minow-Pinkney extends this to be indicative of the narration in *MD*, where she finds it impossible to "pinpoint the locus of the subject" (58). She finds *MD*'s aeroplane-scene emblematic for how Woolf: "refuses an 'authoritarian' relation to her own novel. Rejecting the thetic self of keys and master-codes" (59).

Fand (SWC3) makes the claim that the narrator in *MD* is "egoless", and able to observe the character's minds "directly" (50). Fand does not explain what she means by "egoless", but, advancing from her dialogic approach, seems to suggest that the narrator is a neutral or objective presence, outside subjectivity, but which can "jump in" and assume any of the novel's voices. In a way, Fand is indisputably right. Strictly speaking, we are dealing with an omniscient, extradiegetic (in Genette's terminology) narrator in *MD*, who can observe and enter into the diverse minds of the multiple selves in the narrative. But Fand's idea of the egoless narrator implies that the text also offers the narrator in a "neutral habitat", outside or prior to focalization. Rather I think *MD* presents us with a *narrator-character-continuum*, where we seldom, if ever, get the complete end of the narrator's side of the scale. As *MD* contains direct discourse, we do get the character-end of the scale.

Contrary to Fand's implied belief in an egoless presence, and Minow-Pinkney's experience of a "discursive mist" (58), I think there always is a personal subjectivity "lurking" in *MD*, more or less always the possibility that this is the perspective of this or that character, whereas the narrator is conspicuously "silent". I think it is exactly this rejection of an objective or "authoritative" perspective on the characters and their surroundings which facilitates the preservation of distinct selves and subjectivities – even the peculiar one Septimus makes for. Minow-Pinkney's argument actually attests for the heterogeneity of the perspectives, as she describes the phrase patterns Woolf uses to create "hinges" between the different subjectivities (57). Although Woolf's use of traditional indication of direct discourse is spare, the text offers a rich supply of such "hinges". Just the fact that we can identify these suggests exactly that there *are* boundaries between the different subjectivities. The most obvious one being that shifts in focalization are usually indicted by a new paragraph:

For he was gone, **she thought** – gone, as he threatened, to kill himself... But no; **there he was**; still sitting alone on the seat, in his shabby overcoat, his legs crossed, staring, talking aloud.

Men must not cut down **trees**. There is a God. (26, my emphasis)

As I usually find the case, Auerbach's question can be confidently answered here. Whereas the boundaries between the subjectivities of the different characters are pretty clear, we can never be sure of getting *only* the voice of a neutral or "egoless" narrator. There admittedly are glimpses where the narrator appears to be in-between focalizations,⁶⁴ but these are always so brief that they attest for the "shifty nature" of language more than an egoless, authoritative presence. The changing subjectivities the narrator "speak for" work in the way described by Schwab as the only way we can imagine language, namely to always evolve from one subject-position (6), but I agree with Minow-Pinkney that this position does not equal a stable, authorial one, possessing the "master codes" of the self and its reality. (Perhaps that is why Woolf primarily narrated in the third person?) but neither is it "dissolved into the semiotic chora" (Minow Pinkney 79). Instead the "locus of the subject" may shift in an instant, from that of a worried wife, to her husband. Rather than "dissolve" Septimus' subjectivity, the narration in the paragraph cited above insists on Septimus' presence: "there he was". This is a phrasing which we will see several examples of both in *MD* and *TL*, and which I find emblematic for how Woolf's fictions insist on the primacy of articulating selves.

These observations about the narrative situation are key to how I interpret Septimus and his "madness". The use of free indirect discourse offers both a challenge to the reader and a life line for Septimus. When for example Septimus exclaims: "It was horrible, terrible to see a dog become a man!" (74) or reflects "that music should be visible was a discovery" (75), the reader must stumble on without an explanation. Septimus' reality becomes the text's reality, and this gives space to the preservation of Septimus' alternative "sense-making". Thus, the narration does not place Septimus outside language or the symbolic world of the novel, but lets him add to its thetic practise as a thetic subject. Even in paragraphs where the narrator initially appears to be "objective", the focalization rapidly zooms in on Septimus, and lets his perspective equal the novel's:⁶⁵

Here he opened Shakespeare once more. That boy's business of the intoxication of language – *Antony and Cleopatra* – had shrivelled utterly. How Shakespeare loathed humanity – the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly! This was now **revealed** to Septimus; the message hidden in the **beauty** of the words. (97, my emphasis)

⁶⁴ As for example during the aeroplane-scene, where the narrator appears to objectively observe: "for thirty seconds all heads were inclined in the same way – to the window. Choosing a pair of gloves – should they be to the elbow or above it, lemon or pale grey? – ladies stopped; when the sentence was finished something had happened (19)". Indeed, during the sentence "something ha[s] happened" - we have jumped inside the head of glove-picking mind.

⁶⁵ Such intense focalization of course goes for the other characters as well, but I think the result is more striking in terms of Septimus because of his peculiar signification practice.

The first sentence is fairly “objective”. The first emphasized word truly *reveals* the position of the narrator – namely at one with Septimus. As with the Septimus-passages already discussed, this “message” also follows a peculiar logic, and again we are not offered an alternative explanation. Are the mouth and the belly sordid? Did Shakespeare loath humanity? This makes sense to Septimus, and therefore, at this point, also to the narrative.

Minow-Pinkney makes an important interjection in clarifying the only *relative* autonomy of Septimus’ semiotic impulse. She demonstrates this through discussing the narration’s indication of natural explanations for Septimus’ ravings. We understand from hints in the texts that Septimus’ prophetic-like epiphanies *are* symptomatic of some kind of post-traumatic-stress-disorder (Minow-Pinkney 63-4). A hint of such a “naturalization” of the passage cited above appears nine pages later where the narrator describes Septimus as “muttering messages about beauty” (106), and thus implies that his revelations are nonsense. Though the distance expressed in phrasing such as “muttering” doubtlessly are effective in disarticulating Septimus and his “sense”, they are conspicuous by their absence for the major parts of the text. One often needs to read very carefully, connecting passages several pages apart, in order to spot such implications of narrative distance.

If we return to the naturalization implied in the references to the war, it is clear that Septimus is marked by his war-past, but I consider the relative silence of the war *as* poignant – especially in a novel where the unravelling of the past plays such a key role. There is an enormous gap between Septimus’ affectedness and the almost completely unaffected rest of the novel’s “population” – this gap makes the silence of the war “noisier” than the hints of its existence. Unlike our image of the young Clarissa kissing Sally on the terrace, we never get to see Septimus as a soldier, not to mention who he was *before* the war.⁶⁶ Therefore, when Lucrezia remarks: “He had become himself again” (158) – the reader is unlikely to experience the same recognition. The present image of Septimus, who in a “lucid moment” is laughing and making private jokes with his wife while making a hat,⁶⁷ is not the Septimus we know, but a stranger to the reader. My point is that the “insane” Septimus is the only Septimus *significantly* present in the text. There is not a substantial, contradictory version of him exposed in his past, nor do we have sufficient “intel” from the narrator that can inform us that

⁶⁶ On page 95, fragments from Septimus’ past are stocked together in a single paragraph, along with the perplexing information that Septimus: “could not feel”. I am not suggesting we know everything about Clarissa either, but that we learn enough to piece together her journey from a young woman at Burton to the respected Mrs. Dalloway of society-London.

⁶⁷ It seems that Lucrezia connects making hats with living a comfortable, “normal” life. When she for example thinks about the difficulties in living her life with Septimus she reflects: “she had had a beautiful home, and there her sister lived still, **making hats**. Why should *she* suffer?” (71, my boldface).

Septimus has changed from being himself, to a distorted version who is “not himself”, as Lucrezia feels (pp. 25 and 51). Again, on plot-level (which hardly makes for much of a level at all in *MD*), character-Septimus is a disturbed war-veteran, but more often than not Septimus is distinguished and articulated as a thetic subject.

Contrary to the lack of distance to Septimus, the novel clearly satirizes Bradshaw’s and Holmes’ treatment of Septimus. The narrator observes that: “Sir William ordered; Sir William with his thirty years’ experience of these kinds of cases, and his infallible instinct, this is madness, this sense; in fact **his** sense of proportion” (109, my emphasis).⁶⁸ The little word “his” implies that also Bradshaw’s sense of proportion is exactly *Bradshaw’s* sense, subjective and relative, and not necessarily “infallible”. This distance is evident also in the narration of Septimus’ suicide. Whereas Lucrezia “understood” (164), Dr. Holmes tries to convince Mrs. Filmer, and presumably also himself, that no one could have foretold that Septimus would do it (164). As the whole reason why Bradshaw and Holmes are taking Septimus away is that he has threatened to kill himself, the reader must see the dark irony in that this should come as a surprise to the doctors with such “infallible instincts”.

Through such subtle hints of irony the narrative expresses distance to Bradshaw and Holmes, in contrast to the *lack* of distance we have observed with regard Septimus. If we can recognize the narrator’s distance, it follows that we move towards the narrator’s end of the narrative-character-continuum. I find it revealing that the places where the authority of the extra-diegetic narrator is most strongly felt, is when the restrictive powers of the symbolic order, personified in Bradshaw and Holmes, are implicitly critiqued, whereas Septimus’ signification practise is only partially “corrected”. This implies to me that Bradshaw and Holmes’ perspectives are not privileged in the novel.

The few instances where the narrator *does* express distance to Septimus threaten to deconstruct Septimus’ thetic practise, and thereby his sense of self. This is so because the distance suggests that Septimus’ utterances ought to be read as proof of his madness, and not as meaning-oriented utterances, articulating him as a subject of language:

Going and coming, beckoning, signalling, so the light and shadow, which now made the wall grey now the bananas bright yellow...**seemed** to **Septimus Warren Smith** lying on the sofa in the sitting-room... Outside the tree dragged their leaves **like** nets through the depths of the air; the sound of water was in the room, and through the waves came the voices of the birds signing. (153, my emphasis)

⁶⁸ The irony on the behalf of Bradshaw is also particularly evident on page 107.

In the first sentence, the narrator presents a natural explanation for Septimus' perspective – namely, that he is confounded by the light. The little word “seemed” suggests that the reality presented is distorted by Septimus' distorted mind, and the use of his full name, as if he were a stranger, adds another level of distance.⁶⁹ But the citation further shows the short distance from what is perceived as poetic language and Septimus' language. So little distinguishes Septimus' “mad discourse” from what is usually accepted as proverbs or imagery, as we can see in the simile “leaves *like* nets...”. But as the paragraph continues, we again move closer and closer to Septimus' end of the narrator-character-continuum:

Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on the shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more. (153)

By the last sentence, the focalization is “zoomed in” on Septimus' perspective and Septimus' signification practise⁷⁰ – and so the paragraph ends (and the following is as strongly focalized). This is typical for the novel. Instead of ending passages with the narrator making remarks that could restrict the perspective to the character's minds (something along the lines of: “So it seemed to Septimus”), the character is allowed “the last word”.

Before concluding my reading of the narrator, I would like to include Wang's perspective. Wang takes Minow-Pinkney's argument for the disarticulation of the transcendental, authorial self a step further, and claims that:

With the stream of consciousness technique, she [Woolf] shows the ways in which the consciousness of self shifts from one discursive position to another... and demonstrates, much in a “deconstructive” fashion, the ways in which language operates in a ceaseless play of differences that cannot be pinned down to an authoritative unit of meaning or a transcendental signified. By exploring the crisis of language and meaning, Woolf shows the problematic nature of consciousness and identity. (181)

I agree that Woolf exposes the discursive nature of self and consciousness in *MD* – and in so doing also deconstructs these as “authoritative units”. Yet I do not think the “play of differences” completely “ceaseless”. Following a Derridaian logic, yes, there necessarily is a ceaseless play (because that is the nature of language); but the text inevitably, if we still accept that language can be meaningful or that we can grant meaning to it through our interpretation of sign systems, creates connections and disconnections. The “locus of the subject”, “hinges” such as “she thought” or “he felt”, can shift in a moment's notice, but we *do* register these shifts. It is exactly because the autonomous, transcendental self is

⁶⁹ The narrator also addresses Septimus with his full name in the cited “naturalization” on page 106.

⁷⁰ As will be discussed in 2.5, the last sentence is part of the discourse Septimus shares with Clarissa.

deconstructed, or only present in glimpses of narrative distance, that the particular selves or “consciousnesses” are allowed to dominate *MD*. The text may show “the problematic nature of consciousness and identity”, but while at the same time showing that it is the only “explanatory model” we truly have. Everything is subjective in this novel. This facilitates a relative autonomy for the articulation of Septimus’ peculiar subjectivity and “sense making”.

2.5 Narrative Juxtaposition: Septimus as Clarissa’s Other

The narrative inevitably puts Clarissa and Septimus up against each other, and this as inevitably shapes our reading of Septimus. In extension of my argument for Septimus’ alternative thetic practice, it is interesting to look at the discourse which Septimus and Clarissa “share”. The allusions to Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* are among the more striking examples of this shared discourse (Poresky 104; Showalter *ad* 8). Clarissa gives us the first reference as she reads two (authentic) lines from the play: “Fear no more the heat o’ the sun / Nor the furious winter’s ranges” (*MD* 10; *Cymbeline* 4.2.258-9). Clarissa returns to the phrase several times. Septimus gives the allusion cited above: “Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more” (153). Even in the way Septimus cites Shakespeare, he takes an already established structure in the symbolic (Shakespeare’s and Clarissa’s words), and reformulates it to his own, peculiar phrase where the heat of sun has been removed. Jane de Gay argues:

While the quotations from Shakespeare function as a point of communality between Septimus and Clarissa, they also serve as a vanishing-point for both characters as individuals, in that each finds expression in the words of an other. The echo from Shakespeare thus suggests, as Woolf implied in her description of the British Museum in *Jacob’s Room*, that although the individuals dies, Shakespeare’s words will continue. (91)

Expanding on de Gay’s logic, Clarissa should “vanish” more than Septimus as Septimus does not cite Shakespeare word-by-word, but appropriates the citation to his own discourse. But it is actually Clarissa who first rewrites Shakespeare’s words: “Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall” (43). (Note that both Septimus’ and Clarissa’s alterations include the reference to the heart.) But upon the news of Septimus’ suicide, Clarissa returns to the original phrasing: “[T]he words came to her, Fear no more the heat of the sun. She must go back to them” (204). Unlike for Clarissa, for whom the phrase: “signals the resolution of her crisis and her decision to return to her party” (de Gay 91), Septimus’ citation retracts him more to his self and his own ideas (for good and for bad). Despite Clarissa’s obsession with the party, she has not been enjoying it, an even experiences

that: “Every time she gave a party she had this feeling of being something not herself” (187). Clarissa’s return to Shakespeare’s original phrasing and the party symbolizes her return to society London and a more restrictive symbolic order; in contrast to Septimus’ discourse, which, despite being shaped by the already spoken structures of Shakespeare and the like, very much speaks of him being himself.

Wang observes the shared imagery of Septimus, Peter and Clarissa (which he describes as “nonlinguistic” (187)), but makes it clear that this connection does *not* offer an opportunity for the preservation of the self:

Despite the deep communion between these characters... no identity can be established. Once the unconscious flow is let loose, it not only overflows the symbolic but also runs over its own moment of revelation and meaning toward a state of ego-loss. Identity, character, and personality are dissolved. (187-8)

Wang here seems to commit the same reduction he critiques other Woolf-critics for in the beginning of the article, namely to presuppose an understanding of the subject as “autonomous, self-contained, and fully conscious of itself and which is assumed to be the source of meaning and thought, independent of social structure, discourse, and systems of signification” (177). I agree that the traditional, transcendental ego is deconstructed in *MD*, but I do not think that equals that “Identity, character, and personality are dissolved”. When Wang concludes that “the self is always on the run, on the run toward nonself” (188) this still means that the self is present in *MD*, *articulated*, yet revealed as a construct of discourses and systems (rather than its own “source of meaning”). Being a subject of language always means being subject to a “simultaneous slide” of articulation and disarticulation. In this light, Septimus’ death can be seen as the utter disarticulation of the self, escaping the symbolic order through “a shutdown of communication, a complete blackout of consciousness”, as Wang claims (186). Yet it is also interpreted by Clarissa, and thereby crucially by the *narrative*, as there is no objective, or authorial perspective on the incident, as “an attempt to communicate” (202). Clarissa makes Septimus’ plunge a “speech” that necessarily is spoken *by* and speaks a subject.⁷¹ In such a manner, Septimus’ subjectivity is preserved in Clarissa’s interpretation of him, and her choice to stay in the thetic, symbolic order. “For there she was” (213), as the final line insists – and therefore, also is his “communication”. Some might interject that such an argument reinforces the tradition of seeing Septimus’ self as dependent on the opposition with Clarissa, rather than a “literary self in his own right”, as I have been

⁷¹ This logic is attested by, among others, Arie Verhagen: “Even in the absence of an actual speaker, and addressee always takes a linguistic utterance as having been intentionally produced as an instrument of communication by another being with the same basic cognitive capacities as the addressee” (7).

advocating. But Septimus is not by any means the only self/subjectivity dependent on an *other*, and his subjectivity also offers something to Clarissa's articulation of her self. As Clarissa pulls Septimus' plunge into "communication", Clarissa recognizes that "Septimus has spoken for her; he 'had done it'" (Waugh 120; *MD* my ed. 204). As subjects of language, we are all dependent on already spoken structures of language, and other thetic subjects.

Poresky (SWC2) is one of several critics to look at Septimus as Clarissa's double. She paints a picture of a seamless connection between Clarissa and Septimus, as "Woolf unities them ineluctably" (101). I think this inevitable connection often in Septimus' case works to disarticulate him, rather than suggest a unitary whole. This becomes evident if we peruse the narrative structure closer. We saw in chapter 1.1 that to narrate our lives and selves is a basic human impulse. Peter Brooks' "classic" *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (1984) discusses how this generates a *narrative desire* when we read. Reading for the plot, for structure, for making sense and cohesion of the elements in a text, is part of the reader's competence (Brooks 37). I will not go far into the question of what kind of "reading self" Woolf's novels create,⁷² but the narrative structure and our narrative desire definitely affect Septimus in a way that I think it negligent not to touch upon in this context. I have claimed that the narration facilitates the articulation of Septimus' peculiar subjectivity and "sense-making", but the narrative, on a more plot- and structure-level, also works *against* Septimus. To put it blankly: *MD* is *Clarissa's* narrative, as the title manifests. Septimus is from his first appearance an interruption to Clarissa's narrative, a disturbing presence for the "plotting reader". Jackson argues that the interruption of plot and the use of *almost plots* are important motifs in Woolf's fiction (122). Unlike what one would expect in the fictions of Dickens or Elliot for example, many of the minor figures and apparent plot-lines introduced early on in the "exposition" of *MD* are never woven into the larger patterns of the novel's action (Jackson 123-4). I would say that Septimus and his story is the "exception of the exceptions" in Clarissa's narrative. He obviously *does* return, yet his intersection with Clarissa's narrative never becomes "direct". Because of the desire to "read for the plot", the question: "What does he have to do with Clarissa?" – haunts at least the first-time reader. The setup of the narrative thus is likely to lead the reader to experience Septimus as an intrusion to the otherwise coherent narrative about Clarissa Dalloway, and to expect that the narrative will conjoin them. The narrative structure thus sets Septimus up as Clarissa's "other", awaiting explanation. Similar to the way *OB* insists on the sameness of Orlando, yet also disarticulates

⁷² For discussion about Woolf's reader, see Richter.

this sameness, *MD* insists that Clarissa is the centre of interest, the woman standing out in crowded rooms – and, her own crowded narrative:

She came into a room; she stood, as he had often seen her, in a doorway with lots of people around her. But it was Clarissa one remembered. Not that she was striking; not beautiful at all; there was something picturesque about her; she never said anything specially clever; **there she was**, however; **there she was**. (83, my emphasis)

Contrary to the absence of Septimus (at least on plot-level), Clarissa's presence is emphasized to the very last sentence; yet we certainly remember Septimus. I think the narrative's inevitable comparison of the two has contributed to the dominant trend of reading Septimus as a darker character than I at least find him to be. I wonder if perhaps our narrative desire lures us into seeing Septimus' death as a necessarily result of the text's development, because without offering Clarissa the epiphany that comes to her upon his death, he otherwise would have no place in *her* narrative.⁷³ See for example Richter's reasoning here:

More specifically, the rhythm in *Mrs. Dalloway* is based on the alternation of the two emotions of vitality, or euphoria, and despair... In the main, Clarissa exhibits the rising emotion, the cresting of the "wave of divine vitality" that carries her triumphantly to the conclusion of her party in her upstairs rooms. Septimus, her double, exhibits the negative of this emotion, a despair which finally drives him to plunge to his death on area railing. (217-218)

Septimus is considered the "emotional antithesis" to Clarissa. But is it completely true that Clarissa primarily is euphoric whereas Septimus is to be associated with despair? I think it more than possible to turn the opposition on its head, seeing Clarissa as the more depressed and dark mind, whereas Septimus often is hopeful and (disturbingly) euphoric. If we return to Clarissa and Septimus shared imaginary, this tendency is striking. Contrary to Septimus' messages that: "Trees are alive" and that: "There is a God", Clarissa envisions moments of her life as "buds on the tree of life, **flowers of darkness they are**, she thought.... not for a moment did she believe in God" (31, my emphasis). Clarissa's already cited "re-writing" of Shakespeare's *Cymbeline* is also much "darker" than Septimus'. Advancing from that citation, Minow-Pinkney argues that Clarissa reveals the self as dead, but that being freed from "ego-identity" means that there is no death (63) (the latter a perspective I think strange to attribute to Clarissa rather than Septimus). Again, Minow-Pinkney advances from the traditional, transcendental, phallogocentric ego, and fails to see that in *MD*, both Clarissa and

⁷³ And again, Woolf's own "explanatory model" for the novel: "The pace to be given by the gradual increase of S' insanity on the one side; by the approach of the party on the other" (qtd. in Showalter, "Introduction" xxvii) seems to have made critics extra apt to look for such a regress.

Septimus offer alternative notions of self. At two other points in the text, Clarissa's tree-imagery speaks out the *survival* of the self:

...here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home... [she was] part of people she had never met; being laid out like mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their **branches** as she had seen the **trees lift the mist, but it spread over so far**, her life, **herself**. (9-10, my emphasis)

...she **felt herself everywhere**; not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere... So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with **people she had never spoken to**, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – **even trees**, or barns. (167, my emphasis)

Clarissa's self is not "dead", but dependent on her relations with other living things. She offers us both a new, relational notion of self, and a guideline to how to read the connection between her and Septimus. "Trees are alive". The self is not dead, but "branched out". Clarissa and Septimus are part of people they have never met through the structures of language. (Clarissa thus gives us a "sneak-peak" of the constitutive relationship between "self" and "other" which will be central to my reading of *TL*).

Naturally, the question arises: If the self is not restricted to the individual – are we still speaking of a self? Thinking back to the definitions of "self" from the *OOED* presented in the introductory chapter, was self not exactly what distinguishes one person from another? Patricia Waugh's concluding remarks on *MD* can provide a good answer. Contrary to Minow-Pinkney's insistence that Woolf "seeks a state of human being prior to its consolidation into personality" (60), Waugh argues for Woolf's "commitment to a vision of subjectivity which, though opposed to the unified, 'emperical' ego, would involve a recognition of both the self's relational connection to others and its separateness and autonomy" (121). I have already implied that Woolf's "commitment" is somewhat problematic in Septimus' case, but I agree with Waugh's notion of the precedence of the separated, yet relational self in Woolf's fiction. This brings us back to the central premise in the Lacanian notion of how language and subjectivity "work": "no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification" (Lacan qtd. in Dews 150) – this also goes for the signification of the self.

Harold Bloom argues: "The doubling of Clarissa and Septimus implies that there is only a difference in degree, not in kind, between Clarissa's sensibility and the naked consciousness or "madness" of Septimus" (4). The various shapes Clarissa's tree-imagery takes remind us that it is *as* reductive to keep the emotional opposition between Clarissa and Septimus, only with the shift of Clarissa standing for despair and Septimus for euphoria.

Indeed, *MD* even hints that also Clarissa has been mentally ill (see p. 13) What does then the “difference in degree” consist in? Bloom’s implied reduction of Septimus’ self/subjectivity to a “naked consciousness” might be a clue. Several critics consider Clarissa, despite her moments of despair and self-doubt (literally speaking), able to construct a sense of self in a way that Septimus is not (Meisel 75; Minow-Pinkney 63-4; Wang 186). For example, Perry Meisel considers Clarissa Septimus’ double “only insofar as she possesses what he lacks – a mirror image or “double” to provide him with a sense of self” (75). Clarissa, much more than Septimus, plays the role of Hawthorne’s prototypical modernist character attempting to define who she is. Septimus is far less interested in his self, and turns his attention, not outside himself, I would say, but *beyond*. As Meisel points out, where Clarissa manages to draw “the parts together” into “one centre” (*MD* 40) Septimus is “terrified” by the thought of “this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre” (Meisel 75; *MD* 16). Clarissa says: “She alone knew how different, so incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing room and made a meeting-point” (40). Clarissa is saying that her self is *not* the image in the mirror, but something “different” and “incompatible”. In Lacan’s paradigm, a mad/psychotic person is one “stuck in the mirror-stage”, failing to move to the stage of self-differentiation (Chiesa 17; Jackson 27). In that light, the virtue of Clarissa’s “mirror image” is for her to be able to see who she *is not*. Clarissa thus also draws up a demarcation line between a social *identity* and a private, more essential image of (her)self. As Lee points out, Clarissa’s clarity stands in stark contrast to Septimus who does not distinguish between his own responses and the exterior world, but assumes a union between himself, the dead, Shakespeare, the birds, the aeroplane’s writing and so on (Lee 108-9). Because Septimus lacks the ability to separate himself from his surroundings, he lacks the crucial “alienation” that according to Lacan is inherent to any sense of self. In the final section I will attempt to disestablish Septimus’ death as only an inevitable “shutdown of communication” (Wang 186), and argue that Septimus shows signs of the kind of “constructive alienation” Meisel, Minow-Pinkney, Wang and Lee have found lacking.

2.6 “Mad” or “Their Idea of Tragedy”?

She must have a son like Septimus, she said. But nobody could be like Septimus; so gentle; so serious; so clever. Could she read Shakespeare too? Was Shakespeare a difficult author? she asked.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Septimus’ infatuation for Shakespeare is here not a sign of delusion; rather, Lucrezia is admiring her husband and wondering if she can learn to “speak Greek” like her clever husband.

One cannot bring children into a world like this. One cannot perpetuate suffering, or increase the breed of these lustful animals...

In the streets, vans roared past him; brutality blared out on placards; men were trapped in mines; women burnt alive; and once a maimed file of lunatics being exercised or displayed for the diversion of the populace (who laughed aloud), ambled and nodded and grinned past him, in the Tottenham Court Road, each half apologetically, yet triumphantly, inflicting his hopeless woe. And would *he* go mad? (98)

Despite the scattered nature of Septimus' thoughts, nobody can deny that he is responding to Lucrezia's wish here. She wants to have children, but he does not, and his reluctance to "bring children into a world like this" is quite understandable in the aftermath of WW1. Septimus' reflection about how others see "lunatics", followed by the crucial remark "would *he* go mad", may indicate his own fear of becoming/ being subject to such pity and ridicule. Though risking sounding like a psychologist and not a literary critic, I think it safe to say that Septimus shows both self-reflection and self-differentiation here.

What madness is, and Septimus' status as "mad" is interpreted by the other characters in the novel. Bonikowski makes the important point that the reader and the characters in *MD* are on different insight levels when it comes to Septimus' madness. Whereas we often see the world through his perspective, the other characters have a visual sensation of Septimus' distinct "strangeness" (Bonikowski 136-7, 160). (Even the never-reoccurring Maisie Johnson remarks that Septimus looks unforgettably "queer" (28)). Lucrezia is notoriously ambivalent as to her husband's (in)sanity. She reflects that: "often he was right, sometimes absurd, of course, but sometimes wonderfully right" (157). She swears that she will never say Septimus is mad (27), but breaks her promise: "Her husband, she said, was mad. He scarcely knew her" (102). Bradshaw deliberately avoids the word "mad": "Sir William said he never spoke of 'madness'; he called it not having a sense of proportion" (106)". Madness is clearly something unspeakable and threatening to Bradshaw. He prefers his own construction, which is an efficient tool for keeping with (what he perceives as) normality. Rather than defining what Septimus has or is, Bradshaw speaks of what he *has not* ("a sense of proportion"), and in so doing manages to deal with him without engaging in Septimus' discourse or world-view. Bradshaw clearly interprets Septimus' speech as indicative of his madness. He reasons that Septimus' tendency of "attaching meaning to words of a symbolic kind" is "[a] serious symptom to be noted on the card" (105). The particular word in question is "war". To attach meanings to words is the motor that makes language work, and that a war veteran would attach special meaning to the word "war" is again quite understandable. But if we look closer at the scene it is strictly speaking not Septimus who attaches symbolic meaning to the

utterance of “war”, but Bradshaw. Septimus only repeats the word, and from that enunciation, the doctor prescribes Septimus with a “serious symptom”. Again Bradshaw, not Septimus, is subject to Woolf’s satire (Bonikowski 148). Bradshaw himself clearly favours the symbolic meaning of words, as he even goes so far as to anthropomorphize “Proportion” and its “less smiling” (!) sister, “Conversion” (109) (both with initial capitals – as if they were names). This attests for the political aspect of the tension between the symbolic and semiotic in *MD*. What “makes sense” to say is of course embedded in the symbolic order, which makes some utterances “a serious symptom”, whereas one can “attach meaning” to Proportion and Conversion, and still be considered perfectly sane; though, in this case, not without the narrator’s implicit critique. *MD* thus illustrates that also “Sanity” is a discursive construction.

Lucrezia’s “diagnosis” of Septimus as mad falls within an eleven pages-long section (97-108) where I consider Septimus’ self and subjectivity in crisis. Septimus’ devastating thought that “it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning” (97) marks the beginning of this deconstructive tendency. He, who has been looking for *the* meaning in the world around him, finds that the world might be meaningless. Neither are other human beings any help: “human nature had condemned him to death” (99). But even at this point where he is “descended” (99), he is not outside human relations. He “surrenders”⁷⁵ and acknowledges that “now other people must help him” (99). What lies in Septimus’ surrender? Only a few pages earlier he has been assured that his own brain is “perfect”, whereas his “sin” (“that he could/did not feel”) is the “fault of the world” (96, 99). Is Septimus giving up his fight for what he still believes in because he acknowledges that he cannot win put up against “human nature” in a world which has been bereft of meaning?⁷⁶

On page 101, we find the narrative ambiguous: “So he was deserted”. Here the question: “who is reasoning?” – is difficult to answer. Is it “just” (the focalized) Septimus who feels deserted, or is the narrator implying regret that nobody stands by Septimus? Whereas Septimus seems to assume a new grasp on his convictions in the citation below, the distance to Lucrezia at this point is heart-breaking:

So there was a man outside; Evans presumably; and the roses, which Rezia said were half dead, had been picked by him in the fields of Greece. Communication is health; communication is happiness. Communication, he muttered.

‘What are you saying, Septimus’ Rezia asked, wild with terror, for he was talking to himself. (102)

⁷⁵ The phrasing in *MD* naturally is in the past tense: “he had surrendered” (99).

⁷⁶ Such passages naturally can be seen as indicative of Septimus’ Christ-delusion (see e.g. 108), taking on the sins of humanity.

We get another possible “long-distance naturalization” of Septimus’ speech. The dead that surrounded Septimus in the first paragraph I cited (*MD* 26) may just be withered roses, “picked by him in the fields of Greece”. Septimus is attempting to define what communication is, but is at the same time *as* outside communication as he ever has been. Lucrezia only hears him “muttering”, and responds with terror because talking to oneself signifies madness.

The climax of this crisis of sanity, meaning and self takes place as Septimus thinks of “confessing” his “sin”:

But if he confessed? If he communicated? Would they let him off then, Holmes and Bradshaw?

‘I - I —’ he stammered.

But what was his crime? He could not remember it.

‘Yes?’ Sir William encouraged him. (But it was growing late.⁷⁷)

Love, trees, there is no crime- but what was his message?

He could not remember it.

‘I - I —’ Septimus stammered. (107-8)

Unlike Clarissa, Septimus’ trouble has until this point not been the question “who am I?”, but that the others fail to receive his “messages”. But this has changed. Septimus has lost track of meaning, and therefore also of himself. He only lists “Love, trees, there is no crime”, but has forgotten that these words are emblems of his messages. He therefore cannot get past stammering “I-I”. He cannot say who he is or what he is thinking. It is at this point not just the world and the corrupted “humanity” which is without meaning, but himself.

As I am now moving closer to the implications of Septimus’ choice to commit suicide, I will put Septimus’ final “speech” in relief to how his threat of killing himself appears elsewhere in the novel. The thought of death pervades the minds of the characters, but the form it takes with Septimus is markedly different. Whereas Clarissa several times defines herself up against the inevitable fact of death (e.g. pp. 9 and 192), we learn of Septimus’ threat of killing himself not from when he is focalized, but through the other characters’ perspectives.⁷⁸ The most “direct” rendering of Septimus’ threat is embedded in a long paragraph, clearly focalized on Lucrezia: “Septimus let himself think of terrible things... Yet he could be happy when he chose... They went to Hampton Court on top of a bus, and they were perfectly happy... Suddenly he said, ‘Now we kill ourselves’” (72). The use of quotation marks here indicates that this was in fact spoken, yet this is very different from if Septimus

⁷⁷ Sir William’s “humanity” seems only to be available during “office hours”.

⁷⁸ There is “talk of” Septimus’ threat from Lucrezia’s perspective on p. 17 and 26, Dr. Holmes’ on p.100 and Bradshaw’s on p. 107.

himself had, not in his wife's distant memory, but inscribed in the "now" of the text, uttered that he wanted to kill himself. It is of course also poignant that Septimus does not threaten just to kill himself, but "suggests" they commit joint suicide. Just to play the devil's advocate, it is not entirely different from how one, in a moment where one is "perfectly happy", can say: "Now I could die". It could even be Shakespeare's discourse at work again as it recalls Othello's words to Desdemona (at a point in the play where all is still well): "If it were now to die, / 'twere now to be most happy" (*Othello*, 2.1.187-8) – a line which Clarissa cites twice (pp 37-8 and 202) (Showalter *ad* 31). Again, although I recognize that Septimus is not well, I do not think he primarily is one to "think of terrible things". I wonder if Holmes, Bradshaw and sometimes Lucrezia project "their idea of tragedy" on him (*MD* 163) – and I wonder if some of the literary critics do as well. The focalized Septimus feels: "Human nature, in short, was on him... The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes. But why should he kill himself for their sakes?" (101). We can of course offer explanations for Septimus' thoughts. He is hearing voices. It is not "the whole world" who is saying this, but his own confused mind. But the fact remains that before it actually happens, we never learn of Septimus suicidal-tendencies directly from him.

When Septimus starts to think of Bradshaw and Holmes coming to admit him, he becomes frantic, and wants Lucrezia to burn his writings:

Now for his writings; how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes; odes to Time; conversations with Shakespeare; Evans, Evans, Evans – his messages from the dead; do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister. Universal love: the meaning of the world. Burn them! he cried. (162)

Everything that has meant something to Septimus is about to go up in flames. But Lucrezia says she will preserve his writings, and stay with him – even if they take him (162).⁷⁹ Bonikowski is categorical in his reading of Septimus' rejection of "human intercourse⁸⁰ altogether" (157), and he claims that Lucrezia fails in her attempt to "keep him grounded in language" (158). I think Bonikowski is imprecise in both these claims. We remember that Lucrezia thinks Septimus sometimes "wonderfully right", wishing that she could read Shakespeare like him, and even to have children who are like him. If anything, Lucrezia is drawn to his language. Rather than attempting to "keep him grounded in language", Lucrezia sees to that his "messages" are preserved. Lucrezia's darkest moments in the relationship are

⁷⁹ As she tries to deny Holmes and Bradshaw access to Septimus when they come, I think it safe to assume that she is not just saying this in order to calm Septimus down.

⁸⁰ Bonikowski uses "human intercourse" in a double meaning, as he claims that Woolf makes the relationship between Lucrezia and Septimus symbolic of the link between "the sexual relation to speech and the structure of address" (Bonikowski 157). (This seems to correspond with the place of *desire* in psychoanalytic theory).

not defined by attempting to draw Septimus “back to speech” (Bonikowski 158), but alienation when he is talking to himself. In the end, Septimus does not reject the companionship offered by Lucrezia. He is the proud witness to his wife’s triumph over Holmes and Bradshaw (“Over them she triumphed” 162). She gives him confidence to distinguish between the “verdicts” the doctors inflict (162), including their idea of who he is, and what he *and* Lucrezia believe in. In his final hour, Septimus is *not* in crisis, and not outside “human intercourse”, but “understood” by Lucrezia (164):

There remained only the window... The tiresome, the troublesome and rather **melodramatic business** of opening the window and throwing himself out. It was **their idea of tragedy, not his or Rezia’s (for she was with him)**. Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. (He sat on the sill.) But he would wait to the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good. **The sun hot**. Only human beings? Coming down the staircase opposite an old man stopped and started at him. Holmes was at the door. **‘I’ll give it you’**” he cried, and flung himself vigorously, violently down on to Ms. Filmer’s area railings.

‘The coward!’ cried Dr. Holmes, bursting the door open. Rezia ran to the window, she saw, **she understood**. (163-4, my emphasis)

As far as I can see, this is the only place in the text where Septimus’ thoughts/talk of committing suicide can be securely attributed to Septimus. It is therefore highly interesting that he is not expressing a death wish, but exactly the opposite. “Life was good. The sun hot”. Even in the moment of the act Septimus seems to proscribe the suicidal drive to something forced upon him, and which he eventually succumbs to for *their* sakes – not because of his own thoughts of “terrible things”. Septimus does not “fear the heat of the sun”.

Septimus’ final words are an enigma. What is “it” and who is “you”? The “you” Septimus addresses is on the first hand the doctors, but also all those subscribing to their version of “human nature”. Septimus’ problem is not with himself or life, but “only human beings”. Given that Septimus, or the narrator assuming his voice, to the very end is clear that he does not wish to die and considers suicide “their idea of tragedy”, I read what Septimus “gives” not as his self, or his sanity, but “their idea of tragedy”. In so doing, he distinguishes between himself and what he finds meaningful, and the ideas of the “you” attempted projected onto him. He thus articulates himself as a thetic subject, who puts words, objects and images in *position* with each other, but also separates (Kristeva) or differentiates (Lacan) himself from that “idea”. He offers “humanity” the “sort of thing” men like Dr. Holmes and Bradshaw like: A tragedy. To Septimus, there still is no death. The suicide is a “melodramatic business”, not an actual culmination of a persistent death drive. He gives “it” to them in a

language that enables them to continue to subscribe his discourse to a “serious symptom” and to keep their “sense of proportion”.

Does this mean that Septimus’ death indeed is a tragedy, whereas Bradshaw and Holmes are allowed to “reign of norms and the normal” and what makes for meaningful signification? Again the narration offers a life line for Septimus. Whereas Septimus’ final words are left without explanation or any other expression of distance, the doctors shine in all their comical glory: “There was a great deal of running up and down stairs”, “no one in the least to blame” (164). Through letting Septimus stand uncorrected and unexplained and this moment, “understood” by Lucrezia and later also interpreted by Clarissa, whereas the doctors are subject to the narrator’s distance and critique, the narrative refuses to subscribe to the doctors’ sense, and allows Septimus’ final words to speak for themselves – or rather: *himself*.

*

The survival of Septimus’ self is dependent on the reader being willing to accept that his language is not unthetic, but to an extent “makes sense” within the universe of the novel. Even if we label Septimus “mad” he cannot be considered outside language, and apart from a momentary crisis, neither is he outside the articulation of his subjectivity and self. His “leaps” do not run towards loss of meaning and death, but towards meaning – something which can be lost if we only look at Septimus on a mere plot-level, or if we keep with a narrow definition of what “makes sense” to say. The juxtaposition with Clarissa can tell us that being a subject of language always also means being articulated as a response to the discourse of the “other”. Septimus’ subjectivity is not a flight away from the symbolic order, but an expansion of it that makes room for his peculiar sense of reality and a sense of self that the narration does not reject.

3 The Decentred Centre: Mrs Ramsay and the Self as also “Other”

I have argued that Septimus’ articulation of self depends on his ability to construct himself as athetic subject, which again requires the ability to differentiate one’s sense of self from others and from the constructions of language. But we do not need to advance from such complicated theories as Lacan’s or Kristeva’s in order to grasp this aspect of the self. Despite the emphasis on individuality, most commonplace definitions of “self” invite an “other” from which the self can be distinguished (Sedikides and Gaertner 7). The *OOED*’s definition of self again is a case in point: “A person’s essential being that distinguishes them from others” (“Self”, def. 1). *TL* presents us with a small population of selves in relation with one another. They directly and indirectly ask Hawthorne’s question: “Who am I?”, but even more so: “who is s/he whom I construe myself from?” The question of defining one’s own self proves in *TL* to go through the detour of the other – significantly through Mrs Ramsay.

Stevenson describes Mrs Ramsay’s death as: “one of the most disturbing moments in twentieth-century fiction, for reasons aesthetic as well as emotional” (Stevenson and Goldman 174). Stevenson’s emphasis on the two-faced impact of this moment corresponds with my twofold interest in Mrs Ramsay. Mrs Ramsay has a unique position in terms of the way *TL* both problematizes and insists on the primacy of the self as the core of Woolf’s narratives. The presence of Mrs Ramsay is both necessary *aesthetically*, in terms of being the primary focal point of the narrative structure in the first section; and necessary *emotionally* – both for the reader and the other selves in the novel. Throughout the first half of the book, Mrs Ramsay is the centre around which the other characters turn, and the closest the reader gets to a protagonist. Her death therefore poses an immense threat both to the characters’ sense of self, and the narrative as a meaningful structure. I will take this a step further than Stevenson and argue that the novel’s disarticulation of narrative and disarticulation of its centre starts already in “The Window” (TW). However, I will put forth that the last section of the novel presents the return of Mrs Ramsay’s presence, and reinstates the relationship between narrative and self. Throughout the analysis, Lily will play an important role as the self which is most obviously dependent on Mrs Ramsay as an *other-self*. Contrary to critics like Goldman, Waugh and Virginia R. Hyman, I read her final vision as representing both the “surviving” presence of Mrs Ramsay’s self and Lily’s self-articulation.

3.1 My Position in Relevant Debates in *TL*-Criticism

The readings of *TL* that focus on Mrs Ramsay particularly intersect with SWC1, as well as generally with “feminism’s Woolf”. The critical narrative about Mrs Ramsay can even be seen as symbolic of the advancement of feminism in literary criticism, as Brenda R. Silver demonstrates in “Mothers, Daughters and Mrs. Ramsay” (2009). Mrs Ramsay has repeatedly been described in terms of being the “ur-mother” (Adolph qtd. in Silver 269), and Silver finds that readers have tended to compare Mrs. Ramsay with their own mothers (269) (a thought that never occurred to me). Central to the “mothers-and-daughters-debate” is the question as to whether Lily or Mrs Ramsay is the true protagonist of *TL*. We recall from SWC1 that Goldman reads Lily as “the focal character, the artist at the centre of a *künstlerroman*” (Goldman and Stevenson 177). Goldman further explains that most feminist readings look at “Lily Briscoe as overcoming Mrs Ramsay and her complicity with an old-order status quo. She is an “Angel in the House”, who must be dispatched” (177). Waugh follows a similar logic, reducing Mrs Ramsay to the mother-figure, and highlighting Lily’s newfound independence. Waugh draws a parallel between Lily’s relationship with Mrs Ramsay and Woolf’s “acute lack of mothering” (109), and in so doing is one of many to read the novel in light of Woolf’s sudden loss of her mother at an early age, and her outspoken motivation to use the novel as a means to “write out” her obsession about her parents (e.g. Briggs; Kelley; Abel and Hyman) – even inventing a new elegiac form (see: Stevenson and Goldman; Herrmann and Naremore).

Like I observed that Septimus has been caught between the comparisons with Woolf herself on one side, and Clarissa on the other, the critical landscape of Mrs Ramsay is thus shaped by connections with the author’s and/or the reader’s mother, and in-narrative as de facto mother to Lily. I wish to stress that I find there to be a shift from the *relative* focus on Mrs Ramsay in *TW* to the *as* relative focus on Lily in “The Lighthouse”, and that this to me more than anything symbols how the novel deconstructs the expectations for what makes for a meaningful, coherent narrative, and simultaneously works to demonstrate that the self never is restricted to the self. I think it interesting to see Mrs Ramsay not as the displacement of Julia Stephen, or as a kind of “ur-mother”, but as the emblem of a *relational* notion of the Woolfian, literary self, which goes beyond the Lacanian logic that “no signification can be sustained other than by reference to another signification” (Lacan qtd. in Dews 150), and suggests something fundamental about how we understand ourselves in relation with other selves.

Robertson's contribution to the Annual Virginia Woolf Conference of 2013 paves the way for looking at Woolf's novels in general, and *TL* and *The Waves* in particular, as predominantly expressing the intersection between selves and others, what Robertson calls *intersubjectivity* (201). Some might ponder how this differs from the unity-thought in SWC2. To Robertson, the point is that the selves in Woolf's fiction "construe themselves intersubjectively – differently depending on the presence or absence of others" (201). Nevertheless, Robertson, unlike the "unitists", finds there to be "substantial gap[s] between consciousnesses" in Woolf's fictions (204). One could say that Robertson's focus on intersubjectivity has precedence in Richter's *The Voyage In*. In her extensive demonstration of Woolf's "inward" narrative techniques, Richter dedicates a chapter to Woolf's "mirror modes". Among them she counts how Woolf's fictions present "other people as mirrors of the self" (xvi), making the characters "develop through their view and appraisals of other people" (111). Mrs Ramsay's function as "mirror" for the other characters' selves is striking to me, but Richter does not take particular notice of Mrs Ramsay in that context.

Though it would be a stretch to call Kemp's "Feminism, Fiction and Modernism" (SWC2) *MD*-criticism, it suggests something so essential for my vantage point that I had to include it here. Kemp considers *TL*'s middle section a striking example of the kind of modernist writing which is "characterized by the way in which its world of objects is unable to carry our need for significance. The writer no longer converts things into centres of meaning or value" (102). Kemp argues that one of the consequences of "this kind of experimentation involves dissent from recurrent narrative gestures (plot, action, even character)" (104). Kemp's focus is on describing modernist, feminist fictions in a wide perspective, and she never discusses *TL*'s other sections. Yet the impression the article gives is that the example is emblematic for Woolf's fiction. I will argue that despite of the "decent" of narrative expressed in "Time Passes" (TP), *TL* returns to narrative and returns to a world seen *with* and *from* the self.

TL's narration has often been considered championing a specifically feminine/feminist writing paradigm. If we synthesize Herrmann, Waugh, Minow-Pinkney and Kemp, they all suggest a feminine writing paradigm to be at work in *TL*'s narration. They use different terms, "dialogical" (Herrmann), "relational" (Waugh), "fluid" (Minow-Pinkney) and "spatial" (Kemp), but all promote the narration's and its female protagonists' combat with traditional, linear narratives that privilege male subjectivity. I find that the implicit premise of such an

argument is that the female is particularly prone to be a “problem” requiring “solutions” in Woolf’s fiction. This is for example evident in Herrmann’s conclusory remarks about *TL*:

The elegy dialogizes the contradiction between the deconstruction of the subject and the construction of a female subject by constructing a narrative which inscribes the female fictional subject as loss [Mrs Ramsay], as absence whose presence must and can only be reconstructed by “an/other woman [Lily]. The artist reconstructs the other woman as absent presence, as elegiac as heroine, as incompleting subjectivity. (89)

We recognize the SWC1-reasoning where feminine subjectivity is impossible more than as a lack or loss, because the subject is inscribed with the male “I”. I think such criticism relies on gender stereotypes, where the female characters fight for or against certain ideologies more or less *because* they are female (and as such have “incompleted” subjectivities). I will demonstrate that the self, both male and female, is always represented as dialogic in *TL*, but not exactly in the sense suggested by Herrmann. I will look at how the shifts in focalization and the many observation-scenes in *TL* make the place of the self and the other constantly shift, rather than form a linear development from the world of patriarchy and the angel-in-the-house-ideal/ur-mother embodied in Mrs Ramsay, to Lily’s paradigm of female dialogism.

3.2 Mrs Ramsay as “Other-Self”

In the previous chapter, I argued that the relative “silence” of the narrator in *MD* leaves room for Septimus’ peculiar signification practice. The narration obviously plays a key role in *TL* as well. The polyphonic narration allows us to see how the characters constantly observe each other.⁸¹ The reader’s impression of the various characters, *especially* in the case of Mrs Ramsay, is a “mosaic”, so to speak, of the various perspectives, rather than a result of an objective narrator’s characterization. Several chapters of *TW* revolve around the scene where Mrs Ramsay reads to James (from Mrs Ramsay’s perspective), but which is intervened by Lily’s and Mr Bankes’ observations of Mrs Ramsay. When Lily is focalized, we also get her perspective on Mr Bankes observing Mrs Ramsay. In a moment where Lily seems on the brink of rebelling against her own idolization of Mrs Ramsay, she interrupts her own unspoken thought due to Mr Bankes’ glance at Mrs Ramsay:

[S]he was about to say something criticizing Mrs Ramsay, how she was alarming too, in her way, high-handed, or words to that effect, when Mr Bankes made it entirely unnecessary for her to speak by his rapture... For him to gaze as Lily saw him gazing at Mrs Ramsay was a rapture, equivalent, Lily felt, to

⁸¹ Though it should be noted that *MD* also presents the various characters perspectives on other characters, notably Peter’s observations of Clarissa, this aspect is more striking in *TL* (contrary to what Richter implies in using *MD* as her primary example in the last section of “Mirror Modes”).

the loves of dozen of young men (and perhaps Mrs Ramsay had never excited the loves of dozens of young men⁸²). It was love, she thought, pretending to move her canvas, distilled and filtered; love that never attempted to clutch its object. (41)

Robertson focuses on the intersubjectivity between Bankes and Lily as they share their “different mutual appreciation” of Mrs Ramsay (202). Robertson compares Lily with Bernard from *The Waves* and suggests: “The figures [the visions Lily and Bernard form of the other selves] are not merely decorative, but have the potential to profoundly affect Lily and Bernard, because the construals are also part of them” (205). Robertson is a bit too tentative here. No doubt, we are not just dealing with a “potential” affect, but a lasting construction of self articulated through the construction of an other-self. These various “figures” of the other-self become the breeding-ground for the articulation of one’s own self, emotions and insights, at the same time as they contribute to the mosaic Mrs Ramsay consists of for the reader. In the passage above, the spectator (Bankes) becomes the object of scrutiny, which in turn teaches Lily not to attempt to define their common “object”. Bankes’ glance changes how Lily sees Mrs Ramsay. The love Lily sees in Bankes’ gaze makes it unnecessary to talk about what is “alarming” about Mrs Ramsay, makes it “nothing of importance” (41). Lily realizes that loving is not about “clutching” the other. We note the difference between Lily’s interpretation of Bankes’ gaze, and how Bankes defines his feelings for Mrs Ramsay. For Lily, it is about love, whereas Bankes pulls Mrs Ramsay into his scientific world. Mr Bankes feels that the vision of Mrs Ramsay reading to her son produces the same effect on him as: “the solution of a scientific problem”, subduing chaos (41). In such a manner, the construction of Mrs Ramsay as an other-self functions as a catalyst for the other characters’ articulation of their own selves. When they observe her, and articulate who she may be, what she may be thinking, they see what is important to them. This is perhaps most striking in the case of Lily. Just from the way Mrs Ramsay watches her children, Lily senses: “So that is marriage... That is what Mrs Ramsay tried to tell me the other night, she thought. For she was wearing a green shawl, and they were standing close together watching Prue and Jasper throwing catches” (60). To Lily, Mrs Ramsay is the “alarming” embodiment of the imperative of marriage, but despite, or perhaps *because* of her determination never to marry, she continues to “mirror” herself in Mrs Ramsay.

⁸² Note that Lily realizes that Mrs Ramsay perhaps never has been subject to the kind of love expressed in Bankes’ gaze. As I will return to later on, this suggest that Mrs Ramsay’s beauty partly is a projection of the admiration the other characters have for her.

The lack of a consistent, objective perspective allows all these subjective impressions of Mrs Ramsay to form the mosaic of Mrs Ramsay, without indicating which perspective is more “right”. This observation says something fundamental about how the self is presented in *TL*. The self in *TL* becomes relational and *almost* unlimited because the self is not restricted to the thoughts, speech or actions of the one self, but is equally a result of the mosaics/“figures” created by other selves. To SWC3-critic Little, Woolf’s experimental selves are a way Woolf *relationalizes* and *feminizes* the symbolic (*The Experimental Self*, 27). Little stresses that this does not result in an essentialist opposition between the masculine and the feminine in Woolf’s fiction, but rather that this feminization must be understood as indicating:

...a loosening, a relationalizing, of the discourses of symbolic authority embodied, for instance, in Mr. Ramsay or Percival. Employing a dialogic and appositional discourse, certain characters such as Lily and Bernard appropriate, and transform or feminize, the inscriptions of authority and agency... For Woolf, subjectivity is “various”; it is “experimental” and dialogic, as several languages mingle in apposition. (*The Experimental Self*, 28-29)

The Experimental Self focuses on the more radically experimental *Jacob’s Room* and *The Waves*, but Little’s argument for the primacy of appositional voices in Woolf’s authorship may also be applied to the present argument (and is favourable to Herrmann’s variant of dialogism for reasons already implied). The “mingling” of voices, or perspectives in *TL* certainly contributes to making the self relational and dialogic, in the sense that it is made up of various, *appositional* articulations, without an objective (what Little calls “inscriptions of authority and agency”) narrator to point to “the real” Mrs Ramsay or “the real” Lily. As suggested when I positioned myself in *TL*-criticism, I find the way Little singles out Lily as a character that “transform[s] or feminize[s], the inscriptions of authority and agency” problematic. Rather, I think this is inept in the overall narrative design, as Minow-Pinkney observes: “Woolf’s texts disperse the transcendental unified subject that underpins male rationality and narrative, and open new possibilities for subjective activity” (60). It is true that Lily is the most openly subversive character in *TL*, and a fitting champion for a new female subjectivity, but I would say that the novel’s dialogism and “relationalization” of the symbolic and of the self transgress the “politics” going on plot-level, and not just concern the female central characters, as also Minow-Pinkney’s reading of *TL* implies.⁸³

⁸³ When Minow-Pinkney uses Irigaray’s concept of “fluidity” to describe Woolf’s female narrative strategy in *TL*, she seems to do commit the same reduction as Little, as she considers this technique “epitomised” in Lily’s and Mrs Ramsay’s “multiperspectivism” (104-5), rather than seeing it as inept to the overall narrative design and at work also with the male characters.

Mrs Ramsay often becomes the focal point for the other characters' thoughts, not because of what she *actually* does or thinks, but because the other selves obsess about who she is, and what she *may* be thinking. This makes her central even in scenes where she is not at all involved in the action. Conventional notions of plot and character are at risk of overlooking the impact and function of such scenes.⁸⁴ Chapter 14 in TW provides an excellent example. Plot-wise, this is about Nancy, Andrew, Paul and Minta going on a small expedition where Nancy loses her brooch, and where Paul, though this crucially is *not* narrated in discourse time, proposes to Minta. Mrs Ramsay is not present; nevertheless, Paul manages to make it about her:

As they turned by the crossroads he thought what an appalling experience he had been through, and he must tell someone – Mrs Ramsay of course, for it took his breath away to think what he had done. It had been far and away the worst moment of his life when he asked Minta marry him. He would go straight to Mrs Ramsay, because he felt somehow that she was the person who had made him do it. She had made him think he could do anything... He had felt her eyes on him all day today, following him about (though she never said a word) as if she were saying, 'Yes, you can do it. I believe in you. I expect it of you.' She had made him feel all that... (65)

Although we can safely presume that Mrs Ramsay has, in her way, advocated the match between Minta and Paul, it is curious that she should become the only person on Paul's mind, and occupy such a central place in a scene she does not take part in. This is emblematic for Mrs Ramsay's central role in TW. Contradictory to a passive, conformist role of "mirror" for the masculine subject suggested for example by Minow-Pinkney (99-100), Mrs Ramsay's mirror-function often makes her more "active" than the men in the narrative – even when she actually *does* nothing. Without saying a word, Mrs Ramsay has made another (male) self "feel all that". The understanding between Paul and Mrs Ramsay can also be considered an example of intersubjectivity. Mrs Ramsay realizes just from the way Paul exhibits his watch that he is engaged with Minta (95), and Paul, on his side, is sure that "She knows all about it. I need not say anything" (94). This scene is also an example of how the novel defies the reader's narrative desire. Not only does a character who does not contribute to the action become central, but the novel denies the reader the moment of a proposal – as was the case in *OB* (see: 1.2.1). Rather than relating the event, the narrative only hints of it already having happened, and leaves us in the suspense of what Minta answered. Mrs Ramsay's unspoken support of Paul becomes more central to the narrative than the proposal itself.

⁸⁴ A case in point can be Abrams' and Harpham's *Glossary of Literary Terms*, which defines *narrative* as: "a story, whether told in prose or verse, involving event, characters, and what the characters say and do". Though seemingly wide, this definition allows no space for characters' *thoughts*.

The alternating focalization, and the many observation-scenes, makes the place of the self and the other constantly shift, or stand in deferred relationships to one another, where we in one moment experience Mrs Ramsay as the self, and in the next see her as the other who enhances the articulation of an “other self”. To summarize: The narration sets up the various characters as relational, and their selves as made up not just by constructions and articulations of a single self, but are shaped by the mosaics of *appositional* perspectives. It may seem like I am making a typical SWC2-unity-argument. To compare: In his chapter on *TL*, Naremore argues that: “the sense of temporal and qualitative unity, of a single voice that orders the whole, is if anything greater than in the previous book. Everything seems to be refracted through the medium of a prose which tends to blur distinctions” (113). But although I find the articulation of the various selves in *TL* always to go through the detour of the other, I do not think this primarily results in a “unity” or “blurred distinctions” (although, this seems to be case for example in the above cited moment with Mrs Ramsay and Paul), and I have trouble “hearing” a single, authoritative voice that “orders the whole” in *TL*. Compared with *MD*, I agree that there are considerably more passages in *TL* that appear “egoless”, but this voice does not, in my view, make an ordered, unitary whole of *TL*’s polyphony (more on that later).

That the selves are relational and appear to the reader as mosaics of various perspectives does not mean that for example Lily and Mrs Ramsay are at one with one another. One of the paradoxes of *TL* is that despite the presence of intersubjectivity, the novel is also about the “gap” between selves (as seen in Robertson’s argument). I think this is indicated in the constant need to define the other. If unity and perfect intersubjectivity *was* achieved, the obsession about the other would not be (because the other would not be other). As we have seen that there also on the unity-side of SWC2 is something that hinders unity, this observation nevertheless *could* be considered within the spectre of the unity-side of SWC2. But there is a more acute argument against unity and complete intersubjectivity in *TL*. The various characters’ insight to the mind of the other *is* limited - and sometimes even rests on false assumptions. Even Mrs Ramsay’s insight is restricted: “what was he groaning about, she asked, half laughing, half complaining, for she guessed what he was thinking – he would have written better books if he had not married” (58). But Mrs Ramsay guesses wrong. The reader already knows from Mr Ramsay’s perspective that he has been thinking of his life and his family with great affection, and concluded: “he would have been a beast and a cur to wish a single thing altered” (58). Mr Ramsay primarily longs for two things: Not to be forgotten in academic circles, and the love and “sympathy” of his wife. But despite Mr Ramsay’s

desperate want for it, Mrs Ramsay is unable to talk of love (51, 100). It is tempting to assume that Mrs Ramsay cannot tell her husband she loves him simply because she does not. But this is not the case: “A heartless woman he called her; she never told him that she loved him. But it was not so – it was not so. It was only that she never could say what she felt” (100). There is a dark irony in that the emblem of motherhood and the busy match-maker is unable to talk of her own emotions. However, the narrative offers amends to this insufficiency through the intersubjectivity (not unity) of the couple. Mrs Ramsay may not be able to tell her husband how she feels about him, but she has other ways of expressing it: “‘Yes, you were right. It’s going to be wet tomorrow.’ She had not said it, but he knew it. And she looked at him smiling. For she had triumphed yet again” (100). They both “triumph” in this scene, and they both prove their dependence on the other. Mr Ramsay is granted being “right” – the greatest token of love in his world (hence: “he knew”), and Mrs Ramsay can make her husband “feel all that” without saying the thing she cannot. But just when the selves of Mr and Mrs Ramsay are at their closest, the triumph of death tears them apart in TP – the reader is not allowed to linger in this moment of intimacy.

Lily sometimes expresses a longing to be at one with Mrs Ramsay:

Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but **intimacy itself, which is knowledge**, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay’s knee. (44, my emphasis)

Waugh considers Lily caught between her “desire for subjective autonomy and the desire to be at one with the mother-figure Mrs Ramsay” (109), and reads that “contradiction” as emblematic for how Woolf stresses a relational, yet independent view of the self (108-109). In my view, Waugh’s argument rests on a fallacious assumption, namely that Lily’s obsession with Mrs Ramsay’s amounts to the longing to be at one with her. Lily’s emphasis on Mrs Ramsay’s “alarming” qualities and her determination never to marry makes it clear that becoming = Mrs Ramsay is not Lily’s primary intent. Rather, she says: “intimacy” is “knowledge”. In my reading, it is not unity with Mrs Ramsay Lily and the other characters desire, but a way to answer the question: “who is she?” in order to articulate their own selves as distinguished from both Mrs Ramsay’s “beauty” and her more “alarming” qualities. Both Waugh and I argue for Woolf’s maintenance of the independent-relational self, but our premise for doing so is very different. From Waugh highlighting the problem the contradiction between creating an individual self while also being relational poses to especially Woolf’s female characters, epitomized in Lily’s relationship with Mrs Ramsay

(Waugh 108-110, 121); I find that the relational self, the constant shifts between self and other in *TL*, shows that the need for identification with and differentiation from other selves adheres to both male and female subjectivity in *TL* (something Waugh inevitably demonstrates by looking at James' pre-Oedipal longing (11-112), and which in psychoanalytic theory is intrinsic to subject formation). As Spivak's article shows (SWC2), the obsession to "catch" Mrs Ramsay is not just Lily's battle, but something which involves the majority of the characters and defines the narrative as a whole. I think this is most overt in the case of Lily – not necessarily because she is a woman, but because she is the other focal self of *TL*.

Particularly through the conversations between Lily and Bankes, the novel directly discusses the problem of knowing who the other is, while also being dependent on relations with that other. With her painting, Lily suggests a new way of seeing the other:

What did she wish to indicate with the triangular purple shape, 'just there?' he [Bankes] asked.

It was Mrs Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection – that no one could tell it for human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said... But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in that sense. There were other senses too... (45)

Lily explains that the triangular shape features "Mrs Ramsay reading to James", but "not in that sense" - not in the sense of "likeness". The point for Lily is not to paint Mrs Ramsay and James as they objectively are. "[T]he picture was not of them", she explains, but yet is in another sense. The scene invites yet another level of observation of the other-self, namely the way Mrs Ramsay appears in the painting. But the other remains "other". The obsession to know: "Who is she?" neither results in unity, nor in dissolving the individual self, but instead posits a relational self who knows that "there are other senses too".

3.3 Catching and Un-catching Mrs Ramsay

I have now come the point where I return to my initial fascination for the self as a problem in Woolf's fiction. The first time I read *TL* was for a class covering the canon of English literature. Woolf's and *TL* "role" on the syllabus was to represent modernism, and the lecturer repeatedly emphasized that the use of free indirect discourse could be seen as a means to represent the experience of the modern human. To me, there was something contrary between my expectations of a technique that was to give the "psycho-physical totality of the self", as Richter phrases it (vii), and my sensation of never completely grasping the characters. I was experiencing what "SWC2-fragmentationists" have pointed out since the publications of

Woolf's first novels. Mrs Ramsay seemed the most fragmental, distant and elusive of all. Already in *TW*, she is described as "gliding like a ghost" among the house and its inhabitants (72). This not just foreshadows how her presence will be in the last section of the novel, but also suggests a deeper problem at the root of the articulation of her self. Mrs Ramsay is a distant character not just because she be described as an aloof person, but because there is a discrepancy between that she is the centre of the text, while there is a doubt to as if there is an independent self beneath all the "figures" – if there is a centre in the centre.

It is suggested in *TW* that Mrs Ramsay is more an ideal "presence" the others respond to, than a person. Consider for example how she is described on her way to an errand: "with her basked and her parasol, there she was again, ten minutes later, giving out a sense of being ready" (12). Despite the reference to clock time, she gives out an aura of timelessness: "there she was" – like Clarissa in her party, the enigmatic and contrary Mrs Ramsay stands out – even during something as ordinary as grocery shopping (something an "angel-in-the-house" never would); but despite the elusiveness of her character, the narrative insists on her presence: "there she was".

The ideal and elusive nature of Mrs Ramsay is most striking in the descriptions of her legendary beauty: "She bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty... She had been admired. She had been loved. She had entered rooms where mourners sat. Tears had flown in her presence" (36). It is emblematic that the focus is not on the love and sorrow Mrs Ramsay has felt, but the feelings that have "flown in her presence". Consider also how the characters pay "tribute to her beauty" in the beginning of the dinner scene:

So she must go down and begin dinner and wait. And, like some queen who, finding her people gathered in the hall, looks down upon them, and descends among them, and acknowledges their tributes silently... she went down, and crossed the hall and bowed her head very slightly, as if she accepted what they could not say: their tribute to her beauty. (68)

I am not by any means suggesting that middle-aged women cannot look beautiful, but there is something peculiar in the constant emphasis that a woman of her age, mother of eight, is the personification of beauty. This strongly contributes to making her an ideal presence, rather than a body in (textual) space and time. (Note also that this is one of many scenes where it is remarked that there are things the characters cannot say to one another – another indication of the gap between selves).

Unlike Clarissa, who feels she is alone in knowing that there is a "different" self which is "incompatible" with the image others see (*MD* 40), *TL* constantly points to the inherent difference between the "sense of being" Mrs Ramsey sends out, and her true self "beneath":

Looking along his beam she [Lily] added to it her different ray, thinking that she was unquestionably the loveliest of people [...]; but also, different too from the perfect shape which one saw there. [...] How did she differ? What was the spirit in her, the essential thing... (42).⁸⁵

Despite that Lily only a moment earlier (the page before) realized that she should not attempt to “clutch” the object of her love, she is clearly obsessed about “clutching” Mrs Ramsay. Mr Ramsay is also aware that there is a Mrs Ramsay who is beyond his reach:

Ah! She was lovely, lovelier now than ever he thought. But he could not speak to her. He could not interrupt her. He wanted urgently to speak to her now that James was gone and she was alone at last. But he was resolved, no; he would not interrupt her. **She was aloof from him now in her beauty**, in her sadness... though it hurt him that she should look so distant, and he could not reach her, he could do nothing to help her. (55, my emphasis)

We might dwell a moment in that Mr Ramsay describes his wife as aloof “*in her beauty*”. As often seems the case, Mrs Ramsay’s beauty is more a state of mind than a matter of appearance – it is striking how little we know about how she actually looks. They all want to “clutch” Mrs Ramsay’s extraordinary beauty, but it may not amount to more than their projections.

Thus, Mrs Ramsay’s infamous beauty becomes emblematic for the obsession of clutching the Mrs Ramsay “beneath”, and this is also a matter where the narrator, in my opinion, does nothing to aid the reader: “Never did anybody look so sad. But was it nothing but looks? people said. What was there behind it – her beauty, her splendour” (26). It is to this passage Auerbach raised his iconic question: “Who is speaking in this paragraph?” (531). And indeed, here it is difficult to “pinpoint the locus of the subject” (Minow-Pinkney 58). Auerbach reasons: “Perhaps it is the author. However, if that be so, the author certainly does not speak like one who has the knowledge of his characters” (531). We cannot even identify the voice as an authoritative *narrator*, as s/he clearly is not omniscient. Returning to the *TL*-debate in a SWC2-perspective, Naremore reads such citations, and this one in particular, as proof that there is a unitary voice which is consistent throughout *TL*: “Here, as elsewhere, the thoughts of the characters mingle with the thoughts of a barely defined narrator; and the passage makes us aware that the whole book is the product of one voice” (123). Naremore equals this voice with Woolf’s own. I find it puzzling that Naremore can experience the narrator as “barely defined”, while simultaneously so clearly hear a unitary voice in *TL*. One can be banal about it and say that obviously the work contains only one voice, but Naremore’s insistence on a unifying voice suggest something beyond the matter-of-fact-observation that

⁸⁵ Lily is focalized in this section.

Woolf strictly speaking is behind all the voices in her novels. If we return to the passage in question, I think the *lack* of a “locus of subject” is exactly the point. Since the paragraph is about how Mrs Ramsay appears in the general opinion (“people said”), that who is reasoning is ambiguous, that it could be “everyone”, stresses its point. Mrs Ramsay is the decentred centre the selves of *TL* surround and idolize, yet sense they only know the surface of – the reader is left as uncertain.

Somewhat counter-intuitively, Mrs Ramsay’s intense self-awareness contributes to the sensation that we cannot know the “real” her. She is so aware of being perceived by others, that the mosaic overshadows her own sense of self. She feels so “lavished and spent” on others that: “there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by” (34) Mrs Ramsay herself thus suggests that there may not be a core beneath her beauty, or the other’s projections of who she is (Hyman 108). I think that possibility haunts the narrative. The “strongest self” in *TW*, who holds both the characters and the narrative world together, is potentially nothing else than a projection of other identities. But is the self ever restricted to one’s self? Is it our “outer actions” that define us? What about the thoughts that never reaches an “other”? Unlike Septimus, Mrs Ramsay does seem to long for a “flight into nothingness” as she contemplates on the peace offered in “losing personality”:

Not as oneself did one find rest ever, in her experience..., but as a wedge of darkness. Losing personality, one lost the fret, the hurry, the stir; and there rose to her lips always some exclamation of triumph over life when things came together in this peace, this eternity... Often she found herself sitting and looking, sitting and looking, with her work in her hands **until she became the thing she looked at** – the light [of the lighthouse] for example. (53)

Contrary to Waugh’s reading of Mrs Ramsay as wanting to “ensure the other’s dependence of her” and desiring “a unity of structure in which she is the real, though invisible centre” (110), I think it is the other characters’ projections and the narration that express such a desire. Mrs Ramsay is acutely aware both of the distance between the selves, and her vital part in bringing them closer: “Nothing seemed to have merged. They all sat separate. And the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her” (69), but I find that Mrs Ramsey repeatedly wants release from her designating task of “merging and flowing”. Nevertheless, she always returns to the relational world, as Little observes (*The Experimental Self* 33).

Spivak (SWC2) reads Mrs Ramsay “yielding to the world of things” as a way in which Mrs Ramsay moves from being “the other not the self” (Spivak 33). It is true that Mrs Ramsay’s identification with inanimate objects articulates such a move from self to other, as seen in the citation from page 53 (“she became the thing she looked at”). But Spivak neglects

that Mrs Ramsay deconstructs her own comparison with the lighthouse shortly after: “She saw the light again...With some irony in her interrogation, for when one woke at all, one’s relations changed, she looked at the steady light, the pitiless, the remorseless, which was so much her, yet so little her” (54). In a similar way as I argued for Septimus’ continued ability to differentiate between himself and the exterior world, I must insist that Mrs Ramsay clearly distinguishes herself from the lighthouse, and refrains from both enforcing the other’s dependence on her, and once and for all “yielding” herself to the world of things and others. Despite often pointing to the “darkness”, the other in her self, Mrs Ramsay returns to the articulation of her own distinctiveness.

... it was a relief when they went to bed. For now she needed not think about anybody. She could be herself, by herself. [...] To be silent; to be alone. All the being and the doing, expansive, glittering, vocal, evaporated; and one shrunk, with a sense of solemnity, to being oneself, a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others (52).

I said that Mrs Ramsay expresses a longing for “a flight into nothingness”, but “nothingness” may not really be “nothingness”. In suggesting that her darkness has a “core”, that there is a “something” beneath or beyond what others can see, Mrs Ramsay articulates a continued, private sense of self. Alone, Mrs Ramsay feels: “herself; and this self having shed its attachments was free for the strangest adventures... The core of darkness could go anywhere, for no one saw it” (52-3). Solitude exhibits the possibility for Mrs Ramsay to be only this “core”, not surrounded by the others’ images of her, more than a desire to vanish into others or objects. The trouble for the reader is that moments such as these point to a Mrs Ramsay who is, simply put, not Mrs Ramsay. They point to a self who is independent on the relationship with Mr Ramsay, the eight children, Lily and so on; a non-Mrs Ramsay-Mrs Ramsay the reader cannot imagine much more than we can Septimus before going to war. Mrs Ramsay articulates the possibility that there might be a “core”, a “beneath” to her “beauty”, while also positing that core outside the parameters of the text. Nevertheless, hints of Mrs Ramsay’s past are effectively planted in the text, as the “Auerbach-passage” continues: “What was behind it – her beauty, her splendour? Had he blown his brains out, they asked, had he died the week before they were married – some other, earlier lover, of whom rumours reached one?” (26-7). But the narrator never lets Mrs Ramsay’s past move past the materiality of a rumour, which the next sentence can dismiss: “Or was there nothing? nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind, and could do nothing to disturb?” (27). But note that these suggestions remain exactly *appositional suggestions*. We never get an authoritative indication of which is “correct”. In a similar way, we are lured to

think we will get to know Mrs Ramsay's first name, only to be denied that information at the last minute (163).⁸⁶ I would say that the text's "dialogism" thus leaves the reader with fundamental uncertainties, rather than a single voice which "orders the whole" (Naremore 113). The text repeatedly points to its impossible imperative of answering: "Who is Mrs Ramsay?" As Auerbach said: "No one is certain of anything here: it is all mere supposition, glances cast by one person upon another whose enigma he cannot solve" (532). As with *OB*, the reader must realize that there is a lot the text "does not say".

In so many ways, the narrative continuously suggests that there is a core-Mrs Ramsay "beneath" or "behind" the mosaic, but Mrs Ramsay herself expresses doubt as to if there is such a core, and the narrative repeatedly puts knowledge about Mrs Ramsay outside the parameters of the text. This does not mean that Mrs Ramsay's self is completely disarticulated (as the case with the name illustrates; that her name cannot be determined to be Sara, does not mean that she does not have one, it *can* be Sara). Fand fittingly describes Mrs Ramsay as "the great absent presence" of *TL* (90), and, as we have seen, Mrs Ramsay was never restricted to her presence or her factual actions. Her self always included a present-absent, ghost-like "beauty" that cannot be "clutched". That unsolvable enigma remains, however, a vital part of the "groundless-ground" of *TL*.

3.4 The Death of Mrs Ramsay and the Death of Narrative

"In the most comprehensive sense... *To the Lighthouse* is about death" (Naremore 122). Naremore is in many ways correct to assert this. An intriguing symbol of this is the place Shakespeare's language assumes in the two novels. Where Shakespeare's words signify continued meaning in *MD*, and a bridge between subjectivities, Mr Ramsay sullenly remarks: "The very stone one kicks with one's boot will outlast Shakespeare" (32). The ephemerality of everything and everyone in the grand scheme of things is constantly suggested in *TW*, until it becomes the sole occupant of the reader's attention in *TP*. This dark prospect adds another level to the disarticulation of the self in Woolf's authorship.⁸⁷ As Hyman observes, Mrs

⁸⁶ The result of the narrative never saying Mrs Ramsay's first name (or her maiden name) is also to enhance Mrs Ramsay's "ideal" character. She is not restricted to one particular first name, but can stand for any mother or wife. Although the explanatory notes "reveal" that Mrs Ramsay's name is Sara in the manuscript to *TL* (Bradshaw *ad.* 163), that does not alter the fact that the printed novel "does not say" this.

⁸⁷ This is not say that *TL* is the first novel where Woolf foregrounds the ephemerality of the self. This is striking already in *The Voyage Out* where the protagonist dies a sudden, meaningless death – just at the point where the narrative has become a cohesive, love story with her as focal point. But unlike *TL*, this does not happen in the middle of the novel.

Ramsay is the character who is most sensitive for the deconstructive threat of decay and death in the narrative's "undercurrent" (Hyman 105):

[The fall of the waves] beat a measured and soothing tattoo to her thoughts and seemed consolingly to repeat over and over again as she sat with the children the words of some old cradle song, murmured by nature, 'I am guarding you – I am your support', but at other times suddenly and unexpectedly, especially when her mind raised itself slightly from the task actually at hand, had no such kindly meaning, but like ghostly roll of drums remorselessly beat the measure of life, made on think of the destruction of the island and its engulfment in the sea, and warned her whose day had slipped past in one quick doing after another that it was all ephemeral as a rainbow – this sound which had been obscured and concealed under the other sounds suddenly thundered hollow in her ears and made her look up with an impulse of terror. (*TL* 16-17)

This is the first of many passages where we learn of the dominant opposition within Mrs Ramsay herself. The loving mother who hears the beat of the waves as a lullaby, who defines herself as her children's guardian and supporter, distinguishes a sound beneath the enthralling rhythm. The "terror" that everything and everyone is "ephemeral as a rainbow" is more profound than the "soothing tattoo". Such passages attest that the deconstructive "undercurrent" of *TL* starts at the very beginning of the narrative. This disturbs, even deconstructs the narrative as a meaningful structure. Patrick Colm Hogan's description of the basic structure of stories can help us understand *how*:

A basic structure for stories begins with the fragile or temporary aspect normalcy disrupted by some precipitating even or change in conditions, leading to a goal pursuit. The goal pursuit constitutes the bulk of the story. It is obstructed by sometimes severe difficulties, but often still leads to achievement of the goal and a return of normalcy... (Hogan 125)

Like the title of *MD* indicates that the narrative is about Clarissa Dalloway, so does the title of *TL* suggest that the basic structure of its story is the question of going to the lighthouse. *TL* complies with, yet mostly defies Patrick Colm Hogan's and the invitation to "read for the plot" that lies in the title. This happens on many levels of the text, and is indicated already on the first page. The main character of the first page, James (the one who actually wants to go to the lighthouse) more or less disappears – until the third section where he no longer wants to go the lighthouse (!). *TL* further advances from a point where Mr and Mrs Ramsay are at the stage of life where: "the tide has already turned, and despite the apparent fullness and harmony of their lives, a strong undercurrent of division and chaos is exerting its power" (Hyman 105). As Hyman point out, even Mrs Ramsay's iconic beauty is from the beginning of the narrative implied fading (Hyman 105):

...she looked in the glass and saw her hair grey, her cheeks sunk, at fifty, she thought, possibly she might have managed things better – her husband; money; his books. But for her own part she would never for a single second regret her decision... (*TL* 9)

TL emerges from a point where things are the way they are, but will inevitably be subject to decay. The central couple are either determined not to change or unable to. At the same time, the narrative does not take on “tragedy”, or, in my opinion, “elegy”, as an alternative meaningful structure, because also the tragic, and mourning followed by consolation, central in most elegies (“elegy”), is denied space in the narrative, as I will return to.

One could say that also *MD* advances from a point where “the tide has already turned”, but where Clarissa has the party to plan for (and all the “life” it stands for in her mind), the central event of going to the lighthouse crucially is not “the goal pursuit” of the two people most critics agree are the central characters in *TL*. Despite that we can say that the prospect of going symbolizes the different epistemological worlds of the characters, Mrs Ramsay’s emotional insight versus Mr Ramsay’s scientific truth etcetera (Winston 44-45); it would be a stretch to say that the prospect of going is central to “the bulk of the story”, to use Hogan’s phrasing. One could of course interject that Lily’s picture competes with the journey as the “goal pursuit” of the story, or even takes over, but that competition or shift itself makes for a vital decentring of the narrative as such. Contrary to what the title of the final section may suggest, the lighthouse never becomes the narrative’s designated centre, but remains a narrative device that more than anything defies our expectations of what is “central”. Mrs Ramsay’s abrupt death epitomises not only the novel’s disarticulation of its (first) central self, but its deconstruction of narrative:

The nights now are full of wind and destruction... Almost it would appear that it is useless in such confusion to ask the night those questions as to what, and why, and wherefore, which tempt the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer.

[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.](105)

As Mr Ramsay stumbles “along a passage”, so does the reader “stumble” over the news of Mrs Ramsay’s death (Stevenson and Goldman 174), and is simultaneously told that “in such confusion” it is fruitless to ask why or wherefore. TP forces the reader to experience that Mrs Ramsay’s “terror” of course also concerns herself, but without presenting the moment as an actual tragedy. Mrs Ramsay does not die in *TL* – her death is reduced to a relative clause (“having died...”), instead of given a place in the narrative. The whole paragraph avoids information, explanation - even narration. It speaks of not just “destruction”, but

deconstruction. The sentences are left incomplete, missing commas and coherence. It is even outside specific time, as Mr Ramsay “one dark morning” stretched his arms out to embrace his wife, but she “having died” the night before that unspecific morning makes Mrs Ramsay grasp only emptiness. In such a manner, this defining moment denies Herman’s rule of narrative as a “distinctive way of coming to terms with time, process and change” (23). It is a death scene which refuses to be a death scene. The reader must stumble on without cohesion and the possibility of closure. Stevenson considers elegy a fitting term for *TL* in its “recognition of its death... and a movement towards possibilities and pastures new” (177), but at this point, the narrative rules out both contemplating on the loss and the movement towards new possibilities. The novel moves from its *sine qua non* - Mrs Ramsay, to as close to the “non” as possible. That the narrative then continues from this empty point is perhaps more heart-braking than the death itself. Levenson makes a related point as Stevenson’s argument for *TL* as an elegy of the Victorian novel. Levenson compares *TL* with the epic traditions of Milton and Joyce, but whereas the distance and widening of perspective in *Paradise Lost* and *Ulysses* work to give some sort of consolation to the fragile state of mankind, the “daunting juxtaposition of human limits and extra-human powers” in *TP* offers no such consolation (Levenson 170-1). The mid-section is the narrative’s open wound, offering the ephemerality of human life without anaesthesia. At the same time, the reader is painfully aware that it somehow must go on (Stevenson and Goldman 174-5). *TP* thus escapes our notions of what makes for a coherent narrative. *TP*’s defiance of narrative is intimately connected with its deconstruction of the self as the premise of narration. Woolf’s narration is correspondently at its most “egoless” in those bracketed sentences of *TP*.⁸⁸ The contrast between the mingling of subjectivities in *TW* to the emptiness of human presence is devastating.

TP exposes the ultimate threat to the relational self: “Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind which one could say: ‘This is he’ or ‘This is she’”(103). “[objects] alone kept the human shape and in the emptiness indicated how once they were filled and animated” (106). We are at the point in the narrative where, as Kemp described it, “world of objects is unable to carry our need for significance. The writer no longer converts things into centres of meaning or value” (102). The apocalyptic atmosphere of *TP* is only interrupted by the maids cleaning the house, but these are without extensive knowledge of the selves and lives of The Ramsays and their friends.⁸⁹ Mrs

⁸⁸ The perhaps only point of comparison is the narrative sections of *The Waves*.

⁸⁹ Emblematic for this lack of insight is that Mrs McNab is not sure if Mr Ramsay and Mrs Ramsay are dead or alive (114).

McNab's is so unsuitable to carry on the memory of the selves in the first section that it ridicules the reader's need for such consistency. Her memory is failing her, she is described as "witless" (111), and even the song she hums is described as "robbed of meaning" (107). The narrator rubs salt in the wound: "What power could now prevent the fertility, the insensibility of nature? Mrs MacNab's dream of a lady, of a child, of a plate of milk soup?" (113) The insensibility of the question is only surpassed by its answer: "She [Mrs McNab] had locked the door; she had gone. It was beyond the strength of one woman, she said" (113). The only self-presence is inept to carry on the memory of the family and their home, and literally walks out on the task. Where the first section foregrounded the self, and the obsession about questions such as: "Who am I?", "Who is she?" and "What is life?", TP foregrounds nature's ability to outlast humanity, making all these questions "robbed of meaning". The disturbing prospect of everything once becoming past that is felt in the undercurrent of the first section has become the unescapable present in the novel's middle section. Even the subject as a necessity of language is disarticulated: "**Listening (had there been anyone to listen)** from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightning **could** have been heard tumbling and tossing" (110, my emphasis). At this point, *TL* exhibits the perfect example of Kemp's argument:

FMF [feminist modernist fiction] offers the possibility of a subjectivity constructed not through the old scenarios of linear sequenced plot, but through new topographies. In the landscape of FMF, the subject cannot hold itself intact; identity and textual voice are contradictory and multiple: mixed up with objects and full of emptiness. (106)

But then, which has been neglected by critics like Levenson and Kemp, everything changes. First, Mrs Ramsay is evoked by McNab: "Yes, she could see Mrs Ramsay as she came up the drive with the washing. 'Good-evening, Mrs McNab,'" (111). Mrs McNab's proves not to be completely "unsuitable to carry on the memory" of the family, as her vivid memory rearticulates Mrs Ramsay's self – even makes her "speak". When "one of the young ladies" (114), presumably Lily, writes of their return, the housekeeper finishes her previously unbearable task of putting the house in order. The estate again becomes a vivid place, housing memories "fetched up from oblivion" (114). Lily returns already in the final chapter of TP: "Lily Briscoe stirring in her sleep clutched at her blankets as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff. Her eyes opened wide. **Here she was again**, she thought" (117, my emphasis). Once more Woolf returns to the insistence on the presence of the self. Thus, although TP remains a *memento mori* that never can be "unread", its devastating insights are made somewhat bearable by the return to narrative and the presence of self.

3.5 The Return to Self, Narrative and Mrs Ramsay

“The Lighthouse” opens with Lily’s feeling of meaninglessness upon returning to the summer house without Mrs Ramsay’s vital presence:

What does it mean then, what can it all mean? Lily Briscoe asked herself... What does it mean? – a catchword that was, caught up from some book, fitting her loosely, for she could not, this first morning with the Ramsay’s, contract her feelings, could only make a phrase resound to cover the blankness of her mind until these vapours had shrunk. For really, what did she feel, come back after all these years and Mrs Ramsay dead? Nothing – nothing that she could express at all. (121)

The narrative thus takes a step back, and we return to the devastating sentiment expressed in the darkest moments of TP. Both Lily’s and Mr Ramsay’s self-articulations are in crisis, and their mourning-processes appear just to have started. Lily finds the quest for meaning reduced to a “catchword” (121), and Mr Ramsay reaches out to Lily to gain the “sympathy” he has always needed, and which his wife no longer can be the source of:

They stood there, isolated from the rest of the world. His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer around her ankles, lest she should get wet. (126-127)

The loss of the one they love the most could have been a common ground for Lily and Mr Ramsay, but the gap between these two selves is too vast, perhaps because, as Lily remarks: “the link that usually bound things together had been cut” (122). Further, Mr Ramsay’s inability to relate to his children without the “link” his wife has been, hinders him from seeing that his loss is also theirs, and makes his sorrow subject to Cam’s and James’ pact to resist his “tyranny”. Cam considers going to the lighthouse: “part in those rites he [Mr. Ramsey] went through for his own pleasure in memory of dead people, which they hated” (136).⁹⁰ In *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Butler argues that loss leads to a *disorientation* because the self is relational (24). The relationship with the person lost enforces the question: “Who “am” I, without you?” (Butler, *Precarious Life* 22). Lily and Mr Ramsay are clearly experiencing such a disorientation, but they first reject the necessary *submission to transformation* Butler finds indicative to a (constructive) mourning process (*Precarious Life* 21). Mrs Ramsay’s death has changed the meaning of things, even who they are, yet they attempt to go back to the way it was. They are finally on their way to the lighthouse, but just as Lily struggles to see the meaning of anything without Mrs Ramsay

⁹⁰ It should be noted that Cam’s feelings towards her father generally expresses more ambivalence. She even feels proud of him, but the compact with her brother to “resist tyranny to the death” makes her dismiss such feelings (136).

present, Mr Ramsay ponders: “What’s the use of going now?” (121), and the children clearly no longer want to go: “He had forced them to come. In their anger they hoped the breeze would never rise... They hoped the whole expedition would fail” (134, 135). Contrary to the assurance James felt expressed in Mrs Ramsay’s opening words, the siblings now hope it will *not* be “fine”.⁹¹ Given that Mr Ramsay does not see the point in going (and he never did) – why force them when they no longer want to? Again, the narrative’s “goal pursuit” is deconstructed. The point is pointless.

If the narrative had ended with Lily’s “Nothing-nothing”, the novel would never have recovered from the open wound of deconstruction inflicted by TP, and the empty space it reduces Mrs Ramsay to. But also the blankness Lily feels, and the stupor it leaves the narrative in, is momentary. (Lily even manages to somehow give Mr Ramsay “whatever she had wanted to give him” (169)). This is a fundamental difference between *TL* and *The Waves*. Where the deconstructive “current” of *The Waves* never stops pulling apart the notion of the individual self, but is blasted out in Bernard’s final line: “Against you [death] I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (228),⁹² the final section of *TL* presents the return to narrative and a world seen with and from the self. Lily is able to make the move from meaningless emptiness to transformative mourning and the elegiac acceptance of death that opens for new possibilities. As she looks at her picture Lily realizes: “‘you’ and ‘I’ and ‘she’ pass and vanish; nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint” (147). But contrary to Goldman and Waugh, I think it clear that Mrs Ramsay does not completely “vanish” as Lily overcomes her. Rather, I find that Lily continues to (re)construct Mrs Ramsay as an other-self, and to use her as catalyst for her own memories. The latter sustains Mrs Ramsay as a co-creator of Lily’s self. In the following, I will look at several passages that indicate that although character-Mrs Ramsay is dead, the articulation of her as other-self “lives on”.

In a much more extensive way than Mrs McNab, Lily repeatedly invokes Mrs Ramsay through reminiscing:

When she thought of herself and Charles throwing ducks and drakes and of the whole scene on the beach, it seemed to depend somehow upon Mrs Ramsay sitting under the rock, with a pad on her knee, writing letters.... But what a power was in the human soul! she thought. That woman sitting there...she brought together this and that and then this, and so made out of that miserable

⁹¹ Waugh argues that the lighthouse for James was part of a pre-Oedipal fantasy of being at one with his mother (111) – this could be one way to explain his current disinterest in going with his father.

⁹² Note also the vast difference between the disarticulation of self literally *proclaimed* in Bernard’s submission, and the continued articulation of self and subjectivity I have argued for in Septimus’ final speech.

silliness and spite (she and Charles squabbling, sparring, had been silly and spiteful) something... which survived, after all these years, complete, so that she dipped into it to re-fashion her memory of him, and it stayed in the mind almost like a work of art. (132-3)

It is fascinating that Lily credits Mrs Ramsay with her recollection of Bankes, it still “depend[s]” on Mrs Ramays “*sitting* under the rock”. The use of present continuance implies the novel’s transformation of a distant past, a memory, to Lily’s experience of Mrs Ramsay’s presence in the moment. In other words, the passage suggest to me the very opposite than that Lily “overcome[s] Mrs Ramsay and her complicity with an old-order status quo” (Goldman and Stevenson 177). Elaborating on the position we recognize from Goldman, Hyman argues:

Lily cannot achieve her “vision” until Mrs. Ramsey’s death. While Mrs Ramsay lives, both Lily and her painting remain in the background. They are only foregrounded by the absence of Mrs. Ramsay. Lily achieves her vision only when she becomes the central mediating presence, acknowledging the presence of the living Mr. Ramsay on the one hand and the absence of the dead Mrs. Ramsay on the other. (104)

But is it correct that the picture depends on the absence of Mrs Ramsay and that Mrs Ramsay is absent from the moments of Lily’s vision? Hyman seems to take Lily too much on her word when she says that “Mrs Ramsay has faded and gone” (143), but neglects the moments where Lily exposes her continued reliance on Mrs Ramsay’s presence. Despite momentarily feeling that she triumphs over her (e.g. 144), Lily keeps invoking Mrs Ramsay: “Oh Mrs Ramsay! She called out silently, to that essence which sat by the boat, that abstract one made of her, that woman in grey, as if to abuse her for having gone, and then having gone, come back again” (146). Lily shows again that she is aware of making an “abstract” of Mrs Ramsay, but cannot help articulating her. She even experiences the “abstract” she creates as an “essence”, actually sitting on the boat. Hyman rests her argument on a limited notion of self-presence and what it means to be in the for- and background. It is correct that Lily cannot bring herself to paint when Mrs Ramsay is there, but the opposite is also true. It is only through conjuring Mrs Ramsay in “another sense” that the picture can exist at all.

In her further argument for the *displacement* of Mrs Ramsay, Hyman reads the dinner scene at the end of TW as demonstrating Mrs Ramsay’s “complicity of her own death” (Hyman 108). Hyman mentions that Mrs Ramsay is assured that the others will continue to remember her, and therefore contemplates: “however long they lived she would be woven” (92), but Hyman is so caught up in the argument for the displacement of Mrs Ramsay that she is unable or unwilling to reflect on that just as the Mrs Ramsay’s displacement is

foreshadowed in TW, such citations as we find on page 92 indicate that so is also her continued presence and articulation.

Humouring Hyman and Goldman, I “admit” that Lily must “overcome” the parts of Mrs Ramsay that create “some obstacle in her design” (143), such as the imperative of marriage and Mrs Ramsay’s silent critique of Lily as a painter, but I maintain that Lily’s self-creation and artistic vision remains dependent on Mrs Ramsay. I would say that the picture is always marked by Mrs Ramsay’s *presence*, although not in the restricted, autonomous sense. If we return to the paragraph where Lily proclaims that Mrs Ramsay “has faded and gone”, it is vital that Lily continues: “We can override her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas. She recedes further and further away from us” (143). Mrs Ramsay may recede “further and further away”, but she is not completely “gone”. Lily even implies that they continue to “improve” her. Thus, despite her outspoken rebellion, Lily opens up for the continued presence and effect of the absent presence of Mrs Ramsay. The articulation of Mrs Ramsay is not over, but is at the “mercy” of Lily and the others (143) – just as Mrs Ramsay hoped for.

Towards the end, Lily again experiences Mrs Ramsay sitting in the room with her, altering her composition:

At last somebody had come into the drawing-room; somebody was sitting in the chair... **It altered the composition of the picture a little.** It was interesting. It might be useful. Her mood was coming back to her... Ah, but what had happened? Some wave of white went over the window pane. **The air must have stirred some flounce in the room.** Her heart leapt at her and seized her and tortured her.

‘Mrs Ramsay! Mrs Ramsay!’ she cried, feeling the old horror come back – to want and want and not to have. Could she inflict that still? And then, quietly, as if she refrained, that too became part of ordinary experience, was on a level with the chair, with the table. Mrs Ramsay – it was part of her perfect goodness to Lily – sat there quite simply, in the chair, flicked the needles to and fro, knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. **There she sat.** (164-5, my emphasis).

As I argued was often the case with Septimus’ “ravings”, the narration only partially offers a natural explanation for Mrs Ramsay’s presence (“The air must have stirred some flounce in the room”). Once again the narration moves from a more objective, “egoless” position, to a subjective experience which eradicates any other explanation: “There she sat”. It is a narrative fact in the same way as Clarissa’s presence at the end of *MD*. The subjective again is the only

“explanatory model”.⁹³ Mrs Ramsay remains something “alarming” to Lily, even an “old horror”, but is also a constructive presence that is “useful” to Lily.

Waugh’s negative view of Mrs Ramsay makes her read the painting as Lily finally resisting “the urge to lose herself in the older woman” (113), whereas Spivak, in her complicated sexual-grammatical allegory, considers Mrs Ramsay “predicated” in Lily’s painting (30), epitomizing the novel as “an attempt to articulate” a “woman’s vision of a woman” (45). I think the completion of the picture makes Mrs Ramsay “reside” another step away, but never displaces the construction of Mrs Ramsey in “another sense”; in addition, it represents Lily. After Lily has assured herself of Mr Ramsay and the children finally reaching the lighthouse, she, seemingly out of nowhere, returns to her painting:

Quickly, **as if she were recalled by something over there**,⁹⁴ she turned to her canvas. There it was – her picture Yes, with all its green and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. **It would be hung in attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did that matter?** she asked herself, taking up her brush again... With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, **she drew a line there, in the centre**. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, **I have had my vision**. (170, my emphasis)

Despite the momentary turn from the instance of self-presence to a favour of the object, from “there she was” to “there *it* was”, the narrative returns to the primacy of the self. The “I” of the final sentence stand out, as even the veil of disarticulation implied in the use of third person is lifted, and is symbolically doubled by the line Lily finally manages to paint through the centre of the picture. But as Lily is aware, the picture is itself not the point: “it would be destroyed. But what did it matter?” It is fragile humanity’s turn to mock the threat posed by the passage of time. Lily does not care about the survival of the picture. She demonstrates once and for all that the “pursuit goal” in *TL* never actually was the picture or the lighthouse (as illustrated in the narrative breaking of when Mr Ramsay and the others finally reach it (Stevenson and Goldman 176)), but the articulation of this “I” which always was dependent on an other-self from which it could be distinguished. Critics like Hyman, Goldman and Waugh see the novel’s ending as the narrative’s final plunge from centring on Mrs Ramsey, the Ur-mother, to Lily, the new female subjectivity. But Lily’s moment of vision does not start a new painting, only featuring her own line or “I”, rather it makes her finally able to

⁹³ Again, the contrast to *The Waves* is striking: “And now I ask, “who am I” I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I only one and distinct? I do not know... **We are not here**” (222, my emphasis).

⁹⁴ What or who the “something over there” is, the narrator of course “does not say”. The moment of the vision is itself thus *possibly* inspired by Mrs Ramsay’s presence.

articulate herself in the centre of her “other sense” image of Mrs Ramsay and James. In my interpretation, Lily never overcomes Mrs Ramsay or any of the other selves, nor does she unite them. Lily’s painting does not just “suggest a new way of seeing the other”, as previously stated, but a new way of seeing the self. She shows with her vision that she is not just a champion for a new female subjectivity, but of an individual self which remains distinctly relational. An “I” in the middle of “hes” and “shes”.

*

As continuously argued in this thesis, Woolf’s novels tend to create other notions of self than the traditional view in the Cartesian-Kantian paradigm.⁹⁵ The “mosaic”, coreless-core, decentered-centre that is Mrs Ramsay can be seen as emblematic for this new articulation of self that remains the premise of narration. The question: “who is she?”, is the primary motor of the novel, yet the narrative constantly returns to the impossibility of “clutching” her. The narrative’s centre is itself decentered and disarticulated through the possibility that Mrs Ramsay’s self does not amount to more than the other characters’ projections. But despite the immense threat of disarticulation of both self and narrative posed by TP and the deconstructive “undercurrent” of TW, the novel returns to the narration of self.

The shift from the relative focus on Mrs Ramsay to the relative focus on Lily (though not much discussed here, we must not forget that the last section significantly also is about Mr Ramsay, Cam and James), does not in my opinion indicate that Lily “overcomes”, or even replaces Mrs Ramsay as the novel’s centre. Much like Clarissa receives a communication in Septimus’ “plunge”, Lily’s vision creates a lasting space for the absent-presence of Mrs Ramsay – a self which is dependent on an “other” to “paint” or “weave” it. Again: The self was never restricted to the self. It is of course not just Lily who depends on Mrs Ramsay. As Lily needs to keep her “object” in “another sense” to paint her “I”, Mrs Ramsay was always dependent on others looking for what could be behind her “beauty”. Thus, on several levels, the decentered-centre of *TL* illustrates the ways in which Woolf’s novels insist on the self as their *sine qua non*, yet also significantly disarticulate the notions of a coherent, autonomous and essential self “beneath”.

⁹⁵ Effectively summed up by Wang: “autonomous, self-contained, and fully conscious of itself and which is assumed to be the source of meaning and thought, independent of social structure, discourse, and systems of signification” (177).

Insisting on the Self

Orlando, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* constantly remind us that the self is a problematic, discursive construction rather than a given, transparent being. They reveal the self as dependent on linguistic constructions and rely on an “other” or “others” from which a *sense of self* can be distinguished. Although an extreme case, it is not just Orlando who changes constantly, the significant “Orlando” struggling to encompass a diverging personality. The self is always subject to various roles in different relationships, changes throughout life, and speaks *itself* within already spoken structures of language. Thus, any sense of a self always involves some kind of denial of lack of coherence, “sameness” and sufficiency. The narrative consistency is what keeps Orlando, Septimus and Mrs Ramsay together – but it has been my intent to demonstrate that this also works the other way around – the continued articulation of self is the anchor point of these experimental narratives. It is no coincidence that *OB* ends at the point where the task of narrating Orlando dissolves into almost incomprehensible lyricism. When I compare my three readings, the perhaps most surprising finding is exactly that *OB*, the novel I introduced as most obviously about the representation of a self, to a greater extent than *MD* and *TL* works to disarticulate its central self. Although Mrs Ramsay and Septimus both die, I would say that their selves are not *as* disarticulated as Orlando’s is. *MD* allows room for the articulation of Septimus’ self - both in the moment of his death, and afterwards as Clarissa receives his “attempt to communicate”. *TL* does not end with the threat of utter disarticulation of self as revealed in TP, but returns to the presence of self as its premise, and specifically lets Mrs Ramsay “survive” as the vital “other-self” to Lily. Again, the focus on self expose that Woolf’s narratives are about so much more than “what happens”, and the distinction between character and self therefore is vital.

As for *subject*, Schwab entitles her introductory chapter “The Insistence of the Subject”, and reminds us that we cannot “conceive of language without presupposing a subject” (6), but I think that we cannot conceive of much at all without constructing a self behind the subject of language. The “I”, “she” or “he” never actually equalled a self, but when the modernist character asks “Who am I?” or my added: “Who is s/he whom I construe myself from?” what the literary self is wondering about is of course not the meaning of the words “I” “he” or “she”, or any linguistic or grammatical entity at all, but the *sense* of self we depend on being signified by such words. Still, by asking the question the self is always already exposed as an elusive, discursive construction - and that insight was one of Woolf’s

favourite playing fields for literary exploration. Given an understanding of selves as constructions of language and specifically narrative structures, we can abstract literary selves in the same way as we do story from discourse. We can get to know these literary beings *as if* they were real people, but we need to not just be aware of, but appreciate this “as if”-status; the “truth in the hoax” of these fictions is that they expose that the self does not exist beyond the narration of it, but nevertheless is indispensable as it remains our primary “explanatory model” – both in literature and in life.

To read literature and simply say: “These are only words”, becomes the actual “flight into nothingness”. Yes, literature is only words, but as there actually is an “as if” everything is possible. Even the self. I think the subject anticipates the self also in Woolf’s three novels. The changing pronouns in *OB*, the connected yet distinct and never-meeting selves of *MD*, and the relational, absent-present self in *TL*; all illustrate that despite that the fleeting subject positions remain the hallmark of Woolf’s novels, the articulation of individual selves “survives” as long as the narratives do – at least in the three novels discussed here. The self as an abstraction of narrative, signifiers of gender and relations – as an “as if” can survive the death of both subject and character. It is because we are still able to hold on to a *sense* of self that we recognize distinct characters at all in these novels, that no matter how much they twist and turn with conventional ideas about how make up a protagonist (or a biographee), and how to construct a narrative, we return to these fractions as distinct beings that we can point to and say: Here is Orlando, here Septimus, and here, still, is Mrs Ramsay.

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