

The Mind, a Room of One's Own: An Epiphanic Moment in Virginia Woolf

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Virginia Woolf was a woman of momentous—and exquisite—moments, memorable moments that stand out in her novels in the form of epiphanies, as well as in the recollection and reworking of her own experience through memory and autobiographical writing. The intensity with which moments are experienced requires a fidelity both to the original experience and to the moment's return to light—to the narrative reworking that explores their significance.

Hermione Lee writes as follows of Woolf's return to her earliest recollections as a child:

her most intense memories were of moments of rapture or of shock, cutting through the moments of 'non-being', of everyday life. Only by being turned into writing, she says in her autobiography, can these moments be 'made whole' or lose their power to hurt. This is her whole rationale for writing: all her life she gives herself pleasure by finding the 'revelation of some order' through such 'moments of being'. So she masters her memories by structuring them like fictions.¹

Recent research on the phenomenology of Woolf's narrative time has likewise emphasized the importance of moments in Woolf's narratives, and the distinctiveness of their articulation in the experiential frame of the novels. In "Exquisite Moments and the Temporality of the Kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*",² Kate Haffey examines the way the remembrance of one 'queer' kiss by Clarissa Dalloway by her teenage friend Sally Seton is an enduring and recurring moment of emotional significance, endowed with a peculiar kind of presence or presentness, "a moment of queer temporality; it hangs between life and death, between youth and adulthood, and crashes through all the barriers meant to keep the past and the present separate" (Haffey 2010: 149). What the moment disrupts is not just the emotional structure of the ongoing self (home, marriage, middle age, the routine expectations of daily life) but also the ordinary, orderly and workaday flow of time. The significant moment recurs and is therefore no longer merely past; the unexpectedness and continuing significance of its return challenges the expectation of our experiential subordination to time as a series and to sensory experience as the locus of the present. There is a rather deadening element in the expectation of ordinary purposive action, a living-out of the everyday as a self-fulfilling expectation:

It is the belief that the future will be merely a repetition of the past. The moment, however, is able to disrupt this kind of temporality, the temporality of cause and effect, of past projected into the future. For both Clarissa and Kitty, a kiss allows them to occupy the present momentarily and to feel the elation of a future that is on the horizon but is not yet decided.³

The epiphanic moment is experienced as an unexpected synthesis of multiple identities and experiences, a conjunction whose very contingency opens up unforeseen possibilities of creative experience. Creativity, openness, unexpectedness, complexity—no wonder memorable moments that make the most of this synthesis provide the experience of the subliminal or the unconscious coming to consciousness, and no wonder they tend to return to mind and to become milestones in personal development, and in the story of one's relation to oneself. The attention Virginia Woolf pays to the complexity and density of the moment is a tribute both to the present and to the mind—if the mind is to be defined, for the sake of this argument, as the management of emergent complexity, and the present as the locus not just of reality, but of the mental activity that synthesizes it.

The theoretical foundation for this notion of the mind and of the present can be grounded in a materialist conception of time as a mental construction, such as the one provided by the pragmatist philosophy of George Herbert Mead.⁴ Perhaps best known as the philosophical founder of symbolic interactionism ("social pragmatism" in his own terms), Mead provides a suggestive philosophy of the mind that, in its integration of time, consciousness, and self-interaction, can illuminate mental phenomena such as "bringing to consciousness", self-communication, and the reworking of memories, providing a perspective which can provide bridges between Woolf's attention to mental and reflective experience and a more general scientific conception of the mind as an evolutionary (and bodily) phenomenon. As a matter of fact, the mind is for Mead the locus of both the present and the most complex syntheses of evolutionary phenomena—of emergent complexity and creativity. Mead's approach provides a philosophical interface where a theory of the epiphany as emergent consciousness can be readily related to other relevant approaches to symbolic action we'll mention in passing,—for example, rhetorical analysis after Kenneth Burke, dialogical-Bakhtinian perspectives, or cognitive theories of imagery such as Fauconnier and Turner's conceptual blends. The element of synthesis and blending in symbol-making will indeed be especially relevant to our central passage here, but our discussion as a whole should be read as a claim for the present relevance of Mead's symbolic interactionism for understanding mental activity and its representation.⁵

An epiphany is a moment of emergence and synthesis, a significant "coming-to-consciousness", a mental state in which the subject becomes self-reflexively aware of her own sensibility and privileged perception. It may actually be a moment of topsight, the awareness of one's own cognitively dominant understanding and perspective.⁶ In the epiphanic moment, reality is revealed both as a complex interaction of phenomena and as the possibility of coming to terms with it, through an integration in the surrounding world that may be felt in the body, but is vividly experienced as the mind's insight into the world as experienced, the mind's making a new acquaintance of itself through a sudden understanding of the way things hang together, with ourselves and our outlook in their midst. Many of Woolf's memorable moments, "moments of rapture or of shock, cutting through the moments of 'non-being', of everyday life" (Lee, 106)—have this epiphanic quality. It goes without saying that there may be different types of epiphanies—some have a more aesthetic, some a more emotional or even religious or mystical quality (there is quite often, indeed, an adumbration of an unexpected or hidden dimension of reality in such epiphanic moments—and some of them may have a more cognitive and interpretive dimension). There is a 'family resemblance' between

epiphanies, but surely the central, most distinctive ones evince a multi-dimensional synthesis of cognition, aesthetics, emotion and revelatory insight.⁷

I want to focus on one epiphanic passage in *A Room of One's Own*,⁸ a passage about — among other things— the mind, or perhaps *the androgynous mind*, androgyny being here a way of escaping predetermination, and experiencing the mental fluidity in which the mind is most at home with itself—in a familiar room, perhaps, but in an unexpected dimension too, one in which the present, and reality, are transformed through the sheer power of the mind's plasticity. Coming from a reflective essay with political overtones, it is perhaps to be expected that the cognitive elements will be prominent, blended with the aesthetic and emotional dimensions of experiential insight. Here we will re-experience this epiphany in slow motion, through a close reading of the passage.

As a critical mode, close reading is perhaps most associated to the New Criticism, the contemporary critical response to modernist literature. It is quite well attuned to a mode of writing that privileges immersion in a foreign consciousness—that of a reflecting character, or that of any writer's text experienced as view of another mind from the inside. It is with the modernists —Henry James, Joyce, Proust, Dorothy Richardson, or Woolf— that prose fiction fully discovers and explores its privileged position as regards the reading of minds, of other minds; its potential to invite us into the private room of the mind of the other, and get a glimpse of the world as seen through their eyes and sensibilities.⁹ Film, a novel medium, would still take some time to explore its own potential in this area, and it would do so to a large extent by following the insights explored by modernist novelists. A close reading of Woolf's epiphanic moment will be our instrument of choice to experience the complexity of Woolf's own 'cinematographical apparatus of the mind', to use the terminology of her contemporary, the evolutionary theorist Henri Bergson.¹⁰

This is the moment in question:

Next day the light of the October morning was falling in dusty shafts through the uncurtained windows, and the hum of traffic rose from the street. London then was winding itself up again; the factory was astir; the machines were beginning. It was tempting, after all this reading, to look out of the window and see what London was doing on the morning of the twenty-sixth of October 1928. And what was London doing? Nobody, it seemed, was reading *Antony and Cleopatra*. London was wholly indifferent, it appeared, to Shakespeare's plays. Nobody cared a straw—and I do not blame them—for the future of fiction, the death of poetry or the development by the average woman of a prose style completely expressive of her mind. If opinions upon any of these matters had been chalked on the pavement, nobody would have stooped to read them. The nonchalance of the hurrying feet would have rubbed them out in half an hour. Here came an errand-boy; here a woman with a dog on a lead. The fascination of the London street is that no two people are ever alike; each seems bound on some private affair of his own. There were the business-like, with their little bags; there were the drifters rattling sticks upon area railings; there were affable characters to whom the streets serve for clubroom, hailing men in carts and giving information without being asked for it. Also there were funerals to which men, thus suddenly reminded of the passing of their own bodies, lifted their hats. And then a very distinguished gentleman came slowly down a doorstep and paused to avoid a collision with a bustling lady who had, by some means or other, acquired a splendid fur coat and a bunch of Parma violets. They all seemed separate, absorbed, on business of their own.

At this moment, as so often happens in London, there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed. A single leaf

detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along, as the stream at Oxbridge had taken the undergraduate in his boat and the dead leaves. Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxi-cab, and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere.

The sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was the rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it; and the fact that the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction. The sight of two people coming down the street and meeting at the corner seems to ease the mind of some strain, I thought, watching the taxi turn and make off. Perhaps to think, as I had been thinking these two days, of one sex as distinct from the other is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind. Now that effort had ceased and that unity had been restored by seeing two people come together and get into a taxi-cab. The mind is certainly a very mysterious organ, I reflected, drawing my head in from the window, about which nothing whatever is known, though we depend upon it so completely. Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body? What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind', I pondered, for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being. It can separate itself from the people in the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them. Or it can think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out. It can think back through its fathers or through its mothers, as I have said that a woman writing thinks back through her mothers. Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical. Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives. But some of these states of mind seem, even if adopted spontaneously, to be less comfortable than others. In order to keep oneself continuing in them one is unconsciously holding something back, and gradually the repression becomes an effort. But there may be some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back. And this perhaps, I thought, coming in from the window, is one of them. For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion. The obvious reason would be that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate. One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest possible satisfaction, the most complete happiness. But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness. And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain, the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually cooperating.

(Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, ch. 6)

This episode and this passage are of course highly characteristic of Virginia Woolf's sensibility, perceptions and reflections. It is significant that the motif of a couple walking together in the city, as an image of precarious harmony between the sexes, was the intended opening of Woolf's first novel, *The Voyage Out*, surviving through many preliminary drafts of the novel.¹¹ As the novel stands, the couple get into a taxi but the scene suggests disunion and confusion rather than unity. Still, we see Woolf coming back to the image in 1929, adding the cab as a rounding-off to the scene observed by the author in the street (Briggs, 2005: 321) in order to find in it a perfectly satisfactory resting place for the mind.

There is almost too much to comment on this moment that conflates stillness and a peculiar intensity, a moment of intuitive perception and its subsequent recollection and elaboration. I shall focus therefore on the second half of the passage, once the scene has been set by the epiphany itself, at that moment when time itself appears to stop, in a moment of insight and self-communication framed by the window frame. Woolf's written re-elaboration of the moment first, and then our close reading of each sentence, will provide us with a perspective twice removed on the workings of the author's—and the character's—thought processes.

The mind is certainly a very mysterious organ, I reflected.

—And this is the reflective attitude *par excellence*: reflection on the mind brings with it a suggestion of endless reflections, or an infinite regress. The organ (?) will remain mysterious after Woolf's reflections, or our own. As a matter of fact, it may become even more mysterious in the process, given that we may discover some depths or dimensions unsuspected by those who have never taken the time to pause and reflect on their own thoughts. And yet in some sense the mind will also get to be better known, taking a new acquaintance of itself,¹² observing itself in its processes, its associations of ideas, and its various simultaneous levels and intersecting planes of functioning. In her previous essays "Modern Fiction" and "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" Woolf had already drawn our attention to this strange quality of reality that emerges when we examine it in close-up and get to discover new hidden dimensions in it, through the mere procedure of not submitting ourselves to ready-made, hackneyed or customary habits of perception or representation.

"The Mark on the Wall" is another insightfully subtle essay or story in which Woolf's mind observes its own processes. It is an essay on nothing, one might say—but it is a nothingness that is brimming with energy and productivity, like the quantum void of modern physics. Like the passage in *A Room*, it is yet another essay on a moment of self-absorption, with the author's mind a blank page, so to speak, or rather a palimpsestic blank. Moments of self-absorption are full of potentialities and of barely formulated thoughts milling under the empty surface. This kind of blankness contains the temptation and the potential of creativity, of the unexpressed. Just try to look for a moment at a blank page, and it is not whiteness that you will see. Or perhaps you will see a whiteness like Moby Dick's, challenging the mind, which is itself, to extract from "these waste blanks" that which nobody had seen but which was, somehow, already there. Or waiting to emerge, from the mind's inaudible workings, to consciousness.

drawing my head in from the window,

This reflection (or this emergence from the deep) takes place at the moment when Virginia Woolf the character goes back into the room (a room with a view, a room of

her own) after looking on the street through the windows of perception. Everything happens in this second, a London second dense like the ones we find in Joyce's Dublin, or in those slow-motion digressions of Sterne's in *Tristram Shandy*. The room is the offline mind turned on itself,¹³ the Paleolithic cave of the Dream-time. The window is the window of perception, an opening on the external world ("the world outside your window" in Tanita Tikaram's song, or Bickerton's 'online thought').

Through this window, Virginia Woolf (the character, and now the writer) has witnessed a scene that she will proceed to allegorize, or rather, a scene that has allegorized itself spontaneously in the back room of her mind, providing her with the image she needed in order to alleviate the strains tightening in her. In an ordinary and yet unnaturally quiet moment, a man and a woman get into a taxi, and the cab drives off. The whole is described within the image of a stream—the stream of time which carries all things within it, perhaps, or the stream of chance, of happenstance, the contingent flow of events and moments (they are the same stream, or at least they flow on the same river bed). The man, the woman and the moment were being watched from a window by Virginia Woolf, who now turns her attention back to herself.

about which nothing whatever is known, though we depend upon it so completely.

This is not wholly inaccurate. These were the formative years of psychoanalysis, of phenomenology, of modern experimental psychology— and of Mead's symbolic interactionism— long before cognitive neurology and the experiments on the theory of mind. What was known about the mind if we discount these contributions is really very little, and Woolf seems to have realized this. Her perceptions and intuitions will need an explanation, too; possibly, they will elicit explanations for quite some time to come. To say that "we depend upon the mind so completely" is, however, a slightly preposterous or ridiculous way of putting it. It would be more accurate to say that we live in a mental environment, or that we are mental beings first and foremost. Put in a different register, we are both body and soul, but it is our souls rather than our bodies that are most ourselves.¹⁴

There is a parallel, though, between the mind and the body, and Woolf seems to point to something like a corporeality of the mind—to certain joints or muscles or organic structures sustaining its morphology, and articulating it in ways that can be subject to tensions or strained postures and movements:

Why do I feel that there are severances and oppositions in the mind, as there are strains from obvious causes on the body?

She feels it because she is a modern woman, living through the tensions of modernity, and the new woman is struggling for a new role in the public sphere. That is one reason why Woolf is writing, and that is one reason why she needs her room, her own private space. The tension between the masculine and the feminine spaces is given a memorable formulation in *A Room of One's Own* when the author is barred access to the university library because she is a woman. This strain in the public space is experienced by Woolf as an inner strain. (It is also a strain in her own marriage with her devoted, protective and oppressive husband, Leonard).

This underlying tension, both personal and political (*the personal is the political* would become a motto of the new feminist movement in the 1970s but is a living experience here) now finds an expression, and with it a relief, in the image of the man and the

woman getting into the cab. Let us note in passing that the automobile is a product and a symbol of modernity, much more so for Woolf than for us nowadays.

What does one mean by 'the unity of the mind', I pondered,

A major modernist theme surfaces here—the multiplicity underlying the self that was being theorized at the time by the social psychology of Cooley and Mead, and their theory of the structuring of the self through roles.¹⁵ Still, in the 1920s and the 30s literary circles were more aware of psychoanalysis and often conceived of this multiplicity in terms of the tension between the unconscious drives of the id and the socialized, civilized self, or in terms of the repression of the pleasure principle (as Freud does in *The Ego and the Id*, 1923, or in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, 1930).

The modernist critique of the unity of the mind, and its denunciation as an illusion, finds a memorable expression in the following poem by E. E. Cummings:

so many selves(so many fiends and gods
each greedier than every)is a man
(so easily one in another hides;
yet man can,being all,escape from none)

so huge a tumult is the simplest wish:
so pitiless a massacre the hope
most innocent(so deep's the mind of flesh
and so awake what waking calls asleep)

so never is most lonely man alone
(his briefest breathing lives some planet's year,
his longest life's a heartbeat of some sun;

his least unmotion roams the youngest star)
—how should a fool that calls him "I" presume
to comprehend not numerable whom?¹⁶

The slightly anomalous typography is kept here as in the original, because in order to understand this poem in its full formal dimension one must take into account that Cummings (who often wrote his name "e.e. cummings") sometimes renounced using capitals, defying the orthographic conventions of English poetry (and prose) as he does in this poem. It is not by chance that the only capital letter here is ascribed to the overbearing and preposterous "I", a spelling anomaly in Cummings disguised behind a spelling anomaly in the English language, signaling here an over-ambitious conception of the self (compare to another spelling anomaly, "God" as "He"), and a pronoun often rewritten by *cummings* as a less ambitious "i"—that may also be read as Roman numeral for number one, but is itself graphically divided and is perhaps less optimistically Phallic.¹⁷ The subdued or minor character of the self is thus expressed in this poem together with its precarious unity, or its dispersed diffusion through the universe, in keeping with Cummings's religious views.

Still there is an I in Woolf's text, the capital I of "I pondered", visible and intrusive in contradiction with the third person of the mind being reflected upon—somewhat like the predicament visible in Hume's argumentation while he deconstructs the self into a loose sequence of impressions—an excellent reasoning that is at odds with the continual

presence of the argumentative and philosophical I, who did not refrain from signing the *Treatise of Human Nature* with his own name. An author must need be an I to some extent, or pass for one. Nay, an author is a privileged self, an authoritative I as a speaker, a focus of understanding or a point of view, even when discussing the dissolution and precarious structure of the self.

for clearly the mind has so great a power of concentrating at any point at any moment that it seems to have no single state of being.

The mind appears here as the management of attention. The shifting of attention amounts to what Keats would call a "negative capability" of the mind—it becomes engrossed in its object; it is a fluid process of engaging different aspects of reality, giving access to sub-worlds within the world, or sub-moments within the moment (notice that *the moment* recurs again in this sentence of Woolf's text). Our plastic, Protean mind keeps us in a permanent state of potentiality, at a crossroads of infinite possibilities that were barely intuited at the moment it first began to turn back on itself and to study itself, "minding the mind".¹⁸ Having (or being) a multidimensional mind makes the ability to focus attention all the more important. Woolf's experience of the London moment is an excellent example of the way in which these two aspects of the mind combine—its openness to the world and its multiplicity (the window) and its ability to center on itself, and, reflexively, transform itself and transform the world through the focusing of attention. Attention, and its selectivity, plays of course a central role in the articulation and fusion of images and representations in the process that Fauconnier and Turner call conceptual integration or blending.¹⁹ Which is arguably, together with symbolism and narrative (and I do mean *together*), the most distinctive ability of the human mind.

It can separate itself from the people in the street, for example, and think of itself as apart from them, at an upper window looking down on them.

In this sentence the reader's mind suddenly recognizes the scene narrated by Woolf, the setting for this excursus or incursion into the mind—both a setting, and an example—a model of the functioning of the mind itself. It is also a model for perspectival and cognitive *topsight*, for the author's own superior cognitive prowess—and an expression of the misgivings elicited by such cognitive dominance, the danger of isolation within one's own frame, in an ivory tower away from common human concerns, as a misguided metaphysician looking down on the *hoi polloi*, an intellectual with delusions of grandeur building one of those idealistic edifices that rest on a negation of their material basis. Although, as a matter of fact, this sentence is already thought inside the room, and written on the desk: it contains therefore two distinct phases or moments: first, a vivid sensation (by Woolf the focalizer character) of a moment of contemplation standing at the window, where the image is first generated by perception and physical experience. Then, the internal dialogical reaction to that perception, leading perhaps to the subject's moving away from the window, but reaching full conscious expression back at the desk, when Woolf the narrator writes about her experience. It is now that the lived sensation of isolation can be fully expressed, the isolation that was experienced at the window in a dynamic tension with the observer's immersion in the quiet moment and the scene. The isolation and the incipient reaction to it find a more perfect expression in the deliberate solitude of the writer at her desk, in her room. This rounds off the writer's reaction to the impression and further shapes the its symbolic meaning, the sense which is now being attributed to it. The mind is reacting to others, and thinking with others, even when most alone, and responding to its own promptings.

Or it can think with other people spontaneously, as, for instance, in a crowd waiting to hear some piece of news read out.

We are individuals, we are a society of individuals, we contain multitudes, legion after legion.²⁰ We are one and many—the crowd inside—but in a crowd we can feel largely what others feel, and either through overt communication or through empathy, we can know that we partake of other people's experiences and that they also share much of what we feel, given that we live in a communal world shaped by shared symbols, values and experiences.²¹ Woolf was very much aware of this community of feeling and thought, as shown in the following passage from a 1903 journal:

I think I see for a moment how our minds are threaded together—how any live mind is of the very same stuff as Plato's & Euripides. It is only a continuation & development of the same thing. It is this common mind that binds the whole world together, & all the world is mind.²²

This passage comes close to the formulation of a universal intertextuality of mind and thoughts in intellectual terms, but there is also an empathetic and emotional dimension in Woolf's projecting herself into other selves and other minds, in reading, in writing or in observing experience. As a matter of fact, there is a moment of empathetic projection in the first earlier scene as well, the one recalled by the solitary writer which stands in contrast with her situation: from the window, Woolf also feels and lives by proxy what it is to meet one's partner, the other in the couple, and to get together into a taxi. The spontaneous union with others, in the collective experience of the waiting crowd, brings to my mind (and likely to that of other readers) Virginia Woolf's experience of political activism, her early experiences with the women's suffrage movement, fictionalized in *The Voyage Out* (1915). Without explicitly mentioning anything of the like, the example of the waiting crowd in *A Room of One's Own* makes us think of a group of people with similar expectations, taking part in a common situation, and waiting for some crucial piece of news, relevant to them all and to their projects—a moment of participation in the life of a community characteristic of a period in which such political emotions were especially intense and absorbing. The image may have been suggested in contrast to the solitary mind watching the view from the window, aloft from communal human concerns, even the most pressing ones, or those which have appeared to be pressing in another "moment of being".

It can think back through its fathers or through its mothers, as I have said that a woman writing thinks back through her mothers.

Mental experience is not restricted to the present moment: it is an experience of time travel, as the mind (re)constructs past and future moments, always in some evaluative or emotional relationship to the present—and memories of personal experiences actually have a distinct neurophysiological basis of their own.²³ But the elaborate symbolic constructions of human culture allow us to travel to the communal past and future, moving through the worlds of history, art and literature, and living through them other people's experiences that are also potentially our own—that are already in part our own. The literature inherited by Woolf is primarily that of the patriarchal Western tradition, that of her *fathers*—most prominently among them Leslie Stephen, the model for Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. Stephen was doubly a Father, as a *pater familias* and as a man of letters, the guardian of patriarchal culture, the editor of nothing less than the *Dictionary of National Biography*, which is the closest thing to an official registry of the Fathers of the English nation.²⁴ And of some of the mothers, too—as Virginia was

particularly sensitive to the female tradition of forgotten and neglected women writers... or *invented* women writers, as in her counterexample concerning the outstanding genius Judith Shakespeare in *A Room of One's Own*.²⁵ Anglophone feminists of a later generation, like Ellen Moers in *Literary Women*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, or Elaine Showalter in *A Literature of Their Own*²⁶ will readily connect with Woolf in "thinking back through their mothers", rediscovering their experiences and conditioning circumstances, and developing an increased awareness of their own experiences and circumstances as women writers in the process. Woolf's writing, and texts like the present one, will provide a powerful inspiration for them in this process of "thinking back" through their intellectual mothers, even the childless ones—many major women writers are childless mothers, and many give birth to literary children that take decades, or centuries, to gestate. They change, too, in the process—Virginia Woolf herself, once reinterpreted along the lines suggested by herself, has turned out to be much more of a feminist theorist than she seemed to be in her own lifetime, and a figure of increasing complexity as her posthumous reputation developed.²⁷

Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness,

An attention to the mind and to its workings—felt from the inside, as a split threatening the subject's own consistency, the mind divided against itself. The specific experience of being a woman involves these divisions or tensions the text mentioned earlier. Such tensions in an intersubjective mind amount almost to a double personality and a double allegiance: the sense of self inherited from the fathers, and the one coming from the mothers, perhaps one that is discovered in particularly significant moments. Because the allusion to the moment recurs here in the suddenness and surprise as, indeed, a split marks a moment as a special one, a moment of insight perhaps, when the tensions make themselves felt or a veil actually falls, transforming the stroller, or the street—

say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical.

Whitehall is the neural center of political power in Britain, still off limits to onetime suffragette activists. Woman appears now as *the other within* civilization, or perhaps *the other within herself*, because this societal division is interiorized and experienced from the inside—as a consequence of Cooley's "looking-glass self". It is not just a matter of a split between the "alien and critical" woman and patriarchal society (or between the "alien and critical" woman and other women); it goes deeper than that. The split is a "splitting off of consciousness" that takes place within the woman herself. We see Virginia as the frustrated suffragette, still furious at the limited role of women in the public sphere, living her discontent as a mental alteration, a recurrent schizophrenia (this moment is also *many moments*). A split of consciousness is a threat coming from the inside, from the outside that has become the inside and has structured it as this unstable system of tensions. The anger, the alienation, the tension are not so alien, maybe, to those voices that hounded Virginia occasionally and would not let her alone, invading the mind's private room.²⁸ Speaking of windows, and tensions, one must remember that Virginia Woolf had already tried to commit suicide once by jumping from a window, an episode displaced and fictionalized—in the sense of assimilated and exorcised through fiction-making—in *Mrs Dalloway*. And (fast-forward to the future, a future we now know) it was in part the threat and the torment of those alien voices she

heard inside her head that made her opt once again for suicide in 1941. This is all to say that the feeling of defamiliarization and strangeness, the *Verfremdung* from the spectacle of life, was not new to her—and in her experience this feeling of alienation was joined, to a great extent, to the tensions involved in the female condition and the feminine social identity. Woolf found being a woman problematic, and not just in political terms. From a sexual point of view, she apparently never fully came to terms with her own sexual identity. She was never sexually attracted to her husband and apparently could not endure penetration during sex²⁹—her relationship with Leonard developed into a mixture of companionship and patriarchal guardianship on his part, after her most serious nervous breakdown just after their marriage.³⁰ While never "coming out" as a lesbian, and often derisive of homosexuals, Woolf was more erotically attracted to women than to men. She seems to have had a strong physical aversion to heterosexual physicality, and she channeled this rejection through nervous breakdowns and hysterical countermoves, which fed into her panic attacks, bipolar oscillations, hypersensitivity, anorexic fixations, headaches, "voices in the head," and other disorders.

Psychoanalysis 101 would suggest a circulating association between this aversion to the penetration of the inner bodily space and her desire for *a room of her own* free from the intrusions of men. They soon had separate bedrooms. Virginia had also been Leonard's in-house landlady before their marriage—an experience of intimacy and separation that further overdetermines the loaded connotations of the staked-out private space of a writer's room.

Masculine prosaic priorities and their interruptions of the female train of thought are unwelcome in "The Mark on the Wall", in *To the Lighthouse*, and elsewhere. The integration with masculinity would have to be psychologically interiorized, as it could not be endured in the form of heterosexuality. Thence her interest in female rebelliousness and in androgyny, and her lesbian or transsexual fantasies, like the ones she imaginatively projected in *Orlando* (1928)—a novel written for her beloved Vita Sackville-West. Surely not all women share this impulse toward contentiousness or this sense of social and identitarian alienation, but Woolf posits herself, as an educated and thinking woman, as a role-model for the typical woman, a role-model who is also a social misfit or a marginal malcontent.

There is perhaps a deeper dissatisfaction here, beyond gender roles or inequalities, not least an acute sense that (in Luis Eduardo Aute's words) *el pensamiento no puede tomar asiento*, 'thought cannot take a seat'.³¹ But this realization is experienced through the subject position of a modern woman in the 1920s and in the context of her own psychopathological dispositions and background. Woolf strives to imagine a way out—a non-traumatic, harmonious experience of herself and of society, an existence without divisions like the one she portrayed in part in *Orlando*, or the one the painter Lily Briscoe manages to imagine through her art in *To the Lighthouse*. The image of the integration of opposites, the reconciliation of the masculine and the feminine element, getting together into the taxi of the integrated self, and driving away to an optimistic future, is a tempting one—although neither her marriage with Leonard Woolf nor her personal experience was as harmonious and balanced as this symbol of smooth integration.

Clearly the mind is always altering its focus, and bringing the world into different perspectives.

The mind re-presents the world, and in so doing it constitutes and transforms it—Bergson's notion of the *cinematic apparatus of the mind* is apposite here, as Woolf seems to be thinking as well of the world reshaped by the mind as a filmic narrative focalized by the camera from different angles, or perhaps as an object that can be photographed in a variety of ways, through the shifting lens of mental attention. Be as it may, the experienced world, phenomenal reality, results from or includes these perspectives, which give it the actual shape it takes.

But some of these states of mind seem, even if adopted spontaneously, to be less comfortable than others.

Here we get to listen to the person with a personal experience of an ailing mind, subject to inner tensions, in pain because of the recurrent unnaturally stiff postures and repeated contortions interiorized by the self, a mind seeking first of all postural relief, a less forced positioning with regard to the world. Patriarchal culture is both spontaneous and compulsory; the order of the sexes ('heteropatriarchy' in the current language of the tribe) is both spontaneous and forced on the mind. Under different (constraining) circumstances, a different order might be spontaneously generated, too.

In order to keep oneself continuing in them one is unconsciously holding something back, and gradually the repression becomes an effort.

Here the language of psychoanalysis appears: the Virginia who is familiar (not firsthand, but through her Bloomsbury acquaintances, and through Leonard) with Freud's psychoanalysis and his theories on repression and the unconscious. She does have firsthand knowledge, though, both of psychotherapy after her first suicide attempt, and she has become conscious of the weight of the Victorian repressions carried by herself and her class and culture; conscious, as well, of the need to refocus her attention, and the postural habits of the social world she inhabits, in order to alleviate the tensions undergone by the mind. Perhaps too in order to become aware of things about which she cannot think clearly at this point, since these tensions obviously prevent the mind from focusing on some issues with the clarity she requires.

But there may be some state of mind in which one could continue without effort because nothing is required to be held back.

We find here a utopian moment: an intimation of a mental state without tensions (perhaps once the current sexual order has been transcended, something that would take us beyond evolution, or to the end of evolution—to the posthuman? This utopia may possibly never overrule (or dissolve) the present sexual or social order, but nevertheless it does exist, as a utopia—and crucially, too, as a lived experience, not in a life lived out as such, but surfacing to a glimpse in a transient moment.

The utopian order appears therefore as an epiphany, a state of mind or the sensation of one. Perhaps it is reworked through memory—like the remembered kiss in *Mrs Dalloway*—perhaps it will never materialize except as an enshrined memory or a passing epiphany, but this is more than nothing: it is a reality that has been inhabited. Hamlet said that nothing is good or bad unless our mind judges it to be such, and the mind constructs its own worlds—its own mountains and cliffs for Gerard Manley Hopkins, or Blake's *mind-forg'd manacles*.³² The mind can also build its own room as a stronghold, and its own utopia.

And this perhaps, I thought, coming in from the window, is one of them.

This moment. A culmination of the passage lies precisely here: in becoming conscious of the present —*this present, this gift*— as it is now that the narrative structure of the passage makes us realize that the whole piece of stream of consciousness has taken place in an intense moment. But is that the case? Because there is the moment, and there is its reworking in thought, the retrospective reflection on the moment, which (as we have pointed out) is also visible in the writing of this passage, so that the moment is paradoxically both the moment lived in its immediacy, and also explored and experienced as a recreation in thought.

For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in a natural fusion.

It is clear that Woolf does not just experience the relief afforded by this image as a focalizing character at the window: she consciously reflects on it, and on the therapeutical import of the image, as a narrator; as the author of the book, in her notebooks, she further comments on the special emotional significance the image has for her, and she reworks it deliberately to suit her purpose, adding to the actual experience, in a fiction-making move (Briggs, 2005: 321). The epiphanic experience and the subsequent reflection and re-elaboration of its symbolic sense through writing are segments of a continuum, moving from a spontaneous reaction of the mind to the threshold of allegory; they are ways of focusing on the relief and experiencing it with full consciousness, appropriating it to the extent of turning it into an allegory of the utopian androgynous mind: the masculine and the feminine halves of the mind, or of the human species, reconciled to one another, and setting off for the journey of life in a taxi-cab. This is an allegory, as well, of an ideally successful marriage, which is not perceived here as distinct from the satisfactory, non-repressive integration of the masculine and feminine elements in human nature.

The obvious reason would be that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate. (...)

Human nature reappears here. But this nature, mediated or distorted by culture, does not dictate the exact way in which the sexes should cooperate, divide their roles, or indeed be structured. When we face the problem of gender and sexual difference, as any generation does, we drag along the whole of human history, and of biological evolution.³³ The dilemma does not disappear, as it seems obvious that human culture—human cultures—are not a free-floating construction that can get rid of, or freely rework, either human history or biology.

It is in this line where Nature reappears that we part with Woolf's text. Not all distributions of roles—whether internal to the mind or external ones, in society, are equally natural, and we have glimpsed the dangers and tensions produced by the enforced postural requirements and mental economies of specific cultural environments—those of Victorian England, most vividly, in the case of Virginia Woolf. She endured (and tried to think through) her own experience of androgyny in a relatively benign patriarchy, and made a powerful contribution to the ongoing debate regarding what "the natural cooperation of the sexes" should be, both in the mind, and in a society that is attentive to its own utopian impulse. Like the Brontë sisters before her, she expressed her own sensibility publicly, in a memorable and transformative way, in "a prose style completely expressive of her mind." Virginia Woolf's style is both an exercise in personal individualism and an act of political intervention; in her work these are inseparable from narrative self-fashioning and from aesthetic innovation on the way we perceive the mind, the world, and our own selves.

*I'll walk where my own nature would be leading;
It vexes me to choose another guide...*

(Brontë, "Stanzas")

—oOo—

NOTES

¹ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1996), 106. Lee refers us to Virginia Woolf's own "Sketch of the Past" published in *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (Sussex UP, 1979; rev. ed., 1985: 81).

² Kate Haffey, "Exquisite Moments and the Temporality of the Kiss in *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Hours*," *Narrative* 18.2 (May 2010): 137-62.

³ Haffey (2010: 154-5). The notion of reality as a self-fulfilling set of collectively constructed expectations is insightfully dealt with by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1967). Another take on the same and its implications for the structure of the self appears, via Erving Goffman's frame theory, in my paper on "Reality as self-fulfilling expectation and the theatre of interiority" ("Goffman: La realidad como expectativa autocumplida y el teatro de la interioridad"), online at SSRN (April 2008), <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1124990>

⁴ George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*, ed. and introd. Arthur E. Murphy, 1932 (Amherst [NY]: Prometheus Books, 2002). I comment further on Mead's views on time and consciousness in the notes to my Spanish translation of Mead's essay, *La filosofía del presente* (University of Zaragoza, 2009), <http://personal.unizar.es/garciala/publicaciones/meadpresente.html>

—and in "George Herbert Mead y la complejidad del tiempo humano," in *Corporalidad, Temporalidad, Afectividad: Perspectivas Filosófico-Antropológicas* (Ed. Luisa Paz Rodríguez Suárez and José Angel García Landa. Berlin: Logos Verlag, 2017), 151-71.

⁵ Besides *The Philosophy of the Present*, Mead's theory of mental representation and evolutionary cognitivism is to be found in another posthumous volume, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist* (ed. with an introd. by Charles W. Morris; Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1934, rpt. 1967). On "social behaviorism" or symbolic interactionism as an approach in social psychology, see Joel M. Charon's *Symbolic Interactionism: An Introduction, an Interpretation, an Integration* (Upper Saddle River (NJ): Prentice-Hall, 7th ed. 2001). Kenneth Burke's theory of symbolic action is set out in *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1966). For Fauconnier and Turner's 'blending' or conceptual integration, see note 19.

⁶ For a further elaboration of the concept of topsight see my note "Panopticon of Topsight on *The Order of Things*," *Ibercampus* (Jun. 12, 2015) <http://www.ibercampus.eu/panopticon-of-topsight-in-the-order-of-things-3165.htm>

⁷ On modernist epiphanies and their romantic ancestry, see Charles Taylor "Epiphanies of Modernism," in his *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989; rpt. 2000), 456-94.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. In *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 7th ed., ed. M. H. Abrams, with Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 1999) 2.2153-2214.

⁹ On mental representations of consciousness and on "mind-reading" see Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton UP, 1978); Alan Palmer, *Fictional Minds* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 2004).

¹⁰ Bergson, *L'Évolution créatrice*, Paris: PUF, 1959, 272 ff.

¹¹ Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life*. (London: Penguin Books, 2005), 1.

¹² Shakespeare, Sonnet 77:

Look what thy memory cannot contain
Commit to these waste blanks, and thou shalt find
Those children nursed, delivered from thy brain,
To take a new acquaintance of thy mind.

¹³ On "online" and "offline" modes of thought, see Derek Bickerton, *Adam's Tongue: How Humans Made Language, How Language Made Humans* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux – Hill and Wang, 2009). A proper understanding of these modes of mental activity should be framed within Mead's theory of social interactionism and of the mind's self- interaction.

¹⁴ "Though I am parted, yet my mind, / That's more myself, still stays behind" (Thomas Carew, "To My Mistress in Absence", from *The Poems of Thomas Carew*. Online at *Luminarium*, <http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/carew/absence.htm>)

¹⁵ Charles H. Cooley, *Social Organization: A Study of the Larger Mind* (New York: Scribner's, 1909); Mead (1934).

¹⁶ "So many selves," in *XAIPE* (1950; ed. with an afterword by George James Firmage: New York and London: Liveright-Kindle edition, 2007), <https://www.amazon.com/XAIPE-Cummings/dp/0871401681>

¹⁷ *i* (1954) is also the title of "six nonlectures" delivered at Harvard by Cummings.

¹⁸ The mental capacity and intersubjective phenomenon of *joint attention* has been considered by Michael Tomasello one of the grounding elements of the peculiarly intersubjective human mind ("Joint Attention and Cultural Learning", in Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Communication*, Cambridge [MA] and London: Harvard UP, 1999, 56-93). Woolf's detailed description of the London moment can be read as an elaborate exercise in joint attention—and the same applies to our close reading of the passage. Further reflections on attention can be found in my paper "Atención a la atención (Sociobiología, estética y pragmática de la atención)," *Analecta Malacitana (AnMal Electrónica)* 33 (Dec. 2012): 3-27; online at <http://www.anmal.uma.es/numero33/indice.htm>

¹⁹ Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, "Conceptual Integration Networks." Expanded web version, Feb. 2001, at <http://markturner.org/cin.web/cin.html>

²⁰ From Emily Brontë's "Stanzas" (*Poems by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell*, 1846; in *Online Literature*, <http://www.online-literature.com/bronte/1360/>):

To-day, I will seek not the shadowy region;
Its unsustaining vastness waxes drear;
And visions rising, legion after legion,
Bring the unreal world too strangely near.

—Brontë was another "*wit woman*" awed by the potential multitudes she contained. Brontë's poem (there is actually some debate as to the extent of her sister Charlotte's revision) is also a deliberate exercise in mental balance and integration through the conscious creation of symbols for the mind. It provides an account, too, of a woman writer's coming to terms with internal and external pressures on female self-fashioning, and with her own potentially threatening excess of sensibility and imagination.

²¹ The recent discovery of mirror neurons, which fire on watching common experiences of looking, moving, or grasping in other subjects, provides an additional neurobiological

grounding for the well-established fact of the distinctive human sociality. See e.g. Daniel Lametti, "Mirroring Behavior: How mirror neurons let us interact with others" (*Scientific American* 9 June 2009), online: <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=mirroring-behavior>

²² Quoted in Lee, *op. cit.*, 171.

²³ See Jérôme Dokic, "Voyages mentaux dans les temps," a lecture at the École Normale Supérieure (Les Lundis de la Philosophie) Feb. 10, 2014. Online audio at *Savoirs ENS*: <http://savoirs.ens.fr/expose.php?id=1655>

²⁴ Perhaps only rivaled by *Whitaker's Table of Precedency*, in "The Mark on the Wall".

²⁵ The weight of the patriarchal past can also be detected between the lines in Emily Brontë's "Stanzas":

I'll walk, but not in old heroic traces,
And not in paths of high morality,
And not among the half-distinguished faces,
The clouded forms of long-past history.

I'll walk where my own nature would be leading:
It vexes me to choose another guide (...)

²⁶ Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Garden City [NY]: Doubleday, 1976); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton [NJ]: Princeton UP, 1977).

²⁷ See e.g. Catharine R. Stimpson, "Woolf's Room, Our Project: The Building of Feminist Criticism," in *The Future of Literary Theory*, ed. Ralph Cohen (New York: Routledge, 1989) 129-43; Toril Moi, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist Readings of Woolf," in her *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 1990), 1-17.

²⁸ There exists, however, a possible neurophysiological explanation for the "voices in the head" heard by so many unstable geniuses and original minds. See Charles Fernyhough, "The Science of Voices in Your Head" (video lecture), *YouTube (The Royal Institution)* 14 Sept. 2016, <https://youtu.be/95otBlepVHc>

²⁹ Lee, p. 331. Woolf's disgust with heterosexuality and penetration may partly originate in a childhood episode of sexual molestation by a half-brother of hers. See Lee, p. 127: "Over and over again in her re-creations of the imaginative world of childhood, there is a moment of fear or shame or panic, the image of a safe private world being invaded, often with the strong sense of sexual threat".

³⁰ See Briggs, *op. cit.*, 33; Lee, *op. cit.*, 298-340.

³¹ Luis Eduardo Aute, "De paso" (from *Albanta*, Madrid: Ariola, 1978); lyrics in *Música.com*, <http://www.musica.com/letras.asp?letra=1009938>

³² See my note on "Prisons and Worlds of the Mind," *Ibercampus (Vanity Fea)* 29 April 2017, <http://www.ibercampus.eu/prisons-and-worlds-of-the-mind-4645.htm>

³³ See my introduction to *Gender, I-Deology* (ed. Chantal Cornut-Gentile D'Arcy and José Angel García Landa; Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996). Woolf's ideal of androgyny was received

favorably by many feminist critics, e.g. Carolyn Heilbrun *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*. New York: Knopf, 1973. On the psychopathology of mental androgyny, see D. W. Winnicott, "Split-off Male and Female Elements found Clinically in Men and Women: Theoretical Inferences" (*Psychanalytic Forum* 4, ed. J. Linden; New York: International Universities Press, 1972). A neurological perspective on sexual difference in the brain can be found in *The Essential Difference: The Truth about the Male and Female Brain*, by Simon Baron-Cohen (New York: Perseus Books, 2003).