Emily Dalgarno

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Preface

This book represents one moment in my study of the work of Virginia Woolf. At the end of my labors I have an even stronger sense that the intellectual rigor and fertility of Woolf's mind make her a central figure in Modernism. The scope of her reading was wider than is suggested by her essays, and its depth enhanced by her work as a translator. She traces her intellectual lineage to Plato and Greek tragedy. In all of her major works I sense that her translation of *Agamemnon* is the ground of her preoccupation with the division between the visible and invisible worlds of the living and the dead. A topic like beauty, which is central to her representation of gender, takes its place as part of the historical struggle with language that she traces to the *Symposium* and the *Phaedrus*. Other topics – kinship, and the Imperial subject find their echo in writers and philosophers of her era. Yet her inflections are distinctive, in the sense that social problems manifest themselves in her work primarily as problems of language and subjectivity, in a way that has disappointed readers who would have preferred an activist Woolf. Yet the power of her mind to make connections across languages and historical periods accounts in my view for her continuous presence sixty years after the end of her life and career.

I join company with others who have come to understand how the solar eclipse of 1927, the first that had appeared to English viewers in two hundred years, forced Woolf to rethink the nature of the visible, in a way that reshaped her career. It led directly in my view to the strange reconception of character as subject that makes *The Waves* such a formidable yet rewarding reading experience. The intellectual energy that she brought to understanding war photography and the relationship of the retinal to the camera image accounts in part for the new direction and force of *Three Guineas*. My argument about the centrality of vision to all of

Woolf's writing I hope will lead to a fresh recognition of her distinctive contribution to Modernism.

The Albert A. and Henry W. Berg Collection of the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations has graciously granted me permission to publish portions of Woolf's holograph notes. Permission has also been granted by the London Society of Authors. The editor of *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* has given permission to reprint in Chapter 5 portions of a version that appeared in the journal in 1994. The editor of *L'Humanité* has given permission to print the figure in Chapter 6.

I acknowledge with deep gratitude the criticism and encouragement of the colleagues and friends who helped to make this a better book. Colleagues in the Department of English at Boston University read and criticized several chapters. My thanks to Susan Mizruchi, Leland Monk, James Winn, and especially to David Wagenknecht. Patricia Hills in the Art History Department drew my attention to an important letter by Leslie Stephen. Mark Hussey of Pace University read and criticized the entire manuscript. Owen Gingerich of the Harvard College Observatory advised me on astronomy. My friends Gillian Cooper-Driver, Anne Gaposchkin, Annette Herskovitz, Arthur Kaledin, Louis Kampf, and Peter Solomon, and my son Andrew Izsák have given me the encouragement that made the difference.

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Abbreviations

WORKS BY VIRGINIA WOOLF

I have used the Hogarth Press "Definitive Collected Edition" of Woolf's fiction except when otherwise noted. The date of first publication of each work appears in parentheses, and the publisher is Hogarth Press unless otherwise noted.

AP	*A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals 1897–1909*, ed., Mitchell Leaksa, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1990)
BA	*Between the Acts* (1941), 1990
CDB	*The Captain's Death Bed*, ed. Leonard Woolf (1950)
CE	*Collected Essays*, 4 vols., ed. Leonard Woolf (1966–67)
CR	*The Common Reader* (1925), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1953
CSF	*The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. Susan Dick, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1985)
D	*The Diary, vols.* I–V, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1977–84)
E I, II, III	*Essays*, 3 vols., ed. Andrew McNeillie, London and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1986–88)
GR	*Granite and Rainbow*, ed. Leonard Woolf (1958)
Hol *W*	*The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, ed. J. W. Graham (1976)
JR	*Jacob's Room* (1922), 1990
L	*Letters*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann, vols. I–VI, London and New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1975–80)
M	*The Moment and Other Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (1947)

MB	*Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings* ed. Jeanne Schulkind, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1976), 1985
MD	*Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), 1990
ND	*Night and Day* (1919), 1990
RF	*Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940), Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976
RO	*A Room of One's Own* (1929), ed. Michèle Barrett, London, Penguin, 1993
TG	*Three Guineas* (1938), ed. Michèle Barrett, London, Penguin, 1993
TL	*To the Lighthouse* (1927), ed. Hermione Lee, London, Penguin, 1992
TP	*The Pargiters*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska, New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich (1977)
VO	*The Voyage Out* (1915), ed. Elizabeth Heine, 1990
W	*The Waves* (1931), 1990
Y	*The Years* (1937), 1990

Woolf's holograph notes in the Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations are referenced by reel number.

WORKS BY JACQUES LACAN (IN ENGLISH)

E	*Ecrits: A Selection*, transl. Alan Sheridan, New York, W. W. Norton, 1977
FFC	*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton (1978), 1981
Sem I	*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, transl. John Forrester, Cambridge University Press 1988, W. W. Norton, 1988
Sem II	*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954–1955*, transl. Sylvana Tomaselli, Cambridge University Press, 1988, W. W. Norton, 1991
Sem III	*The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III: The Psychoses 1955–1956*, transl. Russell Grigg, W. W. Norton, 1993

Contents

CHAPTER I

The hiding places of my power: Woolf's optics

> . . . the hiding-places of Man's power
> Open; I would approach them, but they close;
> I see by glimpses now. . .
> (Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, book XI)[1]

In 1928 Virginia Woolf wrote Vita Sackville-West a lighthearted letter about their travel arrangements, which included as well some thoughts on Tolstoy and on her own writing practice. The vocabulary of the letter casually reveals the sense of the visible that is at play throughout her work. She wrote:

> The main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross . . . a novel, as I saw, to be good should seem, before one writes it, something unwriteable: but only visible; so that for nine months one lives in despair and only when one has forgotten what one meant, does the book seem tolerable.

In the rapid associations of the letter the passage immediately follows a suggestion that Sackville-West in her essay on Tolstoy should have questioned "what made his realism which might have been photographic, not at all; but on the contrary, moving and exciting and all the rest of it . . . some very queer arrangement . . . of perspective" (*L* III:529). It would seem that the visible world might be represented by language that acknowledges the "gulf" between it and the writer, or by a kind of realism that is based on the visual codes of photography and perspective. In Woolf's mind the visible is prior to and contrasted with the writable. It suggests a kind of power that she attributes elsewhere to Septimus Smith, to see beyond the horizon of ordinary perception into a larger world that is only partly available to verbal representation. The visible is a kind of point in space towards which she moves during a period of extraordinary anticipation, that like gestation figures the future that is being

brought into existence minute by minute. Her sense of the visible takes no account of the author in the sense of a writer who masters his material; rather it opens the question of the narrator as subject.

The letter illustrates what I see at work everywhere in Woolf's writing, how narrative begins as a response to her sense of being oriented towards an unrepresentable visible. Her career occurred at a moment when historically specific optical codes were undergoing significant change. In her work narrative comes into existence at the point of conflict between two dominant representations of ocular experience, one that is modeled on mathematical perspective, and another on the mechanical regulation of light, for instance in the camera. My study focuses on what Woolf learned from her translation of Greek literature about representing the visible, the struggle to create in her fiction an alternative to nineteenth-century adaptations of Renaissance perspective and notions of beauty, and her interest in astronomy and photojournalism.

The history of the transformation of visual codes has been widely studied.[2] I focus on two moments, the resurgence of interest in perspective just as it was being abandoned by Cézanne and other painters, and the coincidence of changes in the design of the camera with the Spanish Civil War, so that in different cultures photographs might represent differently the conduct of the same hostilities.

A sense of conflict is often represented by Woolf as the inability of two persons to see the same object, and her characters are often differentiated from each other by their ways of seeing. *Jacob's Room* develops the dilemma stated by the narrator: "Nobody sees anyone as he is" (*JR* 25). In *The Waves* Bernard remarks on the disjunction of the gaze, "What I see . . . you do not see" (*W* 159). So in *To the Lighthouse* the two Ramsay children, Cam and James, see the boar's head in their bedroom in entirely different terms. Lucy Swithin and her brother Bart in *Between the Acts* do not share one visual field: "What she saw he didn't; what he saw she didn't" (*BA* 15). The problematic of the visible so construed comprises who sees and who cannot, the seen and the unseen, the relationship of the visible to representation, and the constitution of the viewing subject.

The value of Jacques Lacan to my argument is that he defines the "bipolar structure" (*E* 103) of the subject that is created at the juncture of visibility and language, the subject for whom full expression in language may be blocked by a difficulty in the realm of seeing. The problem occurs in Woolf's work at the level of character,

when a speech act permits Lily Briscoe to finish the painting that she had left unfinished ten years earlier. It occurs also at the level of language: for instance after Peter Walsh's dream his repetition of the phrase, "the death of the soul," registers the event both as perception and as consciousness, as the seen and the said.

Lacan argues that psychoanalysis is neither a world view nor a philosophy: "It is governed by a particular aim, which is historically defined by the elaboration of the notion of the subject" (*FFC* 77). That position is strengthened by his claiming a place for his work and Freud's in a genealogy which goes back to Descartes. He stands for the subject defined as "I" and identified with the ego.[3] Descartes is nevertheless the predecessor of Freud in the sense that "Freud, when he doubts . . . is assured that a thought is there, which is unconscious, which means that it reveals itself as absent. As soon as he comes to deal with others, it is to this place that he summons the *I think* through which the subject will reveal himself" (*FFC* 36). Since, according to Lacan, Descartes' thought was directed to the real rather than the true, he remained unaware of the subject, "but we know, thanks to Freud, that the subject of the unconscious manifests itself, that it thinks before it attains certainty" (*FFC* 37).

In this genealogy Descartes also becomes the starting point for a history of optics. His image of the window in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) suggests a frame of reference for Lacan's representation:

> But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves . . . Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind.[4]

David Michael Levin derives a world view from this image. It is, he argues, the mechanistic vision of a rational and controlling mind that cannot grant speech or humanity to the men seen in the street.

Jacob Flanders has a similar experience when he turns from reading *Phaedrus*, and looking out of the window observes in the street the alien figures of "Jews and the foreign woman." It is perhaps what leads the narrator to comment, "What does one fear? – the human eye" (*JR* 104 and 75). In Levin's argument this detached way of viewing the world creates the environment necessary for scientific endeavor, but it also incorporates in the same

vision an element of madness. "Descartes . . . places a window between him and the men on the street, a window which disengages him from the visible world, makes him a spectator, and interrupts, or rather destroys, all the causal connections that would normally be in effect."[5] Woolf's moment in history is marked, like Levin's, by her clear recognition of the potential for destruction in a philosophy of spectatorship.

Lacan, more concerned with the visual dimension of the window experience, sees Cartesian meditation coinciding with the moment when "geometral or flat" perspective was superseded. It is demonstrated by imagining that a set of "ideal threads or lines" can transfer an image from one plane to another. Since the method is tactile and could be taught to a blind person, Lacan concludes that it is "the mapping of space, not sight" (*FFC* 86). In contrast Dürer's *Artist Drawing a Reclining Woman* (1538) introduces "a correct perspective image," in the sense that the image of the female brings into existence what had previously been "immanent in the geometral division . . . a dimension that has nothing to do with vision as such . . . the phallic ghost" (*FFC* 87–8). In a way that becomes important for Woolf, "the phallic ghost" suggests that desire weds the painter to his subject.

Woolf, who may not have been aware of "geometral" perspective, represents mathematical perspective in painting in the context of its late resurgence in the twentieth century. Erwin Panofsky begins his essay "Die Perspektive als Symbolische Form" (1924–25) with Dürer's definition of the Latin "perspectiva" as meaning to see through.[6] Alberti in the first book of *De Pictura* (1435) writes: "I describe a rectangle of whatever size I please, which I imagine to be an open window through which I view whatever is to be depicted there."[7] The fundamental weakness in this organization of space is the assumption that we look with a single, immobile eye, and that it takes "no account of the enormous difference between the psychologically conditioned 'visual image' . . . and the mechanically conditioned 'retinal image.'"[8] After some discussion of the differences between Plato's and Aristotle's conceptions of space and the various practices among painters of the Italian and northern Renaissance, Panofsky accounts for these apparent contradictions: "Thus the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as

much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self."[9]

Debate over Panofsky's essay has focused on the parallel that he suggests between perspective and other cultural formations. Hubert Damisch argues from the heuristic power of perspective in the work of Lacan and Foucault that its history is plural. Given that few Italian paintings in fact conform to the laws of perspective, he questions whether it became a paradigm, in the sense of a scientific practice that traverses history and provides a model for thought. He replies to Panofsky's claim that perspective dominated the conception of space until Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907), by noting that discussion reached a new intensity just as Cézanne and painters of his era had abandoned it.[10]

One catches an echo of this debate in Roger Fry's analysis of the history of art as "a perpetual attempt at reconciling the claims of the understanding with the appearances of nature as revealed to the eye at each successive period."[11] Fry specifically rejected the significance of perspective: "neither perspective nor anatomy has any very immediate bearing upon art – both of them are means of ascertaining facts, and the question of art begins where the question of fact ends."[12] But his insistence that the processes of art are analogous to those of science, and the vocabulary of "formal relations" that he developed suggest that to some extent he continued to think within the older problematics. In several passages of his *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (1927) he analyzes the painter's practice in terms of color laid over geometrical shapes: "instead of searching for diagonal perspective vistas, movements which cross and entwine, he accepts planes parallel to the picture-surface, and attains to the depth of his pictorial space by other and quite original methods."[13] In other words Cézanne's originality was characterized, in Fry's interpretation, by the unquestioned necessity to represent spatial depth.

The undercurrent of elegy that runs throughout Woolf's work is often figured as the compelling power of perspective. We see it in *To the Lighthouse* when Lily Briscoe, although she theorizes her painting as "colour burning on a framework of steel," language that owes something to Fry, is yet caught up in an archaic visualization of Mrs. Ramsay as a madonna seen through a window (*TL* 54). Clarissa Dalloway in two important scenes views through a window an old woman preparing for the night, and Septimus dies by plunging

through a window. And again in *The Waves* Percival as the embodiment of desire remains forever out of reach, a kind of vanishing point that serves to focus the gaze of each character.

The camera was developed in a manner consistent with Renaissance projections of perspective. Joel Snyder writes that although the pinhole camera had been used since antiquity for the purpose of observing eclipses, its images, which "do suggest a pictorial application to a modern eye . . . did not to the medievals. And they did not suggest a pictorial use until well into the sixteenth century, when the principles of linear perspective . . . had taken root in Italy."[14] Critics and historians of photography agree that the dimensions of the image and the coincidence of the fixed point with the eye are analogous to Renaissance monocular perspective.

It is the premise of my argument that Woolf moved from a world where the philosophical mind might expand the limits of the visible, to one where seeing was transformed by an apprehension that light creates the subject as object. The shift cannot be represented in terms of a decisive historical passage to a new world view. Lacan comments on "the optical structuring of space," which since Plato has been tied to "the straight line" as "a space that is not in its essence the visual" (*FFC* 94–5). The result is that "the relation of the subject with that which is strictly concerned with light seems, then, to be already somewhat ambiguous" (*FFC* 94). Astronomical phenomena contribute to the ambiguity. If you wish to see a star of lesser magnitude, he writes, "You will be able to see it only if you fix your eye to one side" (*FFC* 102). In a space defined by light, "the point of gaze always participates in the ambiguity of the jewel" (*FFC* 96). As a result the eye becomes caught up in a dialectic of loss, that is quite different from Lacan's earlier sense that one lives under the gaze of others: "*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*" (*FFC* 103). *The Waves* and *Three Guineas* are in similar terms transitional works, in the sense that in them Woolf too is poised between a visible that is modeled on the perspective of the desiring subject or the subject of philosophical reflection, and a quite different visible in which the subject is witness to an event created by light, that exceeds the parameters of retinal vision.

Woolf's work opens itself to a new set of questions when read in the context of the shift in the representation of the visible in the West. My argument goes like this. Woolf's engagement with the visible as problematic appears to have begun with her translation of

the Greeks. She learned from them that the visible is one segment of the larger invisible world that is seen by the gods and intermittently by the mad. It is a model that with variations appears in her major novels from *The Voyage Out* to *The Years*. In this scheme death is the event that precipitates the fundamental question: how does language name the figure who is no longer visible? Her translation of *Agamemnon* includes the image of the grieving Menelaos, who awakens from a dream of the absent Helen to find his embrace once again empty, so that his waking vision and his dream confirm one another.

When we recall that Woolf's experience of the deaths of her mother, her half-sister Stella, and her brother Thoby was followed by World War I, it is not surprising to find repeated in her work the trope of the empty arms that embrace both the invisible world of the dream and the waking world. The image of a character who, seeking to exchange a glance with the dead, is revealed for the moment in the position of viewing subject is central to her work. As the visual field splits among dream, vision, and hallucination the individual character is drained of power and the subject may be momentarily glimpsed.

So in *Mrs. Dalloway* Peter Walsh dreams of "spectral presences" that are "visions" of "the figure of the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world" (*MD* 57–8). When he awakens suddenly he mutters "'The death of the soul'" and subsequently feels the words attach themselves to the scenes of which he has been dreaming, so that they become "clearer" (*MD* 58). After a break in the text Peter then spontaneously recalls the failure of his courtship of Clarissa and his "sudden revelation" that she would marry Richard Dalloway (*MD* 61). The dream/vision of the grieving mother and the revelation of Clarissa lost are stories about the authority of instants of extraordinary visibility, joined by a phrase, "the death of the soul," that opens a narrative perspective far beyond anything that Peter can articulate. He is for the moment before he owns the phrase "'the death of the soul'" by repeating it, in the position of subject, and when he has repeated it, he is no longer.[15] The narrative juxtaposes the subliminal effect of the war to Peter's memory of his personal history so as to suggest that a major theme of the novel and the power of its narration are prefigured in the subject's response to the empty embrace.

WHEN THE SELF SPEAKS TO THE SELF . . .

Before turning to the remarkable congruence between Woolf's understanding of the visible world and that of Jacques Lacan I first pose the questions that are addressed in my study in terms that I derive from Woolf's early work. Three of her short stories suggest that in the aftermath of World War I she recognized that the sign was historically constituted, and that as a consequence the visible world could no longer be represented simply as the object of description. The mirror experience – she preferred "looking-glass" – occurs on the troubled boundary between seeing and naming, and achieves its significance less as a phase in the development of the subject than as a moment of self-reflection that necessarily involves misrecognition. My claim in other words is that Woolf's understanding of visibility and subjectivity is grounded in the events and ideology of twentieth-century history.

The stories that I have in mind are fables of representation, in the sense that they explore but leave unresolved problems that are implicit in her novels. Each one situates the relationship of seeing to naming in a particular historical and ideological context. "The Mark on the Wall" (1917) is the narrator's meditation on the relationship of sign to object in time of war, with a digression on the historical significance of the mirror experience. The story suggests that the visible may be historically determined: "in order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw" (*CSF* 77). The visible comes into existence when it is assigned a name in order to commemorate a historical moment. The narrator distinguishes this practice from that of the former owners of the house who favored "an old picture for an old room," as though they merely required a correspondence between objects and their settings for purposes of decoration. The narrator shares their propensity when musing on castles and knights, but also recognizes that objects refer to a particular history. The list of things that the narrator has misplaced figures a life characterized by loss. The Western civilization that writes its history in terms of "the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation," necessarily confers on those objects its sense of the problematic and fragmentary (*CSF* 78). Nor can such loss be assuaged or evaded by writing history as the biography of individuals like Shakespeare, for "this historical fiction . . . doesn't interest me

at all" (*CSF* 79). The story, which has often been appreciated for its charm, seems to me to lay out the narrator's difficult choices while leaving the relationship of language to the visible both urgent and unresolved.

At this point the narrative admits an apparent digression in order "lovingly" to protect the image of the self from "any other handling that could make it ridiculous." "Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people – what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes!" (*CSF* 79). The mirror experience suggests Woolf's satiric view of the romantic ego, and increasingly of certain Romantic poets as well. Here as elsewhere in Woolf's work the mirror experience by isolating the individual's appearance reduces the reflected figure to the empty shell that is seen by others.[16] Although mirror scenes are common in European novels, Woolf is distinguished by her engagement with its implications for narrative epistemology. In this story it leads to criticism of novelists who see no further than reflection. They endanger "the real thing" by their willingness to pursue these "phantoms . . . leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories" (*CSF* 80). The significant limitations of self-reflection become the ground of Woolf's dissatisfaction with realistic narrative.

"The Mark on the Wall" is brought to a close not when the war ends or when the object is saved from destruction, but when the narrator is recalled from her revery by hearing her companion remark: "It was a snail." Assigning a name brings closure in a world in which the importance of the mark is to be seen and named "in order to fix a date." The possibility of smashing the looking-glass marks a moment of resistance to the romantic notion that objects have the power to memorialize the past as a pretty picture. The destruction of the "romantic figure" is a first step towards seeing beyond the mirror, which creates no more than a self-reflecting fiction, "a world not to be lived in." Interrogating the boundary of self-reflection makes possible a new set of questions about naming and the making of history.

Lacan's discussion of structure in *Seminar III* develops a definition of subjectivity in the context of physics that involves a redefinition of the sign. He begins by distinguishing a "closed" structure, which "is always established by referring something coherent to something