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A Story of Multiple Thresholds: A Close Reading of Virginia Woolf's Short Story "The Mark on the Wall"

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ABSTRACT

Within Virginia Woolf's body of short fiction, "The Mark on the Wall" stands out as a unique but also intriguing story. The story's early neglect and subsequent recognition mirror the difficulties that readers and commentators have had with its unusual form and content. This essay proposes to explain the changes that have recently occurred in critical appreciations of "The Mark on the Wall" by linking these to a major feature of the story, namely the ways in which it anticipates not only developments in Woolf's career as a writer of fiction, but also post-modern theories of knowledge and truth. Woolf's story, it will be argued, marked the beginning of Woolf's career as a writer of short fiction, shaped the direction that her longer novels would later take, and confirmed the intersections between her personal experience, in this case the experience of illness, and her artistic endeavor. This essay will rely on a close reading of "The Mark on the Wall" to explore these and other facets of the story that make of it, indeed, a work of multiple thresholds for its author.

KEYWORDS: *Virginia Woolf, The Mark on the Wall, short fiction, modernism, biography*

INTRODUCTION

"The Mark on the Wall', Virginia Woolf's first attempt at short fiction has generated mixed responses from readers and critics. Katherine Mansfield, Woolf's contemporary and successful short story writer, was excited by the story. "[R] eread The Mark on the Wall yesterday", she wrote to Woof, "and liked it tre-mendously". (*Letters 2*: 170). E. M. Forster was apparently less impressed because, in his opinion, the story 'deliberately' aimed at nothing in particular. This diverse reception was to a large extent the result of the unusual form of the story as well as its ambiguous thematic concerns. Woolf was clearly aware of the controversial aspects of her story but was apparently excited about the kind of opportunities that it brought with it. In a 1917 letter to David Garnett, she stated that "[i]n a way it's easier to do a short thing, all in one flight than a novel. Novels are frightfully clumsy and overpowering of course; still if one could only get hold of them it would be superb." She added, "I daresay one ought to invent a completely new form" (*Letters 2*: 167). Nor was Woolf wrong about the prospective importance of her short story. In fact, as it will be argued throughout this essay, "The Mark on the Wall" would prove to be a story of multiple thresholds for Woolf. With it, Woolf would achieve a significant number of objectives as a writer: she would find an alternative genre to the novel (the short story), forge her distinctive voice as an author of fiction, and develop the kind of innovative narrative techniques that would later become a trademark of the modernist movement.

At the same time, "The Mark on the Wall" could also be described as a highly predictive work because it anticipates a number of subsequent works and developments. On the one hand, it anticipates some of the hallmarks of the modernist narrative method such as the stream of consciousness technique, the primacy of image over word, and the primary concerns of fiction that Woolf would later outline in her essay 'Modern Fiction'. On the other hand, the story also remarkably anticipates a number of epistemological concerns that would be associated with structuralism including the elusiveness of the signifier, the instability and gaps in meaning, and the impossibility of absolute knowledge. There is even the suggestion that this instability and incomprehensibility might be preferable to traditional models of reference and knowledge. Finally, and perhaps more importantly for the purposes of this essay, "The Mark on the Wall" prefigures some of the provocative arguments about the experience of illness that Woolf would later push forward in her stimulating essay 'On Being Ill' (1925). Anticipating the essay in question, "The Mark on Wall" could be interpreted as a reflection not only on the pain and suffering involved in this experience, but also and more importantly, the kind of transformative insights that it is capable of generating. Moreover, these insights, the story suggests, become available during illness precisely because in illness we are able to go beyond the plain world of facts and 'reality' and access those rich, unchartered, dream-like regions of the soul where deeper truths are revealed. Given the dream-like quality of the

narrative, this essay starts from the basic assumption that the story is best read as the unraveling of a dream – and will therefore follow the method of dream analysis prescribed by Freud for the interpretation of dreams. Together with a close reading of the story that pays attention to its formal aspects, this method would permit precisely the process of going below the surface of images and metaphor to retrieve their underlying meaning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To study Virginia Woolf's short fiction is to confront a body of works that was long subject to neglect and has only recently revived. The neglect was to a large extent the result of the broader marginalization of the genre of the short story, a genre that was systematically eclipsed by the novel. Claire Drewery (2011:7) observes that even following the "unprecedented boom in the publishing of the short story in the late 19th and early 20th century [...], the work of Richardson, Sinclair and Woolf in particular suffered notable neglect". In Woolf's case, the bias against the genre was only exacerbated by what many considered as the unusual style and themes of the stories. 'The Mark on the Wall", in particular, alienated early critics with its unconventional form and complex subject matter. EM Forster famously complained that "it aims deliberately at aimlessness", (quoted in Walkowitz 124) whereas R D Charques took aim at the story's avoidance of the social and political conditions of the time. Woolf's other stories did not fare any better, and it would take several decades before the first book-length study of Woolf's short fiction appeared. Following the publication of a previously overlooked series of sketches as *Carlyle's House and Other Sketches* in 2003, Nena Skribic's *Wild Outburts of Freedom* appeared in 2004, to be shortly followed by Kathryn N. Benzel and Ruth Hoberman's *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction*.

It was in the context of this revival of interest in Woolf's short fiction that "The Mark on the Wall" finally began to receive the attention it deserves. Yet, this attention was generally limited to Woolf's feminist politics or her interest in the philosophical and artistic ramifications of Einstein's theory of relativity. Magdalen Wing-chi Ki (2010), for instance, sought to refute the argument that the story was apolitical by linking it to what she refers to as Woolf's "feminist pacifism and her critique of male logic and the Great War". Wayne Narey (1992) finds in the story what he believes to be "evidence of familiarity with of Einsteinian Physics", explaining that Einstein's new conception of space and time "coincided with [woolf's] own approach to fiction as a nonlinear view of event, one in which time is relative for each observer". A recent article in the literary website "Literary Hub" by Gabrielle Bellot (2017) revisits Narey's focus on the connection between Einstein's ideas and Woolf's experiments in "The Mark on the Wall" by examining the influence of the theory of relativity on Woolf's work in general. The consideration of the story's experimental form began with Susan Dick's statement that the story "reflects her [woolf's] desire to find a radical new narrative method, one that would express through both its form and its content the multifaceted ways we experience reality" (*Trespassing Boundaries* xv-xvi). Similary, Teresa Prudente (2008) emphasized the story's role in defining Woolf's innovative approach to fiction writing, particularly in its treatment of narrative time as a reproduction of the time of consciousness. Rebecca L. Walkowitz, too, echoed the same preoccupation with the innovative aspect of "The Mark on the Wall", when she declared that in it "Woof is critical of traditional narrative aims, those of realism and linear narrative progress" (2006: 131). More recently, Aimée Gasston (2021) pointed to the role played short fiction in providing Woolf with she calls a "protected and private space, below the radar: a place of experiment where anything goes, where a neophyte has little to lose".

Some critics have emphasized the modernist elements in the story by underscoring its visual aspects. Joanne Trautmann, for instance, dwells on "the visual elements in Woolf's style" which, she explains, was due to the fact that Woolf "lived among painters and knew well the technique of Impressionistic pointillism. She adapted it perfectly to her philosophy that reality appears to us in light illuminated moments rather than in big slabs of uninterrupted truth (2004: 22). In the same vain, Nicole Fan (2021) points to the 'visual culture' in which Woolf came of age as a writer, as well as the 'visual talent' that seemed to run in her family. Nena Skrbic, too, acknowledges the power of image when employed by a skillful writer such as Woolf. "What makes [the stories] compelling", she wrote, "is their ability to tell a story through one image, along with the freedom that lies beyond their margins in terms of both reader expectation and a sense of potential about to be realized (*Trespassing Boundaries* 23).

RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE

Interesting as these and other studies of Woolf's short stories are, they seem to overlook the importance of two major sources for Woolf's unconventional handling of the short story genre and particularly "The Mark on the Wall". One of these is Sigmund Freud's theories which took the world by storm at the time. And despite Woolf's declared indifference to (or ignorance of) Freud's new ideas, there is enough evidence to suggest that she was at least exposed to them, not least through the Hogarth Press which published some of Freud's work in 1924. Her husband, Leonard, openly reported being "rather proud of having in 1914 recognized and understood the greatness of Freud and the importance of what he was doing" (Briggs, 2005: 2). One of Freud's theories which clearly influenced Woolf was the method of 'talking cure' or free association, which consisted in letting the patient speak freely about whatever came to his/her mind with the purpose of uncovering a central idea or a 'primal scene'. This technique would find its way to Woolf's fiction in the form of the so-called method of stream of consciousness of interior

monologue. Another theory that seems to have influenced Woolf's writings is that of interpreting dreams. Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (German: *Die Traumdeutung*) was published in 1899, and the English translation appeared in 1913, four years before the publication of the "The Mark on the Wall". In his analysis of dreams, Freud distinguishes between what he calls the manifest content of a dream, the literal dream, which includes the events, images, and thoughts contained within the dream, and the latent content – the hidden or symbolic meaning of the dream. At the heart of this typology are the mechanisms of condensation and displacement which operate to remove whatever content is deemed 'unacceptable' and substitute it with a less controversial, symbolic version of it. The task of the analyst, according to Freud, is to work his/her way through the web of transformations and displacements that are found in the manifest content in order to access the hidden meaning or 'truth' of the dream. I would argue that this theory provides a viable interpretive framework for the study of "The Mark on the Wall" in that allows us to go beyond the surface meaning of the story and access its symbolic meaning.

The other source of inspiration for Woolf, and one that is in many ways similar to Freud's dream mechanisms was her recurring experience of illness. Woolf repeatedly pointed to the extreme and lasting impact her prolonged illness had on her writing and her perception of life. What is striking about the way she conceived of her illness, however, is the awareness that along with the usual suffering and the mental and physical exhaustion that accompanied her recurring bouts of illness, this experience did not altogether come without certain advantages. The latter often involved a heightened sense of consciousness that provided her with access to superior truths and modes of being. Thus, much like Freud's theory of dreams, which suggests that access to the truth of things lies beneath the surface of random images and events, so does the decline of heath come with a liberating elimination of the world of facts and information and an entry into the much-coveted world of superior truths. I will argue that by structuring her story as if it were a set of sequences in a dream, Woolf indirectly points to the valuable insights that she was able to reach during her periodic encounter with illness.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research utilizes a method that combines biographical, textual, and Freudian elements. The biographical component stems from the critical consensus regarding the importance of certain events in Woolf's life and the multiple ways in which they shaped both her theory and practice of fiction. Just as the impact of her psychological struggles on her work was undeniable, so was her experience of physical illness crucial in determining the way she conceived of her life and *oeuvre*. Therefore, acknowledging the impact of her illness has – and will continue – to shed light on many aspects of her work. Along with the biographical elements, this research follows the method of close reading, which consists in the careful, sustained analysis of select passages of the text under study. Close reading as a method is associated with the rise the school of New Criticism in the middle decades of the 20th century and, as Andrew DuBois (2003:13) observes, has since been 'entrenched' in universities and schools as the dominant method of literary analysis. The method relies on close attention to individual words, the syntax, the order in which the sentences unfold ideas, as well as formal structures in order to uncover boarder ideas and meanings. As a process of textual analysis, the method of close reading, while acknowledging the significance of biographical and other extra-textual considerations, it establishes the primacy of the text over other concerns. Finally, the Freudian method of analysing dreams yields valuable insights into the underlying meaning of words and images. Accordingly, this research treats the various images and tropes in the story the stories as if they were, in a sense, a transcription of a dream, which would imply the task of distinguishing between a surface meaning and a hidden, underlying meaning, or to use Freud's terms, a manifest dream content and latent dream thoughts. However, dream content, Freud tells us, is embedded in "a hieroglyphic script" that needs to be decoded by replacing "each image by a syllable or a word that may, by some link or other, be represented by the image" (*Interpreting Dreams* 294). This implies the task of decoding these images for the purpose of uncovering their deeper meaning.

A Gate to "private world of illness": Analyzing the images of The Mark on the Wall"

"The Mark on the Wall" was published in 1917, along with Leonard Woolf's short story "Three Jews" in *Two Stories*, and marked Virginia Woolf's first attempt at experimental writing. It is an unusual story in which, in the narrator's own words, "[n]othing ever happens" (Woolf, 2012:35). The narrator in the story is sitting in her living room smoking a cigarette when she notices a mark on the wall, "a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece" (31). At first, the mark is thought to be a hole and then "the head of a gigantic nail" (34), and in the end turns out to be a snail. In between these guesses, the narrator embarks on a series of philosophical speculations that range from a metaphysical reflection on reality to the primacy of the impersonal world of nature. A central theme in the story, however, is the condition of illness with its suffering but also its insights. Much like a dream, however, the story does not explicitly refer to the experience of illness, but points to it obliquely through the use of several images and figures.

The image that dominates the opening section of the story is that of the cigarette smoke. This image recreates in the mind of the reader the world of dreams with its blurry background and indistinct outlines. When used in conjunction with the word "wall" of the title, the image of smoke suggests the

juxtaposition of two distinct worlds: an imaginative world and a real world, and the ways in which the boundaries of these two worlds repeatedly overlap: "I looked through the smoke of my cigarette", the narrator says (31). The smoke of the cigarette becomes a metaphorical wall separating the world of fancy from the real world. At the same time, it signifies the utter fragility of this wall, a hint perhaps that the two worlds will not remain entirely separate. On a deeper level, this mapping of boundaries suggests the invisible line(s) separating the 'real', objective world from the world that is unveiled in illness. In tracing the contours of both worlds, Woolf seems to anticipate recent conceptualizations of the experience of illness. Susan Sontag, for example, in her study of the figurative uses of illness (1978), uses a strikingly similar geographical metaphor. Illness, she says,

> is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer only the good passport, sooner or later each one of us is obliged, at least for a spell to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place. (3)

Interestingly, Woolf seems to anticipate Sontag not only in "The Mark on the Wall" but also in 'On Being Ill' when she marvels at "how astonishing, when the lights of health go down, the undiscovered countries that are then disc1osed, what wastes and deserts of the soul a slight attack of influenza brings to view (1986:193).

For Woolf, then, the onset of illness brings about a shattering of the veil that limits our perception to the surface of things, thus allowing us to penetrate the depths toward another kind of reality. This is why we find the narrator in "The Mark on the Wall" longing for a situation in which she can "slip easily from one thing to another, deeper, away from the surface, with its hard, separate facts" (1986:79). The metaphor of sinking resonates with particular force in Woolf's writings, and, as Katherine Dalsimer (2001:194) notes, is an ambivalent one. It is at times used to denote what Woolf calls in her diary the "plunge into [the] deep waters" of illness, but is also her way of designating the process of diving into the activity of writing and "discovering sea pearls of truth". In "The Mark on the Wall", the act of seeing through the smoke of the cigarette occurs as displacement of the metaphor of sinking under the surface and, as such, it enables the narrator to leave behind the prosaic world of reality with its "vast upheaval of matter" (Woolf, 2012:35), and plunges her, like Woolf's patient, into the much more diversified and creative world of fancy. A similar movement is enacted in the story 'The Fascination of the Pool', where the surface of the pool in question becomes, as Melba Cuddy-Keane (2003:128) suggests, "an entrance to deeper layers, as Woolf moves the mind of the viewer easily from reflected images to images in the depths".

The technique of relying on images suggests that Woolf has reached a stage in her career where she believed in the primacy of the visual over words in conveying certain thoughts and emotions. This would seem to be a logical development of her method as a writer, given that, as Joanne Trautmann (2004) points out, she lived among visual artists and was constantly exposed to evolving painting theories and techniques. The primacy of images, moreover, recalls Freud's 'visual' theory of dreams with its insistence that dreams are essentially modified images of our unconscious wishes and desires.

Another remarkable image in the story is that of 'cow'. It occurs toward the end of the story as the narrator's mind seems to wonder off randomly from one thought to another: "The cows swish their tails beneath them on hot afternoons" (Woolf, 2012:34). The image is a remarkable one, not least because it would be used again in "An Unwritten Novel" as Minnie Marsh, the reticent protagonist of the story, cryptically exclaims: "Oh, that cow!" The narrator then adds: "[s]he broke off nervously, as though the green wooden cow in the meadow had shocked her and saved her from sorne indiscretion" (Woolf, 2012:16). This seemingly random image acquires significance when seen in the context of Woolf's illness. When ill, Woolf was often forced into a state of physical and intellectual idleness that often made her feel heavy and dull just like a cow, as suggested in this diary entry in which she attempted to describe what she called 'a nervous breakdown in miniature': "sank into a chair, could scarcely rise; everything insipid; tasteless, colorless. Enormous desire for rest. .. Mind a blank. Slept in my chair. Thursday. No pleasure in life whatsoever.... Read automatically, like a cow chewing cud" (*Diary* 3: 103).

The image of the cow could also be seen as an indirect allusion to the harsh medical regime that Woolf was forced to follow during illness, with its combination of rest and milk drinking, and which she often described in bitter terms, as shown in this letter: "think - not one moment's freedom from doctor discipline – perfectly strange - conventional men; 'you shall lie still and drink milk' - for 6 months" (*Letters* 4: 180).Thus, by combining multiple indirect references to the situation of being ill, the word 'cow', just like an image in a dream, seems to act as a composite idea compressing multiple references to a repressed material. Freud calls this process condensation – a mechanism through which several dream-thoughts are often combined and amalgamated into a single element of the manifest dream, as exemplified by the dream of the botanical monograph which is analyzed in the chapter on the dream-work, as presented in Figure 2.

Another image that seems to operate as a case of condensation is that of 'snail', which appears at the very end of the story: "I don't see why we should have a snail on our wall". The narrator muses. She then exclaims: "Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail" (Woolf, 2012:35). Given that the narrator's second guess as to the identity of the mysterious mark on the wall was that it could be a nail, the word 'snail' inevitably recalls 'nail'. In its anatomical meaning, moreover, nail conjures up 'finger' and 'toe', an association that is supported by the fact

that in the story "Kew Gardens", a central image in the story is a "shoe with a square silver buckle at the toe" (Woolf, 2012:26). Interestingly, both finger nails and toes seem to be central motifs in Woolf s fictional representations of illness, as in the passage in *The Voyage Out* that describes a dream Rachel had prior to her fatal illness. In this nightmarish dream, Rachel is appalled by the sight of "a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails" (Woolf, 2000:77). This dream prefigures the hallucinatory visions that Rachel will experience at the height of her illness, with the slight difference that the 'little deformed man' has now become "little deformed women sitting in archways playing cards" (331). What is even more arresting is that the earlier image of the nail has now been superseded by the insisting image of a toe: "why, there's a toe all the way down here!" the woman said, proceeding to tuck in the bedclothes. Rachel did not realize that the toe was hers" (331). Several years later, Woolf would describe the invalid Mrs Pargiter in *The Years* in a way that recalls the earlier patient: "Bare of all rings save her wedding ring, her fingers alone seemed to indicate that she had entered the private world of illness" (Woolf, 21). Woolf's metaphor for the entry into "the private world of illness" is a fall "into a deep pool of sticky water", a metaphor that once again borrows one of the attributes of the snail (TY 341). The same thing could be said about that image of a "shell of a person" which appears early in the story as the antithesis of an earlier image of a "romantic figure with the green of forest depth all about it" (MT 32). 'Shell 'and 'snail' will be combined into one striking image in the opening of' Kew Gardens', where the narrator describes the effect of light as it falls on "the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins" (Woolf, 2012).

"What a gap!": Problematizing knowledge and Meaning

Discussing the various images that cluster "The Mark on Wall" inevitably leads us to the central and most insisting image of them all – that of the mark on the wall. Having established that the story rests on the tension between what Dean Baldwin calls "the relation between imagination and fact" (13), which in turn obliquely points to the experience of illness, thus anticipating Woolf's theorization of illness in 'On Being Ill' (1925), I will argue that through the image of the mark, Woolf performs yet another act of anticipation – this time with regard to some the major theoretical developments in our understanding of knowledge and reference that we associate the so-called post-structuralist movement. The image, it will be argued, indirectly emphasizes one of the key aspects of the experience of illness, namely the impossibility of absolute knowledge in ways that resonate with recent structuralist and deconstructive re-conceptualizations of knowledge and closure.

Obviously, on the surface, the mark on the wall becomes the occasion for the narrator's speculations, in that it triggers the whole chain of thoughts that give the story its substance. In other words, it is the narrator's gateway to the much-coveted world of the imagination. But on a deeper level, the mark on the wall, by defying all attempts at full knowledge and understanding, seems to operate as a gap in meaning, the symbol of an ever elusive signified. It is first described as a 'black' mark on a white wall, which emphasizes the otherness of the strange mark, as it does not seem to fit in with its background; then it is suggested that the mark might be a 'hole', which again conjures up the contrast between the disruptive mystery of the mark and the stable familiarity of it surrounding area. All these connotations would seem to anticipate recent deconstructive theories of knowledge such such as Cathy Caruth's work on traumatic experiences as exemplifying what she calls "an inherent gap of knowing" (39). In the context of Woolf's illness, the mark on the wall seems to exemplify not only the feelings of utter solitude and vulnerability engendered by her repetitive bouts of illness, but also the unintelligibility and incomprehensibility of the visions that "the dark cupboard of illness" offered her (*Diary 1*, I4). It is therefore not surprising that when she finally recovered from a severe lapse into illness that lasted two months, Woolf's first words were: "what a gap!" She then adds,

> [h]ow it would have astounded me to be told when 1 wrote the last word here, on June 7th, that within a week 1 should be in bed, and not entirely out of it till the 6th of August - two whole months rubbed out - these this morning, the first words 1 have written - to call writing - for sixty days; and those days spent in wearisome headache, jumping pulse, aching back, frets, fidgets, lying awake, sleeping draughts, sedatives, digitalis, going for a little walk, and plunging back into bed again. (*Diary 2*: 125)

It seems then that for Woolf, no matter how illuminating about the inner self the experience of illness might be, its impact on the self's relationship with the external world is absolutely shattering. It is conceived as a gap, a drawn-out moment of 'non-being' that functions very much like a momentary death. Likewise, the narrator knows that the mark on the wall, for all its possibilities, might lead to a dark world where one is "helpless, speechless, unable to focus one's eyesight, groping at the roots of the grass, at the toes of the Giants" (78). Paradoxically, however, it is this incomprehensibility at the heart of the experience of illness that both Woolf in "On Being Ill" and the narrator in "The Mark on the Wall" seem to valorize. In the essay, Woolf justifies this by a sense of being suffocated by meaning, a situation that indulges our intelligence, it is true, but it also smothers our senses. In health, she says,

> meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. In illness, on the other hand, with the police of duty off, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarme or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent and distil their

> flavour, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is ail the richer for having come to us sensually first, by way of the palate and the nostrils, like sorne queer odour. (Woolf, 1986:200)

Thus, instead of a hermeneutics of meaning, Woolf, anticipating Roland Barthes, advocates an erotics of meaning, what Dalsimer describes as an enhanced experience of language in which "the meaning of words recede, [and] and their sensory qualities are heightened. Words become sound, and scent, and taste" (2001:176). Moreover, the theoretical movement of interpretation delineated in the essay is enacted in the story, as the narrator's attempt to attach meaning to the central signified in the text – the mark on the wall – procures her the pleasure of play characteristic of all signification. It does not matter in the end that the mark on the wall turns out to be a mere snail since, as Baldwin observes, "the prosaic fact of the snail is far less interesting than the speculations it provokes" (1989:14).

'Ruptures of transcendentalism': Illness as Mysticism in "The Mark on the Wall"

The ability to view things in a new light that reveals their otherwise hidden core is bound up in Woolf's mind with a quality of mysticism. In the essay, Woolf repeatedly uses religious imagery to delineate the kind of horizons that are opened up to us in illness. Thus, the patient regaining consciousness after a tooth extraction confuses the dentist's first words "with the greeting of the Deity stooping from the floor of Heaven to welcome [him]" (Woolf, 1986:193). Also, illness is represented as 'the great confessional' by virtue of its pristine outspokenness; in illness, Woolf says, "things are said, truths blurted out, which the cautious respectability of heath conceals" (Woolf, 1986:196). Nor was it unusual for Woolf to see her own illness in the light of a spiritual revelation. In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, dated August 15,1929, Woolf described her recurrent headaches as follows:

> These headaches leave one like sand which a wave has uncovered – 1 believe they have a mystic purpose. Indeed, l'm not sure that there isn't sorne religious cause at the back ofthem - 1 see my own worthlessness and failure so clearly; and lie gazing into the depths of the misery of human life; and then one gets up and everything begins again and is all covered over. (*Letters 4*: 78)

Yet, if illness is here equated with some sort of spiritual experience, it is hardly in the orthodox sense of Christian religion. Woolf, who at no point in her life could be described as being religious, points instead to a vague state of mysticism that results from the inadequacy of the available human systems of thought to account for the unique experience of illness. To study the 'great wars' that the body wages with illness and the attendant feelings of solitude, suffering, and melancholia, Woolf says, would be to look horror in the face. Thus, in the absence of a conceptual understanding of the trauma of illness, "this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain, will soon make us taper into mysticism, or rise, with rapid beats of the wings, into the ruptures of transcendentalism" (Woolf, 1986:194).

It is a variation on this transcendental movement of consciousness that seems to be taking place in "The Mark in the Wall". After all, the narrator too, like Woolf, seems persistently drawn toward an alternative world beyond. Consider, for instance, her reflection on the afterlife, where she imagines herself being reborn into eternal life, a child playing "at the toes of the Giants", surrounded by "spaces of light and dark, intersected by thick stalks, and rather higher up perhaps, rose-shaped blots of an indistinct colour - which will, as time goes on, become more definite [...]" (Woolf, 2012:32). The portrait of this paradisiacal place becomes more definite as the story moves toward its conclusion, when the narrator refocuses her eyes on the mark on the wall and, in doing so, is confronted with a vision that strikes her as "something definite, something real" (Woolf, 2012: 82). The Deity that seems to unveil itself to her is the one that inhabits the "impersonal world' of nature, of objects, of the chest of drawers and the tree whence it came".

The 'tree', which functions as a central symbol in Woolf's fiction in general, is invested here with a healing power that derives from its sheer indifference: "For years and years", Woolf says, "they grow, and without paying any attention to us, in meadows, in forests, and by the side of rivers - all things one likes to think about" (82). Years later, when she wrote 'On Being Ill', Woolf would echo again what she views as the healing effect of the

obliviousness of natural elements: "[i]t is in their indifference that they are comforting. That snowfield of the mind, where man has not trodden, is visited by the cloud, kissed by the falling petal" (Woolf, 1986:198). Likewise, if artists such as Milton and Pope achieved the kind of greatness that has rendered them immortal in our collective memory, it is mainly because they cultivated a consolatory quality of 'forgetfulness'.

The triumph of the elemental forces of nature over the human is also a central theme in *To the Lighthouse*, and provides a key feature of Woolf's modernism. In the middle section of the book entitled 'Time Passes', Woolf brackets off historical events such as the European War and the successive deaths in the Ramsay family, and dwells instead on the larger rhythms of nature with their greater cycles of destruction and restoration. The result of this exercise is a *tour de force* of experimental writing that combines the lyricism of poetry with the visual precision of painting, and would set the tone for the modernist style of *The Waves*. The opening of the section is a prime example of this innovative writing, as weIl as of the indomitable nature of the forces that Woolf attempts to describe, in this case the darkness of the night:

> The slow and smooth advent of darkness, however, seems to be the prelude to a less peaceful scene: Night after night, summer and winter, the torments of the storms, the arrow-like stillness of fine weather, held their court without interference. Listening (had there been any one to listen) from the upper rooms of the empty house only gigantic chaos streaked with lightening could have been heard tumbling and tossing, as the winds and waves disported themselves like amorphous bulks of leviathans whose brows are pierced by no light of reason, and mounted one on top of another, and lunged and plunged in the darkness or the daylight (for night and day, month and year ran shapelessly together) in idiot games, until it seemed as if the universe were battling and tumbling, in brute confusion and wanton lust aimlessly by itself. (Woolf, 2000:320)

I have quoted at length here because this passage (and similar passages) from *To the Lighthouse* represent the crux of Woolf's achievement as a modernist, as they set apart her brand of modernism from the kind of modernism presided over by the major male writers of her generation. Instead of looking back to some past historical period or geographical location for inspiration, Woolf seems instead to be constantly aware of a force in nature that is "working; something not highly conscious; something that leered; something that lurched" (Woolf, 2000:209). This odd poetics tends to dissolve the conceptual boundary between space and time in a way that is akin to Einsteinian physics, and as such it renders more profound Woolf s experiments with narrative consciousness and time. One might also add that Woolf's emphasis on the enormous and destructive forces of nature in 'Time Passes' arguably prefigures Freud's concept of the death drive which he postulates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. This idea can be seen in the quasi-pantheistic disposition in "The Mark on the Wall", where the narrator's thoughts are constantly drawn to the still but profound life of natural objects: "there are a million patient, watchful lives still for a tree, all over the world, in bedrooms, in ships, on the pavement, lining rooms, when men and women sit after tea, smoking cigarettes. It's full of peaceful thoughts, happy thoughts, this tree" (Woolf, 2012:83).

This is a dazzling and awe-inspiring world to be sure, far more interesting than the 'real' world as symbolized by Whitaker's *Almanack a*nd the 'Table of Precendcy', and worthier of the novelist's attention. Accordingly, the narrator's reflections develop into a metafictional commentary on the 'proper stuff of fiction', which c1early anticipates the argument that Woolf would push forward in the essay on 'Modern Fiction'. Novelists, the author says, should leave "the description of reality more and more out of their stories", and focus instead on 'the depths' and 'phantoms' of the "thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation" (Woolf, 2012:80). In 'On Being Ill', Woolf would theorize this world of 'standard things' in more concrete terms by locating it within the imagination of the recumbent, and would therefore express puzzlement that "illness has not taken its place with love and battle and jealousy among the prime themes of literature" *(*Woolf, 1986: 193).

Discovering a 'new form': The Possibilities of the Short Story Genre

While in 1917 Woolf seemed to imply that novelists should explore the valuable visions made accessible in illness, by the time she was working on "On Being Ill", she appeared less convinced of the novel's aptitude to convey such an elusive experience. Engaging "all our faculties ... our reason ... our judgement [and] our command" at once the novel form, she suggests, is hardly fitted for conveying such a mystic and sensual experience as that of illness, and so "it is to the poets that we turn" (Woolf, 1986:199). This meant for Woolf not so much starting to write poetry per se, as it signaled the necessity of finding a new medium, a new language that is "more primitive, more sensual, more obscene" (194-5). She would even consider an instantaneous transcription of her thoughts as they occurred using conventional language: "suppose one could catch them [her thoughts] before they became 'works of art'? Catch them hot and sudden as they rise in the mind ... of course one cannot; for the process of language is slow and deluding" (*Diary 3*: 103). The so-called 'primitive' and 'sensual' language Woolf would find in the kind of writing that she embarked on when she started composing "The Mark on the Wall", a writing style that relies on images in order to convey the complex of thoughts and sensations experienced during illness. The effect of this is that the experience of reading becomes very much like contemplating a painting or reading a dream narrative. Consider for instance the following passage:

> The cows swish their tails beneath them on hot afternoons; they paint rivers so green that when a moorhen dives one expects to see its feathers all green when it comes up again. I like to think of the fish. balanced against the stream like flags blown out; and of water-beetles slowing rising domes of mud upon the bed of the river. (Woolf, 2012:82)

We get the impression that we are looking at a painting in which several creatures have been captured in a frozen moment of time: a cow in green meadow, a moorhen taking a dive, fish in a stream, and water-beetles on a river bed. The act of painting is not only conjured up by the reference to 'paint rivers', but is enacted by the movement of the moorhen as it dives into the green water, much as a painter dips his/her brush into colors. Moreover, the components of this still picture establish a web of inter-texual allusions not only to the other stories but to Woolf's work at large. The image of the fish, for instance, links up with the narrator's longing for "a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin" (MT 34), an allusion perhaps to

the world of thought opened up by illness. The image of a fin 'slicing' water would become a central motif in Woolf's work and especially in *The Waves*, where it embodies Bernard's impressionistic view of reality.

> Leaning over this parapet I see far out a waste of water. A fin turns. This bare visual impression is unattached to any line of reason; it springs up as one might see the fin of a porpoise on the horizon. Visual impressions often communicate thus briefly statements that we shall in time uncover and coax into words. (Woolf, 1990:125)

CONCLUSION

It would perhaps not be inaccurate to describe "The Mark on the Wall" as a story of beginnings for Virginia Woolf. For, with it began not only her publishing career (the story was the first publication of the Hogarth Press), but also the experimental phase of her work. And although written "all in a flash, as if flying" (*Letters* 4: 231), the story would contain the seeds for most of the themes and techniques that she would continue to develop in later years. More importantly, "The Mark on the Wall" exemplified for Woolf the therapeutic dimension of experimental writing, a feature that she would explore more thoroughly in her novels of the twenties. Also, by obliquely bearing witness to the experience of illness, the story would set the tone not only for the other stories of the period but also for the essay on illness in terms of their exploration of the power of art to organize the chaos of lived experience, as well as the valuable insights that could be reached during illness. "I shall never forget the day l wrote The Mark on the Wall", Woolf wrote in a letter to Ethyl Smith (*Letters* 4: 231). Nor are readers likely to forget the day they first read the story.

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