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What “it” is about: The implicit in Virginia Woolf’s short fictions

Anne Besnault-Levita

- 1 How does “it” mean, what is “it” about and what does “it” reveal about the ethics of Virginia Woolf’s poetics of the implicit, and therefore of fiction, are the three questions I would like to raise in this paper. My starting point will be the recurring use, in many short stories, of the indefinite pronoun “it”, that haunting black mark on the white wall of the texts whose metalinguistic function challenges some of our common assumptions about the implicit as a linguistic and literary concept. In other words, I would like to examine the implicit theories of meaning and interpretation behind the implicit as they are put to the test by Woolf’s fictional prose.
- 2 On first consideration, the use of the pronoun “it” in Virginia Woolf’s short fictions has nothing to do with the notions of linguistic presupposition, cultural presupposition or pragmatic implicatures, nor does it seem to refer to the common definition of the implicit as what is suggested or understood without being stated directly. As a pronoun replacing a noun or referring to a clause, “it” first seems to call for our knowledge of language as a code and designates language as explicit. “Ah, the mark on the wall! It was a snail”, the narrator of Woolf’s famous short story concludes in an anti-climactic moment deflating the reader’s expectations as to the nature of that “small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece” described in the first paragraph¹. In what clearly reads as an ironical punch-line, “it” first anaphorically refers to the mark before cataphorically providing us with a definition — “it was a snail” — which puts an end to the thematic and imagistic meditation that it had triggered off in the first place. The deceived reader is left with the feeling that the linguistic and literary explicitness attached to the use of “it” is frustrating. But the “judicious” reader will reject explicitness as the implicit of the text to turn to implicitness as its essential mode: realizing that the mark’s definition as a snail is some kind of reading lure, he will have to build up an interpretation of this short story insisting on the unsaid — this pattern of hidden, not-yet actualized signifieds — as one of its fundamental dimensions.

- 3 Thus, he may choose to read "The Mark on the Wall" as a fictional essay promoting Woolf's art of fiction as an encounter with "life itself"². In this case he will foreground the text's implicit meditation on the problems of representation, a meditation opposing facts to fancy (the mark is a snail, yet "it is not the actual sight or sound that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds"³), comparing the Edwardian interest for "the surface with its hard separate facts" (85) with the modernist awareness that a mirror never hides "one reflection but an almost infinite number" (85), contrasting the hierarchical and even patriarchal order of what Woolf calls in this same story the "Whitaker's Table of Precedency" (86) with the infinite richness of humanity as metaphorized not by the definition of the mark as a snail but by its potentially unstable nature as a referent. In the light of modernism's acknowledged self-reflexiveness and rejection of univocal determination of meaning, the reader may also conceive the story as the expression of a syntagmatic movement taking him from the illusion of significance as transparent and stable (the mark is a snail) to the revelation of signification as a paradigmatic process implying plurality and instability: "The outward sign I see and shall see for ever; but at the meaning of it I shall only guess"⁴. Inspired by a more phenomenological approach of interpretation positing the impossibility of our gaining a knowledge of the world that would remain untouched by our perception of that world, he could also probably insist on the definition "it" implicitly conveys of sight as insight, of vision as an envisioning process: objects are always the incomplete objects of our subjective perception. Now a post-modernist, if not deconstructionist, interpretation of "The Mark on the Wall" would surely underline the absence of any stabilized signified attached to "it" together with the endless circulation of unstable signifiers imparting a strong sense of the unrepresentable, of the absence of a "beyond-the-text" since, indeed, "No, no nothing is proved, nothing is known. [...] Everything's moving, falling, slipping, vanishing..." (87-89).
- 4 Whatever the different and yet non-exclusive interpretations, the various signifieds explicitly referred to by the signifier "it" – "mark", "object", "hole", "nail", "snail" – all point to an implicit dimension of the text which no longer designates language as an explicit and stable code or the text as an easily deciphered riddle. In other words, Woolf's use of the implicit here implies a poetical order that should be opposed to the traditional grammatical order of language, but also to the rhetorical or pragmatic order of meaning and interpretation when the theoretical injunctions implied by those orders amount to what Jean-Jacques Lecercle, in *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, calls a "doxic" theory of interpretation and meaning⁵. Thus, according to what could be called the metaphysical order of traditional grammar⁶, one of those injunctions is that as a mode of grammatical ellipsis the implicit entails that 1) an elliptic sentence refers to a complete sentence 2) what is implied is always perceptible 3) the missing words define a negative form of utterance: they unmistakably refer to the intention of the speaking subject, although in a negative way. Indisputably, the way "it" works in Virginia Woolf's short fictions offers an implicit theory of language and meaning that challenges those three theoretical maxims. First and foremost, the implicit is not for Woolf a secondary phenomenon which does not, or should not, disrupt the transparency of language as its primary quality. As Woolf herself explains in an essay called "Craftsmanship" dealing with the art of fiction but also with language as a conversational tool, words always "mislead us", "fool us"; they never express "one simple statement but a thousand possibilities". The "useful meaning" of words is not, as

the final line of "The Mark on the Wall" suggests, their "literal meaning", their "surface meaning". The proper way to use them is by relying on their "power of suggestion which is one of [their] most mysterious properties". "Words, English words", Woolf goes on explaining, "are full of echoes, of memories, of associations – naturally"⁷. Not only does Woolf suggest here that the implicit dimension of words – the natural vagueness and undecidability of language – comes first; she also reverses the usual hierarchy of traditional grammar and of traditional rhetorics and pragmatics according to which the implicit presupposes the existence of explicit semantic contents to which it refers as an origin. As the short story entitled "Solid Objects" suggests, the search for such an origin (whether it be of an object or of a word) is impossible, and this is partly why what is implied is not always perceptible and does not refer to any complete and originally intended form of utterance:

It was a lump of a glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone. You had only to enclose it in a rim of gold, or pierce it with a wire, and it became a jewel; part of a necklace, or a dull green light upon a finger. Perhaps after all it was really a gem; [...]. (103)

- 5 In this short story, the way "it" cataphorically fails to provide us with a definition before retrospectively referring to an impossible quest for truth – "What was the truth of it, John?" asked Charles suddenly, turning and facing him. "What made you give it up like that all in a second?" (106) – is exemplary and echoes our analysis of "Mark on the Wall". But although truth (the implicit signified attached to the signifier "it" under which all the others are subsumed in this text and in Woolf's short fiction in general) is most of the time conveyed metaphorically, it cannot be approached either through traditional rhetorics when based on a definition of the rhetorical figure as transparent and "translatable"⁸. In this respect, Oswald Ducrot is right to argue that the conception of language as a code, and of rhetorics as a set of conventional categories always finally turning indirect meaning into explicit meaning is incompatible with the very notion of the implicit⁹. The resurgence of the grammatical order of language (as defined above) in such a conception of the rhetorical order of language is obvious: it implies a positivistic account of sense based on the reductive opposition between literal and figurative meaning and argues for the view that literary interpretation is a disclosure process implying closure in the first place.¹⁰

- 6 Interestingly enough, Virginia Woolf's use of the implicit challenges this view by systematically resorting to connotation at the expense of denotation, as if there could be no such thing as denoted meaning. Linguistically and literarily speaking, the mark on the wall is not a snail but a mark on a wall: just as "solid objects" are solid (i.e. clearly identifiable) in appearance only, it has no significance outside a discursive context. This is why Woolf's short fictions constantly blur our usual perception of the line between literal meaning and figurative meaning, between denotation and connotation, between the alleged transparency of the code and the alleged opacity of literature. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle points out in an essay entitled "L'écriture féminine selon Virginia Woolf", the "philosophy of the implicit" in "the feminine sentence" according to Woolf can be described in the terms of various theories of sense and discourse (he mentions Derrida, Lyotard and Deleuze), but whatever the mode of theorizing, the Woolfian truth cannot be characterized by a normative and straightforward use of "designation, signification and manifestation"¹¹. Not so much

because it is ultimately inaccessible or "beyond the text", as because it always exceeds ready-coded motifs, whether narrative or semiotic. In Woolf's short fictions, what we take for an explicit signification always-already implies the underdetermination of language as an implicit dimension, which accounts for the way the use of the pronoun "it" follows a circular movement from the implicit to the explicit and back again to the implicit: "But was it 'happiness'?" the narrator wonders in "Happiness" (178). "How could she express it?" the character-focalizer asks in "A Woman's College from Outside" (147). In both examples, "it" anaphorically refers to an implicit utterance which is cataphorically turned into an explicit signified – "happiness", "life", "the world" – before losing its explicitness through a process of metaphorization that reminds one of Gertrude Stein's conception of the use of names¹²:

A name is adequate or it is not. If it is adequate why go on calling it, if it is not, then calling it by its name does no good. If you feel what is inside of a thing do not call it by the name by which it is known.

- 7 "Names", "big words" as Woolf puts it, do not seem to fit "it": "No. The big word did not seem to fit it [Happiness], did not seem to refer to this state of being curled in rosy flakes around a bright light" (178). "Big" words frozen by canonical significations, by semantic and cultural recognitions always fail in their attempt to hide the opacity of natural language behind an illusory correspondence between signifiers and signifieds, figural meaning and literal meaning:

How could she express it – that after the dark churning of myriad ages here was light at the end of the tunnel; life; the world. Beneath her it lay – all good; all lovable. Such was her discovery. (147)

- 8 In Virginia Woolf's short fiction, light is life is the world is truth is light. The meaning hidden behind "it", the desired epiphanic disclosure of the text, cannot but be delayed, differred and differring, Derrida would say, questioned, rendered implicit, just as the idea of a formal centre of signification releasing knowledge is itself disrupted and replaced by an infinite reserve of signifiers and therefore of "possibilities", "echoes, memories [and] associations":

Desiring truth, awaiting it, laboriously distilling a few words, forever desiring – (a cry starts to the left, another to the right. Wheels strike divergently. Omnibuses conglomerate in conflict) – forever desiring – (the clock asseverates with twelve distinct strokes that it is midday; light sheds gold scales, children swarm) – forever desiring truth.¹³

- 9 To understand how "it" means and what it is about therefore requires more than a positivistic account of meaning as intention and recognition. In this respect, even the traditional (Jean-Jacques Lecercle would say "doxic") pragmatic view of sense does not seem to "fit it". If Woolf would surely agree that "the interpretation of a text can be treated as an extended speech act"¹⁴, it seems to me that she would reject Searle's conception of meaning as intentionality (at least, her fiction does) according to which "everything that can be meant can be said"¹⁵, just as she would challenge Oswald's Ducrot's view that implicit meaning is always added on to literal meaning which it never completely erases¹⁶: "In reading we have to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated; lapsing and pouring into each other like reeds on the bed of a river"¹⁷. Here again, Woolf reminds us that indirect language acts based on the use of the implicit are not secondary phenomenons. In a discursive context, the implicit has to be interpreted and constructed, not simply retrieved and re-constructed. In fact, what "it" is about in Virginia Woolf's short fictions cannot be recognized or disclosed

since the modes of the implicit that "it" activates require a theory of interpretation which does not imply that signification comes prior to utterance. In this respect, the way the conventional motif of the quest in some of Woolf's famous stories ("The Mark on the Wall", "An Unwritten Novel", "A Haunted House", "Monday or Tuesday" or "The Lady in the Looking Glass") may lure the reader into a hermeneutic pattern of interpretation is a remarkable example of Woolf's subversive strategy, as the quest motif appears to orientate the writing and the reading of those texts towards the disclosure of an origin that was finally never there and therefore never lost¹⁸.

- 10 "A Haunted House" is here another canonical example of the way Woolf prompts us to look at "it" as a successful, yet finally absent, centre on which the overall meaning of the story deceptively depends:

Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure — a ghostly couple. 'Here we left *it*,' she said. And he added, 'Oh, but here too!' 'It's upstairs,' she murmured, 'And in the garden,' he whispered. 'Quietly,' they said, 'or we shall wake them.'¹⁹

- 11 The resort to cultural implicatures in the form of an intertextual allusion is the first mode of the implicit in this story whose title builds up a deceptive horizon of expectation for the "common reader". The convention of the gothic tale invites us to embark on a syntagmatic journey taking us from sheer absence — there is no object after the verbs "to lift" and "to open" — to the loss of the referent attached to "it" — to a discovered treasure — "the treasure yours" (123) — to the metaphoric unveiling of the treasure's significance: "Waking, I cry 'Oh, is this your buried treasure, The light in the heart.'" (123). However, the disclosure of the metaphorical meaning of the story's "lost" referent does not entail a recognition of its lost signified although it takes place in an epiphanic moment, announced in the rest of the passage by the shift from obscurity to light, from the past tense to the present tense. The metaphorical implicitness of the "revelation" rather challenges the traditional pattern of the quest by taking us back to the beginning of the short story rather than to a lost origin of utterance and meaning. What that obviously rapid hermeneutic analysis does not account for, among other things, is the passage from the pronoun "they" — "from room to room they went" — to the pronoun "I" in the last sentence of the text. Just as there cannot but be an unbridgeable gap between utterer's meaning and utterance meaning, between utterance meaning and interpretation, what 'I' has discovered may not be what "they" have been looking for. What "it" is about is therefore not merely the infinite reserve of textual meaning; "it" is a blunt reminder of the uncontrollable implicit dimension of natural and literary language (Woolf never seems to consider literariness as a form of disruption of ordinary language or communication), which entails that authorial meaning is a partly irretrievable intention and that literary interpretation is necessarily a praxis, an "intervention" depending on a situation of enunciation and on the "determinate limits" imposed by any literary text²⁰.

- 12 I would also argue that for Woolf, it is that uncontrollable implicit dimension which renders human intercourse interesting and intense, however irrational, obscure and meaningless it may sometimes appear to be:

Of all things, nothing is so strange as human intercourse, she thought, because of its changes, its extraordinary irrationality, her dislike being now nothing short of the most intense and rapturous love, but directly the word 'love' occurred to her, she rejected it, thinking again how obscure the mind was, with its very few words for all

these astonishing perceptions, these alternations of pain and pleasure. ("Together and Apart", 193)

'Yet how sad a thing is sense! How vast a renunciation it represents! Listen for a moment. Distinguish one among the voices. Now. "So cold it must seem after India. Seven years too. But habit is everything." That's sense. That's agreement. They've fixed their eyes upon something visible to each of them. They attempt no more to look upon the little spark of light, the little purple shadow which may be fruitful land on the verge of the horizon, or only a flying gleam on the water. It's all compromise — all safety, the general intercourse of human beings. Therefore we discover nothing; we cease to explore; we cease to believe that there is anything to discover. "Nonsense" you say; meaning that I shan't see your crystal globe; and I'm half ashamed to try.'

'Speech is an old torn net, through which the fish escape as one casts it over them. Perhaps silence is better. Let us try it. Come to the window.'

'It's an odd thing, silence. The mind becomes like a starless night; and then a meteor slides, splendid, right across the dark and is extinct. We never give sufficient thanks for this entertainment. ("The Evening Party", 99)

- 13 My own reading, or "praxis" of those two extracts thus makes me aware that silence, which within the modernist literary context, is often endowed with a symbolic power of attractiveness, should not be here opposed to conversation or dialogue, but to sense as "habit", "agreement", "compromise", "safety". What is valuable for Woolf in "human intercourse" is neither silence as an ideal form of communication (although such an "entertainment" might seem attractive at times) nor an impossible cooperative principle between speaker and hearer, author and reader, based on the non-proliferation of the implicit. I do not think that her characters grieve here for the loss of dialogic directness or for a prelapsarian linguistic world: natural languages would sink into the plenitude of fixed meaning if the implicit was not a fundamental linguistic category. No "discovery" would be possible, no "spark of light" would "slide" across the dark sky if there was no "little purple shadow which may be fruitful land on the verge of the horizon". As a highly political discursive mode, the implicit in Virginia Woolf's short fictions is thus inseparable from the concepts of history and society, which imply the acceptance of change, obscurity and disagreement and a distrust of "fixed" and "visible" meaning; it is inseparable from the complex and ambivalent process of subjectivation that involves both speakers and hearers, authors and readers. To take up B. C. Rosenberg's words in his analysis of the Woolfian notion of "common reader", there is a parallel between Woolf's poetics and her conception of conversation and dialogue: "dialogue, as a model for constructing knowledge, is not fluid or static, but fluid, decentered, and process-orientated. Like the common reader, dialogue is anti-authoritarian and non-didactic, unsystematic and constantly changing with each interaction [...]"²¹. If we agree that there are ethical implications in the way literary theory articulates the problem of how, as speaking subjects, we take into account the existence of others²², then the question of the ethics of Virginia Woolf's poetics of the implicit cannot but appear to be linked with the exploration of alterity "it" stands for:

I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on and say 'This is it'? My depression is a harassed feeling. I'm looking; but that's not it — that's not it. What is it? And shall I die before I find it?²³

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NOTES

1. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* (1985), ed. Susan Dick, London: Grafton Books, 1991, 89 and 83. All references to Virginia Woolf's short fictions will refer to this edition.
2. V. Woolf, "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" (1923), *A Woman's Essays*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1992, 87: "[the reader's] part is to insist that writers shall come down off their plinths and pedestals, and describe beautifully if possible, truthfully at any rate, our Mrs Brown. You should insist that she is an old lady of unlimited capacity and infinite variety; capable of appearing in any place; wearing any dress; saying anything and doing heaven knows what. But the things she says and and the things she does and her eyes and her nose and her speech and her silence have an overwhelming fascination, for she is, of course, the spirit we live by, life itself."
3. V. Woolf, "Impassioned Prose", *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol.4, 367.
4. V. Woolf, "Sympathy", 108.
5. J.-J. Lecerclé, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, New York: St Martin's Press, 1999. In this book, to which I am much indebted, Lecerclé deconstructs what he calls the "doxic" theory of interpretation and its seven maxims: Maxim n° 1: "the transparency of the text"; Maxim n° 2: "the fixity of meaning"; Maxim n° 3: "the intendedness, or intentionality of meaning"; Maxim n° 4: "the truth of interpretation"; Maxim n° 5: "interpretation as a recovery of presence"; Maxim n° 6: "interpretation as repetition" ("meaning is of the order of an event, the singularity of which it is the aim of interpretation to recapture"); Maxim n° 7: "interpretation involves textual exchange and dialogue" and this dialogue is "resolutely irenic" (43-45).

6. In an essay entitled « Ellipse et présupposition » (*Poétique* (44), nov. 1980, 422-437,) Marie-Thérèse Ligot explains how the nature of language and grammatical rules was already debated in the 17th and 18th centuries, between the rationalist philosophers for whom language, as an expression of Divine Truth, had to rely on a perfect equivalence between words and meaning, and the sensualist philosophers who considered that language was historically based on men's desire to communicate, to exchange information and intentions. The sensualist philosophers (she mentions Condillac and Batteux, 425) therefore opposed the "rhetorical order of language", which acknowledges the presence of speaking subjects in language, to the metaphysical and grammatical order of language: "Bientôt les grammairiens, qui n'avaient fait leurs règles que sur la langue faite et établie avant eux, se persuadèrent que leurs règles étaient la Nature même qui avait présidé à la formation des langues" (Batteux, *Nouvel Examen du préjugé sur l'inversion*, 1767, cité par M.-T Ligot, 425).
7. V. Woolf, "Craftsmanship" (1937), *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942), San Diego, London, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1970, 198-204.
8. G. Genette, *Figures*, Paris: Seuil, 1960, 209: "Toute figure est traduisible, et porte sa traduction, visible, en transparence, comme un filigrane, ou un palimpseste, sous son texte apparent."
9. O. Ducrot, *Dire et ne pas dire : principes de sémantique linguistique*, Paris : Hermann, 1991, 18-21: "la rhétorique connotative [s'appuie sur] un code connotatif qui attache directement à chaque énonciation l'ensemble des significations implicites qui nous semblait d'abord lié à elle par une démarche discursive. [...] Cette rhétorique instaure un nouveau code qui finit par expliciter l'implicite."
10. In « La Parole hantée: épistémologie linguistique de l'ellipse » (« Ellipses, blanc, silences ». Actes du colloque du CICADA, 6-7-8 déc. 1990., Presses Universitaires de Pau, 1992), Gérard Dessons explores the linguistic epistemology of ellipsis as a rhetorical figure and points out this convergence of the two orders of language and meaning: "Dans [le cadre de la rhétorique de l'écart], l'ellipse suppose [...] que la phrase elliptique renvoie à une phrase pleine, [...] que les mots sous-entendus sont perceptibles [...] que les mots manquants définissent une énonciation négative" (15).
11. J.-J. Lecercle, "L'écriture féminine selon Virginia Woolf", *Études Britanniques Contemporaines*, Octobre 1999, 26.
12. G. Stein, "Poetry and Grammar", in P. Meyerowitz (ed.), *Look at Me Now and Here I Am: Writings and Lectures — 1909-1945* (1967), Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984, 125-126.
13. "Monday or Tuesday", 137.
14. J.-J. Lecercle, *Interpretation as pragmatics...*, 34. Lecercle's pragmatic theory of interpretation (his ALTER model) involves the five actants of situation of communication (A- speaker or author; L- language; T- text or message; E- encyclopaedia; R- hearer or reader), challenges the seven "doxic maxims" mentioned above and offers an alternative set of maxims (76-82): 1) *the maxim of indirection* based on the radical separation, in natural languages, between utterance meaning and utterer's meaning, a separation which renders the re-construction of authorial meaning impossible; 2) *the maxim of vagueness* ("natural languages have fuzzy rules and indulge in vague reference") which has the same consequences as the previous one; 3) *the maxim of recontextualisation* ("meaning, far from being changeless, is recontextualized, and therefore varies, even if ever so slightly, with each new reading"); 4) the Derridean *maxim of différance*; 5) the Lacanian *maxim of interpretance* ("meaning is the product of a dialogue between two texts, the interpreted text and the interpretation that reads it, and the subjects involved, the author and the reader, are not free but *assujettis* in Althusserian parlance"); 6) *the maxim of placing* which "involves moving from the traditional concept of subject as centre (of consciousness, of control, of point of view) to a concept of subject as *assujetti*, captured at a place"; 7) *the maxim of metalepsis* according to which the text can recontextualize itself by changing its own ALTER structure; 8)

the Althusserian *maxim of conjuncture* which notes that "there is a specific temporality of the ALTER structure, the temporality of recontextualisation, which historicises it".

15. J. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, chap. I, section 5.

16. O. Ducrot, *Dire et ne pas dire ...*, 11-12: "La signification implicite apparaît et quelque fois même se donne comme surajoutée par rapport à une autre signification"; "la signification implicite laisse toujours subsister à côté d'elle la signification littérale". (A similar definition of the implicit can be found in Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni's *L'Implicite* (1986), Paris: Armand Colin, 1998, 6: "L'existence des contenus implicites présuppose unilatéralement celle des contenus explicites sur lesquels ils se greffent, et qu'éventuellement même ils détournent à leur profit.") Oswald Ducrot's theory is here a good example of how a pragmatic approach to such notions as "the implicit" or "ellipsis" might advocate a conception of language as a "game" played everyday by its users according to their role and position (in his first chapter, Ducrot opposes Saussure's structural linguistics and his conception of language as a "code" to Benveniste's vision of language as an apprenticeship and a permanent practice in reciprocity and intersubjectivity ("un apprentissage et un exercice permanent de réciprocité et d'intersubjectivité") while playing down the uncontrollable undecidability attached to the use of the implicit at every level of the situation of communication.

17. V. Woolf, "Craftsmanship" ...,

18. My view of hermeneutics as an interpretative pattern may appear reductive here. It is nonetheless grounded in the German tradition as defined by Wilhem Dilthey and F. Schleiermacher who considered that hermeneutics should be in relation to the human sciences what scientific method is to the natural sciences, explanation being the mode of intelligibility of natural science while understanding is the mode of intelligibility of human science. (Besides, the term derives from Hermes, the messenger-God who is associated with the function of transmuting what is beyond human understanding into a form human intelligence can grasp.) I would also like to quote Gérard Dessons, in the above mentioned article, 19 — "on trouve ici la démarche propre à l'herméneutique: comprendre, c'est retrouver un sens premier" — and Jean-Jacques Lecercle in the final pages of *Pragmatics as Interpretation* in which he distinguishes the hermeneutic theory of truth as "disclosure" from the hermeneutic theory of truth as "revelation" while insisting on the way the two theories account for "interpretation as translation and not as intervention" (232-237).

19. V. Woolf, "A Haunted House", 122.

20. J.-J. Lecercle, *Pragmatics as Interpretation ...*, 237.

21. . V. B. C. Rosenberg, "Woolf, Reading and Readers", in M. Hussey, V. Neverow-Turk, (eds.), *Virginia Woolf Miscellanies*, New York: Pace University Press, 1992, 2.

22. J.-J. Lecercle, R. Shusterman, *L'Emprise des signes: débat sur l'expérience littéraire*, Paris: Seuil, 2002, 235: "On définira l'éthique comme l'art ou la pensée de l'être ensemble."

23. . Woolf, *A Writer's Diary* (1953), London: Grafton Books, 1978, 115.

ABSTRACTS

Dans les nouvelles de Virginia Woolf, l'utilisation presque obsédante du pronom « it » ouvre, dans la surface trompeusement lisse et factuelle du texte, une brèche donnant accès à l'espace plus insondable de l'implicite :

'What was the truth of it, John?' asked Charles suddenly, turning and facing him. 'What made you

give it up like that all in a second?" "But I've not given it up," John replied. ("Solid Objects")
 'Here we left it,' she said. And he added, 'Oh, but here too!' 'It's upstairs,' she murmured, 'And in the garden,' he whispered. 'Quietly,' they said, 'or we shall wake them.' ("A Haunted House")
 Desiring truth, awaiting it, laboriously distilling a few words, for ever desiring — ("Monday or Tuesday")

But was it 'happiness'? No. The big word did not seem to fit it, did not seem to refer to this state of being curled in rosy flakes around a bright light. ("Happiness")

Ce que « it » signifie dans les nouvelles de Virginia Woolf semble d'abord correspondre à l'objet d'une quête acharnée : celle que mènent, au-delà des apparences, des faits et des mots, personnages et narrateurs. Mais au fur et à mesure que se dérober la référence et le signifié du pronom dans les labyrinthes de la métaphore apparaît l'impossibilité de la quête en même temps que son illusoire intérêt herméneutique.

J'aimerais tenter d'analyser ici la manière dont un certain nombre d'outils critiques (ceux proposés, entre autres, par la linguistique, la rhétorique et la pragmatique) nous aident à mieux cerner la poétique Woolfienne de l'implicite. Je formulerai ainsi l'hypothèse que ce que « it » désigne est moins l'infinie réserve du sens littéraire que l'incontrôlable dimension implicite des langues naturelles et de toute forme de communication.