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1 Virginia Woolf’s short stories have long been the marginal part of Woolf’s canon. In the 1980s-1990s, Ralf Freedman’s Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity, Dean Baldwin’s publication of Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short fiction and Dominic Head’s chapter on Woolf in The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice were essential landmarks in the revaluation of what is now considered to be an essential collection of genius pieces and formative experiences in genre, form and gender. This assessment has been more recently endorsed by Nena Skrbic’s Wild Outburst of Freedom: Reading Virginia Woolf’s Short Fiction, by Kathryn Benzol and Ruth Hoberman’s collection of essays Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf’s Short Fiction and, in France, by the regular SEW conferences published in Études Britanniques Contemporaines.

2 In those works, many interesting pages introduce or discuss the stories comprised in Mrs Dalloway’s Party, a sequence written by Woolf around 1925 and first edited by Stella McNichol in 1973 (Woolf 1973). The critics generally agree about the specificity of this “cycle” in which “the setting is created by the interior world (or psychic geography) and by the heterogeneity of individuated experience” (Skrbic 148). Baldwin’s analysis, for example, focuses on the “party consciousness” evoked by Woolf in her diary: “But my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness etc.” (Woolf 1980: 12). It draws our attention to generation and gender issues by highlighting the central interaction of the “endangered self” with its social surroundings (Baldwin 40). Focusing on the way “The New Dress”, “Happiness”, “Ancestors”, “The Introduction”, “Together and Apart”, “The Man Who Loved His Kind”, “A Simple Melody” and “A Summing Up” function as a sequence “tied together by theme, language and
characters” and as a “place of transformation” between *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, Beth Riget Daugherty’s approach, in “A Corridor leading from *Mrs Dalloway* to a New Book: Transforming Stories, Bending Genres”, is structural as much as thematic (Daugherty 101-110). The critic underlines the contrast between “external social appearances and internal private realities”, between the characters’ “desire to communicate” and their “inability to do so” together with the “transitoriness of happiness against a backdrop of human suffering” (107). Above all, she emphasizes the “interconnectedness” of those stories: they all begin *in medias res*, all “illuminate an internal conflict”, all have “a Woolfian moment of being or recognition” and “feel concluded”, and all use connected words or phrases and images such as struggling flies and unmated widow birds. In “A Tolerable Shape: *Mrs Dalloway’s Party* and the Short Story Cycle”, Nena Skrbic also highlights this structural coherence:

> Each of the stories involves confessional-like situations in which the characters bring to the fore the parts of their life (identity or social status, for example) that they have to come to terms with and reveal their personal feelings, hopes and aspirations to the reader. All the characters are at once ordinary and exceptional, profoundly sympathetic and deeply flawed. (Skrbic 144)

She also dwells on the thematic unity of the sequence, completing Daugherty’s study by exploring the characters’ “preoccupation with memory” (145) and “struggle between sameness and dissimilarity” (147), by insisting on “the repetitive experience of failure and fracture that social interaction entails” as an effect of the cycle, and by tackling the issue of “women’s self-perception” and the way it raises “questions of manipulation, objectification, and loss of self-worth” (149). But Skrbic’s analysis is also aware of the way “language gives a framework to relationships” in those short fictions: “in the cycle, Woolf operates as social analyst, bringing into focus the question of how we communicate and how we place the individual socially” (148-149).

The stories in *Mrs Dalloway’s Party* are indeed built around the idea of conversation as a form of social exchange in which different discursive communities defined by personal background, age and gender are involved. They examine utterances in their social context, raise questions about gender and its narratorial representation, and analyse discourses as the sites of ambiguities and conflicts. Their use of the clashing modes of internalisation (achieved mainly through free indirect speech) and dialogue reflects on communication as a praxis that problematises the self, intersubjective recognition and interpretative strategies at the same time. This is why I would argue that pragmatics and feminist narratology as critical approaches might add to my predecessors’ commentaries.

As representative evidences of this point, I have chosen two stories in which “the party” can be read as a metaphorised social stage implying specific linguistic games and role playing, and where the “introduction” motif — two characters of the opposite sex being introduced to each other by a third overbearing one — obviously implies forms of negotiation with cultural impositions, the other and language. In “The Introduction”, Lily Everit, who is attending her first party, tries “to remain inconspicuous”, and “hangs to the memory of [her essay on Swift] and the compliment” made to her by her professor as if it could protect her from “the intimidating world of male accomplishments (Westminster, Parliament, the telegraph)” embodied by Bob Brinsley to whom Mrs Dalloway introduces her (Baldwin 40). In “Together and Apart”, the meeting once again brought about by Mrs Dalloway, but this time between two “middle-aged characters who could be friends but are unable to find a bond” (Baldwin...
42), ends up in “that paralysing blankness of feeling” which Baldwin attributes to Mr Serle’s “masculine arrogance” (Woolf 2004: 187-188).

In both stories, the conventional narrative framework — an introduction and the ensuing conversation as a potential form of self-discovery and social apprenticeship — leads the reader to expect direct discourse to be the main mode of character-presentation. But Woolf’s “party consciousness” is explored through a more modernist discursive framework, and actual dialogue is reduced to a few lines while the inner voice of indirectly reported thought is pervading. My contention here is that although the actual utterance of impersonated speech in these stories is almost stifled by the use of free indirect and free direct discourse, it should nonetheless be studied as speech-acts reflecting on the characters' discursive negotiation with their conflicting agendas in the context of the prescriptive ideology of the party. This negotiation should then be shown to be at work in the stream of consciousness technique which turns out to be another mode of conversation involving similar forms of inner conflicts. In the end, more than a modernist domination of thought over speech, of the modernist solipsistic self over social interaction, what “The Introduction” and “Together and Apart” seem to me representative of is Woolf’s fictional critique of conversation and self-representation, and her pragmatic critique of interpretation.

The prescriptive ideology of the party

In “The Introduction” and “Together and Apart”, as in the other “Party” stories, the represented social scene has obviously changed a lot since Jane Austen's descriptions of the manners of rural gentility. The subject is no longer courtship or marriageship, but human intercourse:

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”, 187)

The male characters do not exactly represent an ideal of manhood, like Knightley in *Emma*, the female characters are not exactly debutantes, and Mrs Dalloway is not supposed to be a matchmaker or an arbiter of relationships. However, in Woolf’s stories as in Austen’s novels, the party is more than a social occasion. It turns out to be a life experience, an encounter with “civilisation” (182), with “the world” — “this was the famous place: the world” (180) — and also with the “traditions” of a “regulated way of life” (180).

At “the very first sight of people moving up stairs” in Mrs Dalloway’s house (“The Introduction” 178), the character-focalizers begin to experience an increased awareness of the social and gender roles that are now imposed upon them — “As she walked with Mrs Dalloway across the room, [Lily Everit] accepted the part which was now laid on her” (180) — roles which they are shown to resist and to “accept” at the same time, as if the painful division between their private and public selves (a well-known modernist subject) was inescapable: “[Serle] smiled; he accepted it; he crossed his knees the other way about. She did her part; he is” (“Together and Apart” “187). “Remembering her youth,” and her own life — “(to introduce a couple made her think
of meeting Richard for the first time!" (181) — thinking that there is something profoundly human in “a man feeling this for woman, and woman that for man, and there flowing from that contact all those homes, trials, sorrows, profound joy and ultimate staunchness in the face of catastrophe” (181), Mrs Dalloway “bear[s] down on [Lily] from the other side of the room”, “approache[s] her with a smile which Lily knew (though this was her first party) meant: ‘But you’ve got to come out of your corner and talk,’ and “never quite drop[s] her arm” until she finds “a group where there were young people talking, and Bob Brinsley” (178-79). As Lily progresses through space with her “commanding” guide (178), feeling “the strange mixture of excitement and fear, of desire to be left alone and of longing to be taken out and thrown down, down into the boiling depths” of the party (178), Woolf’s writing weaves together lexical, grammatical and metaphorical allusions to forms of cultural impositions. The prepositions suggest an impending threat: “bearing down on her”, “to menace her and mount over her”, [Mrs Dalloway] came straight down on her”, the part which was now laid on her”, “this regulated way of life which felt like a yoke about her neck”, “the yoke that had fallen from the skies onto her neck crushed her” (178-182). The use of passive forms such as “to be taken out and thrown down” (178) or to be “flung into a whirlpool where either she would perish or be saved” (179) hints at a form of violent subordination which is corroborated by the overwhelming presence of the symbols of masculine might: “Westminster Abbey; the sense of the enormously high solemn buildings surrounding them” (179), “the towers of Westminster; the high and formal buildings; talk; […] high towers, solemn bells, flats built every brick of them by men’s toil, churches built by men’s toil, parliaments too; […] What had she to oppose to this massive masculine achievement?” (179). Unable to escape from what the reader is led to see as a form of military enrolment (the image of the soldier and the uniform recurs three times in the short story), Lily’s “being (no longer sharp as a diamond cleaving the heart of life asunder)” turns “to a mist of alarm, apprehension and defence” (178) and “yield[s] to the pressure of unquestionable might, that is the conviction that it was not hers to dominate, or to assert; rather to air and embellish this orderly life where all was done already” (180).

In “Together and Apart”, the prescriptive ideology of the party is also at work: the predictive value of Mrs Dalloway’s “you will like him” in the first sentence implies a whole world of tacit social obligations and presuppositions. Yet it is treated in a more peripheral way. Probably because in Hegelian terms, Miss Anning and Mr Serle, aged around forty, do no longer stand for the naïve subject misrecognizing itself to be the centre of the world. As the first paragraph of the short story suggests, they seem to know that they cannot but be governed by “unwritten laws and social customs, a framework [...] from which [they don’t] think to disassociate [themselves]” (Hegel 541):

Mrs Dalloway introduced them, saying you will like him. The conversation began some minutes before anything was said, for both Mr Serle and Miss Anning looked at the sky and in both of their minds the sky went on pouring its meaning[,] though very differently[,] until the presence of Mr Serle by her side became so distinct that she could not see the sky, simply, itself, anymore, but the sky shored up by the tall body, dark eyes, grey hair, clasped hand, the stern melancholy (but she had been told ‘falsely melancholy’) face of Roderick Serle, and, knowing how foolish it was, she yet felt impelled to say:

‘What a beautiful night!’ (183)

Nonetheless, the characters’ increased social and gender awareness of the other’s differences does not prevent them from performing their part in a conventional way:
“‘Well!’ said Miss Anning, patting the sofa cushion emphatically. And down he sat beside her.” (183). It does not prevent them from experiencing a sense of foolishness or inadequacy (this is particularly true of Miss Anning whose maturity has not made her much more secure than Lily Everit), nor does it spare them the pain of expecting what they finally will not get: “Miss Anning felt that she had struck accidentally the true man, upon whom the false man was built” (183); “Let him think so; not liking him, she wanted him to run away with an absurd idea of her” (186).

In the two stories, the reader’s own romantic expectancies about the forging of a new relationship are deflated through situational irony. The encounter is soon experienced on both sides in terms of “confrontation” and “collision” and the feeling of isolation is intensified: “Their eyes met; collided rather, for each felt that behind the eyes the secluded being, who sits in darkness while his shadow agile companion does all the tumbling and beckoning, and keeps the show going, suddenly stood erect; flung off his cloak; confronted the other” (186). In “The Introduction”, this “collision” leads to an anticlimax of horrified disillusion and to the revelation of a gendered relationship of victim and victimiser:

But as she said this, she saw him — how else could she describe it — kill a fly. He tore the wings off a fly, standing with his foot on the fender his head thrown back, talking insolently about himself, arrogantly, but she didn’t mind how insolent and arrogant he was to her, if only he had not been brutal to flies. (181)

In “Together and Apart”, it is followed by a “paralysing blankness of feeling” so that “neither Mr Serle nor Miss Anning could move or speak” (187-188). Each time, what had been a rather quick exchange of words is ended in a definitive and almost pathetic way: the mutual recognition demanded by the cultural and literary codes set up in the short stories has failed: ‘I saw you at the Meistersinger, and you cut me. Villain,’ said Miss Cartwright, ‘you don’t deserve that I should ever speak to you again.’ And they could separate” (“Together and Apart” 188).

“Failed” communication

As many critics have shown, conversation is an essential theme and critical practice in Virginia Woolf’s work. In its represented ideal form, it can be about inventing oneself or re-positioning oneself as a speaking subject; it implies an agonistic yet creative exchange with the other, and might even lead to a felicitous and almost wordless sense of community, as in the following passage from the Voyage Out:

When two people have been married for years they seem to become unconscious of each other’s bodily presence so that they move as if alone, speak aloud things which they do not expect to be answered, and in general experience all the comfort of solitude without its loneliness. The joint lives of Ridley and Helen had arrived at this stage of community, and it was often necessary for one or the other to recall with an effort whether a thing had been said or only thought, shared or dreamt in private. (Woolf 1970: 194)

Because it can invert power-relations and ideological locations, or, in more feminist terms, because it is the place from where to seek an alternative to the authoritative dominance of patriarchal discourse, conversation is also a writing and a reading praxis to which Woolf ascribes a political as well as an ethical value.

But we also know that in their fictional form, whether this form be a dialogue in the traditional sense of the term or the paratactic juxtaposition of disembodied voices,
Woolf’s conversations always problematize the process of communication, often contrasting discourse with silence, talk with small talk, speech as “an old torn net” (“The Evening Party” 93) with voice as the meaningful rustling of inarticulate sense. In “The Introduction” and “Together and Apart”, the sense of failure associated with the dialogue first appears to be linked with the way the over-determined social structure previously described leads to an apparently over-determined linguistic structure: “‘Mr Brinsley — Miss Everit. Both of you love Shelley.’ [...] ‘And I suppose you write?’ he said, ‘poems presumably?’ ‘Essays,’ she said” (181). In this extract, the cultural presupposition voiced by the male character (“as a young woman, you probably think that you should write, and if you do, it cannot but be in the feminine and confessional mode of poetry”), reinforced by Mrs Dalloway’s presumed psychological knowledge, prevents the exchange of words from being a sharing of views. The three lines are acts of authoritative assertion that unveil or hide irreconcilable pragmatic implicatures. The conversation stops here, but as the narrator of “Together and Apart” suggests, “it had began some minutes before anything was said” (183), as soon as Lily entered Mrs Dalloway’s rooms, “hugging to herself the thought of her essay of Dean Swift which Professor Miller had marked with three red stars” (178), proud of a success which could very well be interpreted by the reader in more ambiguous terms of gender conflict: to write an essay is indeed a form of literary emancipation (Woolf’s own essays prove it), but this emancipation is here slightly and ironically subdued by the patriarchal figures of the Dean and the Professor to whose authority (a rather misogynous one in Swift’s case) the young Lily Everit is still subordinated.

In “Together and Apart”, the conversation lasts a little longer in terms of narrative time and number of words. Yet, it is interspersed with a pattern of never-actualised signifieds (reported in free direct or indirect discourse) that designate some of the actual utterances as “dull commonplaces” (184):

> ‘What a beautiful night!’ [...] Foolish! Idiotically foolish! (183)

That is what she felt now, the withdrawal of affection, Serle’s disappearance, and the instant need they were both under to cover up what was so desolating and so degrading to human nature that everyone tried to bury it decently from sight — this withdrawal, this violation of trust, and, seeking some decent acknowledged and accepted burial form, she said:

> ‘Of course, whatever they may do, they can’t spoil Canterbury’. (187)

In the last quoted paragraph, the images of separation and loss culminate with the term “burial” and contrast with the repeated idea of “decency” which announces the return to a coded meaningless utterance.

And yet, in traditional pragmatic terms, a conversation has taken place. If we suppress the characters’ inner thoughts interrupting it, this is how it unfolds:

> ‘What a beautiful night!’
> ‘Well!’ said Miss Anning, patting the sofa cushion emphatically. [...] There was a Miss Serle who lived at Canterbury when I was a girl there.’ [...] ‘Yes.’
> ‘We are originally a Norman family, who came over with the Conqueror. There is a Richard Serle buried in the Cathedral. He was a Knight of the Garter.’ [...]
> ‘On, Stanley, on,’ she said to herself and asked him:
> ‘Do you know Canterbury yourself?’ [...] ‘Yes, I know Canterbury,’ he said reminiscently, sentimentally, [...]

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‘She’s like a fruit tree—like a flowering cherry tree,’ he said, looking at a youngish woman with fine white hair. [...] 

‘It’s odd that you should know Canterbury,’ said Mr Serle. ‘It’s always a shock,’ he went on (the white haired lady having passed), when one meets someone’ (they had never met before), ‘by chance, as it were, who touches the fringe of what has meant a great deal to oneself, touches accidentally, for I suppose Canterbury was a nothing but a nice old town to you. So you stayed there one summer with an aunt? (That was all Ruth Anning was going to tell him about her visit to Canterbury.) ‘And you saw the sights and went away and never thought of it again.’ [...] 

‘I loved Canterbury,’ she said. He kindled instantly. It was his gift, his fault, his destiny. 

‘Loved it,’ he repeated. ‘I can see you did.’ [...] 

‘Canterbury twenty years ago,’ said Miss Anning, [...].

22 According to Jakobson’s well-known model, what we have here is indeed a typical “situation of communication”: an addresser sends a message to an addressee, who replies. The message sent is “operative” since the context referred to — here Canterbury — is “graspable by the addressee”; the code, “fully, or at least partially, common” to both permits Mr Serle and Miss Anning to establish a contact (“a physical channel and psychological connection between [them]”), in order “to enter and stay in communication” (Jakobson 1260): “‘What a beautiful night!’, “‘Canterbury twenty years ago’”. The denotative, phatic, emotive and conative functions of language are here at work. The characters share an interest for the same referential place; Mr Serle’s emotion when remembering the place is perceptible — “he said reminiscently, sentimentally” — as is the effect on him produced by Miss Anning’s reply: “I loved Canterbury, she said”. In the terms of traditional pragmatics then (some of the theorists of which criticized Jakobson’s communication for being insensitive to dialogism and for assigning the addressee a passive role), the dialogue reproduced here is an interaction of persons living in the «world», their utterances are context-dependent, and performed with a certain illocutionary force (statements and requests are made, feelings are expressed) having “certain consequential effects upon the feelings, thoughts or actions of the audience, or of the speaker, or of other persons” (Austin 1962: 101): “He kindled instantly”. Moreover, the dialogue can be said to follow most of the maxims of Grice’s cooperative principle, thus enabling the conversational implicatures always involved in speech-acts to be disambiguated: the uttered sentences avoid prolixity, irrelevance, falsehood, obscurity, ambiguity and disorder. 10

23 Under those conditions, why is it that the reader has the impression that communication fails, that the linguistic surface of rational and polite cooperation hides the difficulty if not impossibility of cooperation, even if, at one moment during the exchange, an encounter briefly takes place? This impression is obviously linked with the characters’ inner thoughts when they interrupt the dialogue, either contradicting what is actually said, or taking the speaker far away from the actual subject of conversation, into an inner world of memories and impressions:

‘Do you know Canterbury yourself?’

Did he know Canterbury? Mr Serle smiled, thinking how absurd a question it was — how little she knew, this nice quiet woman who played some instrument and seemed intelligent and had good eyes, and was wearing a nice old necklace — knew what it meant. (184)

‘Canterbury twenty years ago,’ said Miss Anning, as one lays a shade over an intense light, or covers some burning peach with a green leaf, for it is too strong, too ripe,
Sometimes she wished she had married. (187)

The sense of failure then comes from the reader’s recognition that the characters’ inner thoughts, the thoughts that define who they really are, are not shared but kept secret. But it might also come from a process of identification with the characters’ frustration and with his hopes of recognition by and communion with the other.

Another reading of the way communication works or does not work in “The Introduction” and “Together and Apart” might indeed lead us to consider that Woolf’s fictional critique of dialogue as conversation was not only social, but also “pragmatic” long before the discipline was born. Many essential principles of the traditional pragmatics of conversation are challenged here. Searle’s principle of expressibility—“Whatever can be meant can be said” and no meanings are inherently unexpressible in a mutual cognitive environment (Searle 19-21)—is one of them as the following extracts from “The Introduction”, shows:

But, thought Lily Everit. But — but — but what?
Oh nothing, she thought hastily smothering down softly her sharp instinct. Yes, she said, she did like reading. (181)

Grice’s “intention-recognition” principle, according to which the speaker’s communicative intention shapes his speech-act and can always be recognised by the addressee is another. In the words of Jonathan Culler who takes up the issue in his book entitled On Deconstruction: «Intention cannot serve as the decisive determinant or the ultimate foundation of a theory of speech acts. [...] What [someone] had in mind at the moment of utterance does not determinate what speech act his utterance performed” (122-123):

Was he ‘falsely melancholy,’ as they said? Prompted by the sky, which seemed to make it all a little futile — what they said, what they did — she said something perfectly commonplace again:
‘There was a Miss Serle who lived at Canterbury when I was a girl there’. (Together and Apart” 183)

To be at the same time together and apart: this is what the dialogues in the stories of Mrs Dalloway’s Party are mostly about, and to “make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged (Grice 1989: 26) is not enough to ensure felicitous cooperation. As George W. Turner rightly explains: “often pragmatist researchers and sociolinguists assume an ideal combination of a speaker and a hearer without lapses of attention, preconceptions and preoccupations that distort meaning, misinterpretation of directives or bees in bonnets. We assume that people not only do share but want to share”,11 I would argue that this description of a non-ideal situation of communication perfectly illustrates our two dialogues. It is first uncertain whether the two “couples” in presence in the short stories want to share anything, have anything to share or know what they should share. In fact, being introduced to each other means that they have little choice in this respect: “she felt impelled to say” (183), “and it’s odd, she thought, how one’s feelings are influenced” (185). Then Woolf’s technique of alternating scraps of talk with inner thoughts obviously suggests those interruptions and lapses of attention Turner evokes: Lily and Mr Brinsley, Miss Anning and Mr Serle, are preoccupied with themselves (the repetition of “herself” in “The Introduction is remarkable”), with their own trends of thoughts, with their diverging memories, genealogies, immediate pasts... The characters’ physical contexts (where the
conversation is taking place, what objects are present, what actions are occurring) and their epistemic context (their background knowledge of the world) obviously interfere with the verbal exchange. Last but not least, the two dialogues involve the use of cultural preconceptions that either lead to misinterpretations (“Together and Apart”) or to stopped communication (“The Introduction”).

**Subjectivity, authority, interpellation**

28 Therefore, what direct discourse as dialogue suggests here is that conversation is about disagreement and confrontation as much as cooperation. It is neither a mere matter of linguistic reflexes nor a unifying therapeutic force. It is the place where subjects discursively negotiate their relationships to hierarchies of power but are unavoidably threatened by interpellation, being then “assujetti, captured at a place” through language (Lecercle 80). Thus, it appears that in the two stories the female subjects are “interpellated” at a place where “timidity” and “fear”, together with the internalized idea of being “circumscribed and limited creature[s]” (179), makes them find it difficult “talking to men”, because their talks might “peter out into dull commonplaces” (184). Similarly, the male protagonists are clearly interpellated at a position which prevents them from listening with preconceived ideas to women’s talk.

29 This might explain why much more space is devoted to the representation of inner thoughts in the stories, as if this was the signal that a temporary yet repeated withdrawal from the coded language of the public sphere could enable the subject to free itself from conventions, from the embedded habits of mind and language. Instead of sharing their thoughts (in direct discourse), the characters shape their thoughts (in free direct and free indirect discourse), addressing some of the replies they could have made to the other to themselves instead:

> But what was the whirlpool?
> Oh it was made of a million things and each was distinct to her; surrounding them; being a woman. Perhaps that was the thing that came out, that remained, it was partly the dress, but all the little chivalries and respects of the drawing-room — all made her feel that she had come out of her chrysalis and was being proclaimed what in the comfortable darkness of childhood she had never been — this frail and beautiful creature, before whom men bowed, this limited and circumscribed creature who could not do what she liked, this butterfly with a thousand facets to its eyes and delicate fine plumage, and difficulties and sensibilities and sadness innumerable; a woman. (“The Introduction” 179)

> He had involved himself too deep in life — and her he would cross his knees (all his movements were a little unconventional and distinguish, and not blame himself but put the blame off upon the richness of his nature, which he compared favourably with Wordsworth’s, for example, and since he had given so much to people, he felt, resting his head on his hands, they in their turn should help him, and this was the prelude, tremulous, fascinating, exciting, to talk; and images bubbled up in his mind. (“Together and Apart”, 185)

30 The reader could then be tempted to understand the alternation between dialogue and stream of consciousness as an expression of a dichotomy between the characters’ inauthentic selves and their true selves, between a process of subjectivation and the possibility of self-expression operated through a “movement from self to the object of perception, to self again, to past and immediate past and present, [...] from perception to reflection and back again” (Kaplan 82). On the one hand therefore, the “wobbling”
and “melting” of a dissolving self; on the other, Lily’s essay as a “hard-lump” symbolising the solidity of her “I”: “One divided life (she felt sure of it) into fact this essay, and into fiction, this going out, into rock and into wave, she thought, driving along and seeing things with such intensity that forever she would see the truth and herself, a white reflection in the driver’s back inextricably mixed: the moment of vision” (“The Introduction 178).

31 But of course, as Lily herself perceives, things are not that simple. Lily’s essay is itself a discourse, as “fictional” (in Woolfian terms) as the party is real and not real at the same time. Her “I” (and ours) might sometimes feel to be “hard as a nut”, but “in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ is all shapeless as mist” (Woolf 1957: 104). Thinking is not a context-independent, merely self-reflexive activity: “and it’s odd, she thought, how one’s feelings are influenced. She did not like him, though she rather liked that comparison of his of a woman to a cherry tree” (“Together and Apart” 185). Internal focalisation does not always give us unmediated access to a character’s thoughts (it is clearly not the case here), and free indirect discourse is the site of “doubleness and indeterminacy”, as Kathy Mezei rightly recalls: “we shouldn’t forget that it is the mode through which the character-focalisation appears to be freed from the narrators mediation but is not” (Mezei 69). Just as Mrs Dalloway’s unconsciously imposes her reading of the signs to her protégées, influencing the conversation then withdrawing from it, the narrator offers us his characters’ thoughts interwoven with his own language, and although he never subordinates their words to his, his presence is a form of control implying the reader’s participation either through empathy or ironic distance. In the extract quoted above, for example, I would suggest that Lily’s thoughts follow the syntactic rhythms of an authentic quest for self-discovery while borrowing some gendered linguistic clichés— “being a woman”, “this frail and beautiful creature” — which might be ascribed to her as an interpellated female subject, or to the narrator’s light irony. In both cases, it seems that Woolf has chosen to locate ambiguity and complexity within subjectivity, narration and authority, and therefore in the interpretation process as well.

32 “The Introduction” and “Together and Apart”, as most of the short fictions comprised in Mrs Dalloway Party, are stories about the difficult recognition of the other and expression of the self. One way of interpreting them could consist in thinking that the protagonists’ failed communication leads them to withdraw from the social scene of dialogue into a solipsistic inner world. But if mutual recognition appears difficult, it seems that there is no possible recognition of the self without any confrontation with the other, and that there is no subjectivation through language that is unmediated. For a female reader then, susceptible to feel empathy for the female character-focalisers and to be interpellated by the text at the place of a “feminist” reader, Woolf’s conversational critique of conversation cannot but appear complex. While the two dialogues speak Woolf’s “feminist” critique of the patriarchal potential of language, they do so without inverting known power-relations, but by showing them at work, in direct discourse, in indirect discourse, in narrative discourse. The territory made by speech in those short fictions is therefore more than a phenomenological space characterised by “the pre-semantic insubstantiality existing prior to our usual form of communication” (Mildenberg 70): it is a pragmatic space of conversation as interpretation.
BIBLIOGRAPHIE


NOTES

1. As Susan Dick explains, once Woolf had completed *Mrs Dalloway* she “began quickly to write a group of eight stories (beginning with ‘The New Dress’) which were all set at Mrs Dalloway’s party. In each of these she presents, from the perspective of one or two characters, the subtle tensions that distinguish the ‘party consciousness’” (Woolf 1991: 3).

2. “Pragmatics studies the use of language in context, and the context-dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation. [Its branches include the theory of how] one and the same sentence can express different meanings or propositions from context to context, owing to ambiguity or indexicality or both, speech act theory, and the theory of conversational implicature” (Lycan 1995).

3. In her introduction to *Ambiguous Discourse: Feminist Narratology and British Women Writers*, Kathy Mezei retraces the complex history of feminist narratology as a heterogenous critical field. She also offers a definition which has provided me with a theoretical starting point: “through close textual reading, […] feminist narratology locates and deconstructs sites of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and transgression in aspects of narrative and in the sexuality and gender of author, narrator, character and reader”; it locates the sites of ambiguous discourses within “the narrator, the focaliser, the reader, author-ity, subjectivity, historicity, linearity, or specific structures and features of narrative and discourse and their complex interrelations” (Mezei 2).

4. All references to Woolf’s short stories refer to Susan Dick’s 2004 fourth edition introduced by Helen Simpson.

5. I am of course indebted here to Jean-Jacques Lecercle’s *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, published in 1999.

6. The adjective “felicitous” is here borrowed from pragmatics and refers to the “felicity conditions” that must be satisfied for a speech-act to be performed.

7. Many references should be mentioned here, starting with Woolf’s essays discussing the notion and illustrating it as a literary and critical practice (“Mr Conrad: A conversation” (1923) for example), her short-story entitled “A Dialogue Upon Mount Pelenticus” and Christine Reynier’s paper commenting it (Reynier 167-180), or, among others, Melba Cuddy-Keane’s pages on “Dialogue vs lecture” (Cuddy-Keane 89-91) and “Reading dialogically” (131-135).

8. In this particular case I use “implicatures” in the Gricean sense of the difference between what is actually said and what is intentionally implicated by the speaking subject, knowing that the question of intentionality remains problematic.
9. In pragmatics, “context” includes the linguistic context (the previous linguistic utterances) and the extra-linguistic context surrounding the speech-acts such as the time, place and represented world in which the characters live, the intentions of the speakers.

10. Grice’s theory of conversation implies a sharp distinction between what someone says and what someone ‘implicates’ by uttering a sentence. What is said is identified with the literal content of the utterance; what is implicated, the implicature, with the non-literal, what is (intentionally) communicated, but not said, by the speaker. According to Grice, conversational implicatures have the following properties: (i) they are calculable, that is, inferable from, among other things, the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims; (ii) they are cancelable either explicitly (adding something like "but I did not meant that") or contextually, by changing the context; and (iii) except for those implicatures based on the maxims of manner, they are non-detachable, i.e., there is no way of saying the same thing that would not carry the implicature (Grice 1975: 41-58); Grice’s conversational maxims are maxims of quality, quantity, relation and manner. They can be summarized as follows:

- Quality: speakers should be truthful. They should not say what they think is false, or make statements for which they have no evidence.
- Quantity: a contribution should be as informative as is required for the conversation to proceed.
- Relevance: speakers' contributions should relate clearly to the purpose of the exchange.
- Manner: speakers' contributions should be perspicuous: clear, orderly and brief, avoiding obscurity and ambiguity.

11. This assessment is also shared by Jean-Jacques Lecercle when he explains how the traditional pragmatic “view of dialogue and, by extension, of interpretation has so solidly established itself as to have the strength of doxa” (Lecercle 43-47).


13. Ariane Mildenberg is here evoking the “gigantic conversation” of voices in *The Waves*.

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**Résumés**


Convoquant les outils de la pragmatique et de la narratologie féministe, cet article analyse ces sites discursifs d’ambiguïté et de conflits dans “The Introduction” et “Together and Apart” où le motif de la “présentation” suggère une négociation avec ce que la culture impose, avec l’autre et avec le langage, et où les modes conflictuels de la focalisation interne—essentiellement du discours indirect libre—et du dialogue présentent la communication comme une pratique où se fondent tout à la fois le sujet, la reconnaissance intersubjective et les stratégies d’interprétation.
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