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Liliane Louvel



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Telling “by” Pictures: Virginia Woolf’s Shorter Fiction

Liliane Louvel

“It is indeed so exciting and so absorbing. This painter’s world of form and colour that once you are at its mercy you are in grave danger of forgetting all other aspects of the material world”.

(Vanessa Bell 157)

I will start from a personal reading, an “impression” and offer “une idée de recherche” as Roland Barthes once phrased it, that will lead me to make a series of propositions. It might appear fanciful because of its nature, but the word “impression” is telling for it evokes the print left on one’s mind by a series of readings: it is a memorial/mnemonic process, akin to Frances Yates’s “Art of memory” and Simonides’s gruesome testimony. And Simonides, who fathered the famous aphorism on the comparison of poetry with painting, in more ways than one testifies to the importance of images in relation to memory and to language. Frances Yates acknowledges that “this has a common denominator with the invention of the art of memory”¹. So my “impression” is not that fanciful after all. I will venture that Woolf’s writing, in particular her short stories, is strongly marked by the presence of the visual. This I have already had occasion to develop (Louvel 2002). Woolf had, what painters call “an eye”, and a gaze I would add, a fact which imparts her texts with a very visual quality; this is what I purport to trace and find coherence with. This will also help me define what the “visual” is, what forms it can take on in a literary text and what use it can be put to as a critical tool to open “the eye of the text”. Looking back on Woolf’s text thanks to the visual we will see to what extent it is part of the writer’s creative imagination and process. It works both ways as it stands at the origin of her creative activity but it is also inscribed in her writing and thus is part and parcel of its literary quality. Thus it may be considered as one of the criteria to define the singularity of her writing.

The strong presence of the visual: a taste for the hybrid.

Interestingly enough, Susan Dick, the editor of *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf* chose this generic term and not the more classic “short stories”.

Because she was experimenting with narrative forms, Woolf’s shorter fiction is extremely varied. Some of her shorter works, such as “Solid Objects” and “The Legacy”, are short stories in the traditional sense, narratives with firm story lines and sharply drawn characters. Others such as “The Mark on the Wall” and “An Unwritten Novel”, are fictional reveries which in their shifts of perspective and lyrical prose recall the autobiographical essays of nineteenth century writers. De Quincey in particular. Still others, which could be called “scenes” or “sketches”, probably owe to Chekhov, who helped us to see, Woolf remarked in 1919, that ‘inconclusive stories are legitimate’ (Woolf 1989, introduction: 1-2)

And Susan Dick concludes that “the line separating Virginia Woolf’s fiction from her essays is a very fine one”. The key notion of experimenting with forms, the diversity of the shorter fiction and the playing on boundaries between genres and media, are at the core of Woolf’s use of the visual and the gaze as I will try to show. Furthermore, Woolf used to call her shorter fiction, her “short things” or “little pieces”, when she described her creative process, while lying ill, or “deranged” as she put it (Lee 375). As Christine Reynier warned “The number and variety of texts seem to preclude any overall reading that would lead to the definition of the Woolfian short story as a specific literary genre” (Reynier 55).

The absence of “firm story lines” points to the fact that some of the “stories” devoid of the narrative quality usual to the genre, are closer to what Dick calls “fictional reveries”. In some cases, they are more akin to pictures, as the word reverie itself suggests for it seems to carry a more visually arrested (or static) quality. Moreover their condensed short form is a further link with painting. This is the case, for instance, with “Blue and Green”, or “Portrait 3” in “Portraits”. Both “pieces” develop in a shape close to that of a poem. Typographically setting them as verses would prove my point. Furthermore, “Ode Written partly in Prose on Seeing the Name of Cutbush Above a Butcher’s Shop in Pentonville” though meant as a humorous retort, shows beyond its mirror-like referential shape (to the poem by G. G. Byron “Written after Swimming from Sestos to Abydos”) that it is also part of Woolf’s quest for an experimental form such as she sought in *The Waves* and in the form of the “playpoem”. Hybridity stands at the center of it all, with its haziness, fluidity and openness.

The quest for the “shape” of her shorter pieces is acknowledged when *apropos* “An Unwritten Novel” she writes in a letter to Ethel Smyth: “That—again in one second—showed me how I could embody all my deposit of experience in a shape that fitted it—not that I have reached that end but anyhow I saw, branching out of the tunnel I made, when I discovered that method of approach, Jacobs Room, Mrs Dalloway, etc-”.² It is of import to note to what extent Woolf’s expression is suffused with images and in particular structural ones: “deposit”, “shape”, “fitted it”, “branching out of the tunnel”. Although talking of “the shape” of a story is a dead visual metaphor, in the case of Woolf, it recaptures all its strength when she details her struggle to find her way out of the tunnel of words in shaping the experimental gems that will put her on the way to her future novels. Notwithstanding, the “shorter things” also “were written in way of diversion; they were treats I allowed myself when I had done my exercise in

the conventional style”³. The “shape” better fitted to embody Woolf’s experience must evolve out of the rules and composition of the genre so as to escape its constraints and implement its own. And the visual is an integral part of this process. The wish to innovate and find one’s own tool goes in hand in hand with Woolf’s very particular biography in terms of her lifelong engagement with the sister arts.

The sisters’ arts: Virginia and Vanessa.

Vanessa Bell, Virginia’s elder sister was a painter and Woolf constantly met painters in her circle such as Clive Bell, Roger Fry, David Garnett, Mark Getler among others. The founding of the Hogarth Press and the work turned out by the Omega workshops also prove that literary enterprise and the graphic arts ran along parallel lines. The rivalry between the two “sisters’ arts” is well known⁴ and how Woolf tended to measure her art against her sister’s own is attested to.

But at this time she was still finding out how (and whether) she could write as a painter would paint. [...] She kept testing her judgments against the painters. She went to the Omega shows and tried to make up her mind about the paintings under the barrage of Roger Fry’s opinions. She listened to him talking about Cézanne to Clive, and compared her own responses to the famous apples. She set her aesthetics against Fry’s, when he wrote to praise her for “The Mark on the Wall”: “I’m not sure that a perverted plastic sense doesn’t somehow work itself in words for me.”⁵

It has to be remarked that “the plastic sense” working “its way in words” is said to be “perverted”. We shall also see that the topic of Cézanne’s apples discussed in this extract will unexpectedly reappear in one of her sketches.

The collaboration between the two sisters consisted, among others, in the decoration and presentation of Virginia Woolf’s writing, particularly so concerning her short pieces. For *Monday or Tuesday*, Vanessa completed woodcut illustrations for four of the stories. The 1927 issue of *Kew Gardens* contains illustrations on every page, some of them reminiscent of William Blake’s own ones in their intimate intertwining of words and images. Vanessa also contributed cover-designs: “What she provided was a kind of ‘visual underscoring’ which gave the books a sympathetic atmosphere” (Lee 368-69) according to H. Lee who also states that: “Through 1918 and 1919, she wrote other sketches for Vanessa to illustrate. In all of them, silence, darkness, death pull against social conventions” (Lee 375). Among these sketches figure “The Evening Party” and “Solid Objects”. According to Dick, “Portraits” and “Uncle Vanya” “are probably part of a collaborative work called ‘Faces and Voices’ that V. W and Vanessa Bell were discussing in February 1937” (Woolf 1989 :307).

Some of this “very close relationship” as Jane Dunn termed it, surfaces in “The Symbol” whose narrator is writing a letter to her “elder sister”. The latter has children of her own and owes much to Virginia and Vanessa’s early childhood life. This short story about which Woolf wrote: “I wd [sic] like to write a dream story about the top of a mountain”⁶ and two years later “I think of taking my mountain top—that persistent vision—as a starting point”⁷ shows the importance of the visual in relation to her inspiration and to the choice of the narrative device: the tourist is busy writing her letter on a balcony overlooking the mountain scenery “like a box at the theatre” (290). She is the eye witness of a tragedy occurring under her very eyes as she is describing it to her sister. Three dots suspend the end of the letter: “As I write these words, I can see the young men quite plainly on the slopes of the mountain. They are roped together.

One I think I told you was at the same school with Margaret. They are now crossing a crevasse” (290). The tourist’s pen falls off her hand and drops of ink “straggle[d] in a zigzag line down the page”. The narrator registers the drops of ink left to dry on the letter before the letter writer resumes her task unable to find “a fitting conclusion”, except the clichéd form she was struggling to avoid. This short story also calls to mind Katherine Mansfield’s “The Fly” in the combination of death and writing, of writing as giving a death blow. It is also very visual in the sense that not only is the scene described in (mock) real time, but the letter offers itself as the material evidence of what its writer is supposed to have under her eyes while depicting it, including the unfinished sentence and the (almost) visible ink stains.

“The Symbol” also points to the etymology of the word as the Greek *symbolon* means putting together two separate parts of the same unit (originally, a clay disk) to compare them. This is even more obvious in the holograph in which a sentence later omitted figures: “The virgin peak had never been climbed [cancelled] It was a menace: something cleft in the mind like two parts of a broken disk: two numbers that cannot be added: a problem that is insoluble” (Dick in Woolf 1989: 312). The short story depicts the letter writer’s quest for meaning while scanning the landscape “‘the mountain’ the lady wrote on the balcony of the hotel, ‘is a symbol ...’” (288). Facts will answer the question, and the broken disk reassembled.

The visual is remarkably staged by the insistence of Woolf’s narrators on seeing or watching. A case in point is “The Fascination of the Pool”: “But if one sat down among the rushes and watched the pool—pools have some curious fascination” (226–27), and its coda: “That perhaps is why one loves to sit and look into pools”. It is also the case in “The Symbol”, or in “The Lady in the Looking-Glass”, to quote only a few of the other “short pieces”, where a character is engrossed in a vision. The incipit of “Three Pictures” also runs as: “It is impossible that one should not see pictures; because if my father was a blacksmith and yours a peer of the realm, we must needs be pictures to each other (228). This strong declaration shows to what extent seeing/thinking in pictures, visual thinking or imagination, are of primary importance in the microcosm of “the short pieces”. In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points”, the moment of revelation rests heavily on a process of seeing, as the last paragraph proves when “saw” is repeated ten times.

Many details are minutely strung together as if the narrator were using a magnifying glass. They are clearly delineated in “The Fascination of the Pool” where locations, visual indications such as shades and colours, are almost obsessively noted in only one paragraph

Round the edge was so thick a fringe of rushes that their *reflections* made a *darkness* like the *darkness* of very deep water. However *in the middle* was something *white*[...] the *centre* of the water reflected the *white* placard, and when the wind blew the *centre* of the pool seemed to flow and ripple like a piece of washing. One could *trace* the big *red* letters in which Romford Mill was *printed* in the water. A *tinge* of *red* was *in the green* that *rippled* from bank to bank. (226, my emphasis)

These details and the recurring visual apparatus offered by the story also concur with what I call “pictorial markers”, that is, textual markers clearly encoding the presence of the visual, of the pictorial (meaning picture in a more restricted sense). The literary text will not only mimic but work along the same lines as painting, image or “the visual” broadly speaking. Let us remember Woolf often wondered “how she could write as a painter would paint” (Lee 370), and saw the formula as reversible when she

addressed her sister: “what a poet you are in colours” (Woolf 1980: 381). A brief survey of titles, lexis, colours, genres, framing effect and typography will help me prove my point.

Pictorial Markers

Some of the titles of the “short pieces” are closely linked to the visual in a metareflexive way: “Three Pictures”, “The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection”, “Portraits”, “Scenes of the Life of a Naval Officer”, “Nurse Lugton’s Curtain”. “Three Pictures” even includes three subtitles in keeping with its nature as it adopts the form of a polyptych and more precisely that of a triptych. Within “the first picture” of the triptych another subtitle is mentioned reinforcing the visual trend: “So now at the turn of the road I saw one of these pictures. It might have been called ‘The Sailor’s Homecoming’ or some such title” (229). Then follows a verbless series of sentences separated by semi-colons standing as many gilded wooden columns on the predella of a triptych separating its different episodes. The profane scene overhangs an explanatory label or cartellino situated at the bottom of it, in which verbs are reintroduced:

A fine young sailor carrying a bundle; a girl with her hand on his arm; neighbours gathering round; a cottage garden ablaze with flowers; *as one passed one read at the bottom of that picture* that the sailor was back from China; and there was a fine spread waiting for him in the parlor; and he had a present for his young wife in his bundle; and she was going to bear him their first child. Everything was right and good and as it should be, one felt about that picture. (228, my emphasis)

“The First Picture” depicts the happy arrival of the young sailor back home, “The Second Picture”, the cry overheard by the narrator. It is almost exclusively devoted to sounds and voices: “No picture of any sort came to interpret it, to make it intelligible to the mind. But as the dark arose at last all one saw was an obscure human form, almost without shape, raising a gigantic arm in vain against some overwhelming iniquity” (229). In “The Third Picture” the narrator on his way home is “going over the picture in every detail”, “making up picture after picture of [the sailor and his wife] so that one picture after another of happiness and satisfaction might be laid over that unrest, that hideous cry” (230). Then comes the final picture, the churchyard scene: “Indeed look at that picture! A man was digging a grave, and children were picnicking at the side of it”. When the narrator discovers the identity of the dead person, horror finds a vivid bitter expression in the final line: “What a picture it made!” The polyptych form is also that adopted for “Portraits”, although this group of nine “sketches” was partially arranged by and the titles given mostly according to the editor’s choice and guesses⁸. As for “Blue and Green” the two paragraphs stand as a diptych in which the two colours would stand facing one another each on their own panel. Once more the title *Blue & Green*, in italics overhangs the two subtitles GREEN BLUE (in block capitals) as in a diptych. This short story is a case in point as it develops the adventures of colour *per se* under the shape of a series of tiny vignettes, —somewhat like in “Three Pictures” but on a smaller scale—, juxtaposing “views” cleanly separated by semi-colons and told in the present tense:

All day long the ten fingers of the lustre drop green upon the marble.[...] But the hard glass drips on to the marble; the pools hover above the desert sand; the camels lurch through them; the pools settle on the marble; rushes edge them; weeds clog them; here and there a white blossom; the frog flops over; at night the stars are set there unbroken. (142)

With the passage of time, blue takes precedence, then "It's night ; the needles drip blots of blue. The green's out" (142). A beginning, a middle and an ending, a story has been told but its "tour de force" rests on the fact that its main characters are colours, the colours of a tale.

And colour is another of the «"pictorial markers" I offer as critical tools to open "the eye of the text". "Blue and Green" are the two colours typical of Woolf's imagination and apparently favourite of hers. In the poem-like "piece", green is repeated six times in the text and twice in the title and subtitle; blue, nine times and twice more as well. Blue and green figure in innumerable instances. In "The Fascination of the Pool", in the extract quoted above, green largely figures. In "Slater's Pins", Miss Cray wears "blue in winter, green in summer". In "Nurse Lugton's Curtain", "the blue stuff turned to blue air" before reverting back to its material quality "the air became blue stuff"(160-161). In "Solid Objects" the pieces of glass Charles finds are green. Green and blue, the colours of water, would have pushed to Bachelard to place Woolf among "les rêveurs d'eau", water dreamers.

As in painting, Woolf recurs to strong framing effects. On the narrative level, Woolf's short pieces often are very tightly held together by verbal clasps as it were. Like a picture frame, they play the part of a *parergon*, in between the reader's world and the *œuvre* itself. In "Nurse Lugton's Curtain", order, disorder, return to order, are clearly indicated by the paragraphs setting, and the function of the "blue stuff" which undergoes the different metamorphoses of the blue fabric. Of course, an echo of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: "We are such stuff as dreams are made of" cannot be ignored. Structurally speaking, beginnings and endings often stand in an echo system, coupled together in the coda with general truths uttered by the narrator. In "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection", the same sentence: "People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms...", opens and closes the story. "It is impossible that one should not see pictures" is echoed by "What a picture it made!" in "Three Pictures". In "Slater's Pins Have No Points", Miss Craye's ambiguous opening question "Slater's pins have no points—don't you always find?" finds its answer in her final surrender when she affirms, laughing: "Slater's pins have no points". The second paragraph of "The Fascination of the Pool" which opens with "pools have some curious fascination, one knows not what" meets a possible answer in the explicit: "That perhaps is why one loves to sit and look into pools".

The short "stories" often adopt the same kind of structure: as in "The Symbol" a beautiful image is cruelly found to be deceptive. Illusion is opposed to reality in the very last lines of the story: this is the case with "The Lady in the Looking-Glass" or "The Fascination of the Pool" among other very "visual" or "pictorial" stories. In "Three Pictures", the cruel opposition between the euphoric first picture and the dysphoric last one is brought about by the text which voices the fragility inherent in human life: "All was as quiet, as safe [as] could be. Yet, one kept thinking, a cry had rent it; [...] This goodness, this safety were only on the surface" (230).

Besides the narrative level, framing effects seem to be favoured by Woolf, within the diegesis itself. In "The Fascination of the Pool" the vision is framed and darkened by the neighbouring rushes: "Round the edge was so thick a fringe of rushes that their reflections made a darkness like the darkness of very deep water" (226). Frames are also referred to under the guise of windows, door frames or thresholds "framing" characters. Two fine examples can be analysed. In "Slater's Pins Have No Points" after

Fanny Wilmot has eventually found the lost pin on the carpet, she has a glimpse of a new Miss Craye lost in ecstasy: “She sat there, half turned away from the piano, with her hands clasped in her lap holding the carnation upright, while behind her was the sharp square of the window, uncurtained, purple in the evening, intensely purple after the brilliant lights which burnt unshaded in the bare music room” (220). Miss Craye’s figure is delineated by the “sharp square of the window” behind her which is reminiscent of Alberti’s famous prescription: to make a picture one has to draw a *quadrangolo* which is like a window open onto composition (*la storia*). She clearly stands as the portrait of a lady while her true nature is revealed in the equation between the intense purple London night and her passionate self:⁹ the purple colour of the background, that is red mixed with blue, suggests the erotic undertone of the evening revelation. In “Three Pictures”, a door frame explicitly plays the same framing effect as the window: “We cannot possibly break out of the frame of the picture by speaking natural words. You see me leaning against the door of the smithy with a horseshoe in my hand and you think as you go by ‘How picturesque!’” (229). “How picturesque!”, this metapictorial comment finds its counterpart in “The First Picture” in which “picture” is repeated 14 times on one single page. The self-reflexive nature of the story is “mise en abyme” thanks to the hall of mirrors of the different frames: that of the main title: “Three Pictures”, that of the three subtitles: “The first (Second then Third) Picture” and that of the sub-subtitle: “The Sailor’s Homecoming” embedded in “The First Picture”.

The visual is not restricted to painting but it also includes “semiotic mediators” as so many variations of/on the pictorial. Woolf makes great use of mirrors, tapestries and optical devices or instruments fulfilling a variety of textual or narrative functions.

Variations of/on the pictorial: semiotic mediators

The mirror of course is prominent in “The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection”. It is the instrument of the revelation experienced by the narrator posted in an adjacent room. Its treacherous nature has already been alluded to above with the initial declaration of the incipit: “People should not leave looking-glasses hanging in their rooms.” The fact Woolf chose the subtitle “A Reflection” shows to what extent she knew mirrors could be instruments of thought and knowledge. I have already had occasion to work at great length on this short story (Louvel 1997) and to do so here would be beyond the scope of this paper, but two sentences deserve quoting to show the visual quality of Woolf’s writing linked to this particular form of picture-making

Suddenly these *reflections* were ended violently and yet without a sound. A *large black form* loomed into the looking-glass ; blotted out everything, strewed the table with a packet of marble tablets *veined with pink and grey*, and was gone. But the *picture* was entirely altered. [...] one could not relate these tablets to any human purpose. [...] And then it was strange to *see* how they were *drawn in* and *arranged* and *composed* and made part of *the picture* and granted that *stillness* and immortality which *the looking-glass* conferred. (223, my emphasis on visual lexis)

The acheropoietic image (i.e., an image not made by a human hand) verges on the supernatural till the mental and logical reconstruction of the shapes rearranges and composes the no longer *unheimlich* letters.

The mirror itself finds a semiotic variation when the pool of the eponymous story becomes a liquid mirror which turns out to be another place of revelation and

reflection to be stared at and pondered over: "Perhaps that was the reason of its fascination-that it held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but in a liquid state, floating one on top of another, almost disembodied" (226). Reservoir of thoughts and knowledge, mirrors, with their fleeting reflections, offer endless subjects of puzzled contemplation.

Another substitute of traditional pictures is provided by a different kind of image. The Curtain in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain" becomes an interesting pictorial space:

"and on her knees covering the whole of her apron, was a large piece of figured blue stuff. [...] For the pattern of the blue stuff was made of troops of wild beasts and below them was a lake and a bridge and a town with round roofs and little men and women looking out of windows and riding over the bridge on horseback" (160).

The metamorphosis of the microcosm also seems to point to the mystery of the creative process be it literary or painterly. Nurse Lugton is dreaming the text and its visual representation, "spinning a yarn" whereas her needle is idle. What happens takes place in the "blue stuff" lying on her knees, the fabric of her dreams, "the stuff dreams are made of". True to the form of a tale this piece takes on,¹⁰ animals magically become endowed with movement and a whole world is brought into motion. Then as in Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker* order is restored when "Suddenly Nurse Lugton twitched the curtain all in crinkles. [...] The animals flashed back in a second" (161). What is of import to my purpose, is to match this small animated animal world with that of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass":

The room that afternoon was full of such shy creatures, lights and shadows, curtains blowing, petals falling-things that never happen, so it seems, if someone is looking. [such nocturnal creatures] came pirouetting across the floor, stepping delicately with high-lifted feet and spread tails and pecking allusive beaks as if they had been cranes or flocks of elegant flamingoes whose pink was faded, or peacocks whose trains were veined with silver. [...] Nothing stayed the same for two seconds together. (221)

In both stories, is depicted the same sort of marvellous animated world getting alive close to a human being, happily unawares.

Optical instruments such as the telescope also draw the reader's attention to the importance of the gaze. The explicit climax of "Scenes from the Life of a British Naval Officer" shows the figure of Captain Brace mounting

higher and higher beyond these impediments until he had mounted onto an iron platform upon which stood a telescope. When he had put his eye to the telescope the telescope became immediately an extension of his eyes as if it were a horn casing that had formed itself to enclose the penetration of his sight. When he moved the telescope up and down it seemed as if his own long horn covered eye were moving. (233-34)

The captain has become reified, turned into a kind of monstrous insect, provided with a hornlike optical instrument appendix, all eyes greedily scanning the horizon. Seeing is equated with possessing and penetrating a territory. The telescope also plays a major part in "The Searchlight", sometimes called "What the Telescope Discovered". "Turning his telescope to the earth, [a young man] sees a couple kissing, and runs down the tower to find the girl". Such is Lee's summary of what she aptly calls "a voyeuristic scene" (Lee 748-49). Let it be noted too that "The Symbol" and "The Searchlight", both focusing on watching, the former a death scene the latter a love scene, were both written in the same year, 1929 (Lee 748-49).

In “Solid Objects”, visual writing is informed by the strong presence of geometry and the accurate references to forms in the initial description: “The only thing that moved upon the vast *semi circle* of the beach, was *one small black spot*. As it came nearer to the *ribs and spine* of the stranded pilchard boat, it became *apparent* from a certain *tenuity* in its *blackness* that this *spot* possessed four legs” (102, my emphasis). Voices and the human element only come second. When a “closer view” is taken, the walking stick “cut long straight stripes on the sand” (102) before the two men’s presence is acknowledged.

Finally, painting itself and art history, be they overt or covert, infuse the Woolfian text with a pictorial quality.

The overt or covert presence of art history

The pictorial vocabulary is one of the manifestations of the overt references to the “arts and crafts” of painting that may appear in Woolf’s text. The word “Sketches” is a recurring one in the diary or in the short pieces, as well as those of “characters” or “portraits” envisaged from the literary or painterly point of view.¹¹ When lying in bed, Woolf writes: “and thus I sketched, I think, all that now, by the light of reason, try to put into prose”¹², which echoes the title she chose for her essays: “Sketches of the Past”. The analogy between character-“drawing” and sketches is literally inscribed in the text while Miss Kingston is writing out receipts in “Slater’s Pins have no Points”: “Miss Kingston who gave little sketches like this on the first day of term while she received cheques and wrote out receipts for them, smiled here” (216)

Painting may also be used as a simile as in “The Lady in the Looking Glass”: “But the picture was entirely altered”, “And then it was strange to see how [the letters] were drawn and composed and made part of the picture” (223), or in [Portrait 5] “to confirm or deny the portrait she had drawn” (224). In “Portraits” [Portrait 6] once more we find the evocation of “views” as so many vignettes cleanly framed by semi-colons: “But she paints [...] whereas I like cool things; pictures of Venice; girls on a bridge; a man fishing, Sunday calm; perhaps a punt” (245). Painters are explicitly quoted: “Fra Angelico you remember painted on his knees” (245) or Leighton in “Ode Written Partly in Prose”: “And he sees the violets and the asphodel and the/naked swimmers on the bank in robes like/those worn by the Leighton pictures at Leighton/house” (239). In “Blue and Green” a *topos* of Italian Renaissance painting is put to use as one of the components of a complex synesthesia: “But the cathedral’s different, cold, incense laden, faint blue with the veils of madonna” (142).

Covert references may contribute to what I called elsewhere “Pictorial description” or “effet-tableau”/“painterly effect”(Louvel 2001). A small vivid vignette is composed when the narrator in [Portrait 6] alludes to a past paradise the delights of which he enumerates: “And Oscar being witty; and the lady with the red lips standing on a tiger skin on a slippery floor—the tiger’s mouth wide open” (my emphasis). The pictorial kinship of the evocation is confirmed by what follows: “‘But she paints!’ (so my mother said) which meant of course the women in Piccadilly. That was my world. Now everyone paints” (245). As I tried to show above, a true “Pictorial effect” is achieved in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” with the description of Miss Craye standing out against the purple background of the square window. To go one step further, one could argue that this “Lady with a Carnation” evokes other famous paintings representing the same

subject in a profane or a sacred way, I think of Leonardo's famous Madonna for instance. Furthermore the carnation being a symbol of p/Passion can be found in quite a few Medieval or Renaissance paintings. We can think of Jacob of Utrecht's or Johann Konig's copy of Leonardo's Madonna. Raphaël also took up the theme with his two *Madonna with Carnation*. But there are also more recent profane instances such as René Gruau's *Garçonne* and Aman-Jean Edmond's *Femme à l'œillet*. The carnation was a symbol of Christ's Passion which explains its presence in sacred painting but it also was a sign of recognition for conspirators or sects. This tallies with the secret sapphist undertone of the text nevertheless claimed as such by Woolf in her private correspondence. In "[Portraits]", particularly in "Portrait 3", a striking passage calls to mind Meyer Schapiro's hypothesis concerning Cézanne's apples, and we have seen above that Woolf discussed them with Fry among others. The scene is located in a "French Inn": "She was sitting in the sun. The light fixed her. There was no shadow. Her face was yellow and red; round too; a fruit on a body; another apple, only not on a plate. Breasts had formed apple-hard under the blouse on her body" (243). But what is eye-opening is Schapiro's following interpretation:

La place centrale accordée aux pommes dans un thème d'amour invite à s'interroger sur l'origine affective de sa prédilection pour les pommes dans sa peinture. L'association que l'on observe ici des fruits et de la nudité ne nous permet-elle pas d'interpréter l'intérêt habituel de Cézanne pour la nature morte et, de toute évidence, pour les pommes, comme le « déplacement » (au sens psychanalytique) d'une préoccupation érotique. (Schapiro 178)

Apparently, Woolf shared the same "preoccupation" and associated a woman's body with apples in a very explicit "cubist" way, together with a singular attention dedicated to shapes, shadows, colours and lighting effects.

Our investigation on the possible pictorial undertones in Woolf's shorter pieces, reveals that the pictorial references not only may consist in allusions to a painting, but also to a pictorial genre, *topos* or technique: "Slater's Pins Have No Points" being a seduction scene taking part during a music lesson, is reminiscent of a Dutch *topos*. In seventeenth-century Dutch painting, many scenes depict "Music Lessons" or concerts and the represented musical "common chord" suggests harmony of another nature. A technique such as etching which uses acid on copper plates, illustrates Woolf's meaning in a vivid visual way as in "The Lady in the Looking-Glass": "At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth" (225). And in "Portrait 3", we have seen that the light has the same property: "the light fixed her". The technique of caricature is put to use in the characterisation of theatre-goers in "Uncle Vanya", and in "Scenes from the Life of a British Naval Officer" where the eponymous character is described in very bold strokes suggesting his rigid makeup: "His face had a carved look as if it had been cut by a negro from a well-seasoned log, had been polished for fifty years, had been dried in a tropical sun; had stood out in the freezing cold; had been sluiced by tropical rains; had then been erected before grovelling multitudes as their idol" (232). The choice of the crude idol as the model of Captain Brace's face evokes Gauguin's own wooden sculptures and paintings as well as the cubists' use of African sculpture. The Captain faces a wall on which amidst dials "measuring, dividing [,] weighing and counting" an invisible substance, hung the very pictorial photograph of a "lady's head surmounted by three ostrich feathers". This parodic "Lady with Three Ostrich Feathers" is reminiscent of Hélène Fourment's portrait by Rubens among other

suchlike paintings. We have seen that this "story" ends with a kind of voyeuristic scene turning the Captain into a sort of insect probing the universe: "When he moved the telescope up and down it seemed as if his own long horn covered eye were moving" (234).

A last instance of the possible variations of the pictorial is put to use in "Nurse Lugton's Curtain." The "large piece of figured blue stuff" displaying animal and human life is reminiscent of a Medieval arras, together with its fantastic inspiration, its many details, its animals and "mille fleurs" making up a microcosm, a world unto itself: "the blue curtain [...] became made of grass, and roses and daisies; strewn with white and black stones; with puddles on it, and car tracks and little frogs" (160). Yet here "exotic" animals bring in another kind of variation adding to the seduction of the tale destined to small children.

I have tried to show how extensively the visual pervades Woolf's work, in particular her shorter fiction, and how it bears on the singularity of her writing. So doing I tried to outline what "the visual", in a sense broader than that of image, means and what forms it can take on when a literary text is suffused with it. In her essay, "Walter Sickert, A Conversation" Woolf expatiates on the sister arts, reaffirming the necessity of seeing, of writing as seeing and the difficulty of this feat:

For though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other : they have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see [...] and he must often think that to describe a scene is the worst way to show it. It must be done with one word, or with one word in skillful contrast with another [...] it is a very complex business, the mixing and marrying of words that goes on, probably unconsciously, in the poet's mind to feed the reader's eye. All great writers are great colorists, just as they are musicians into the bargain; they always contrive to make scenes glow and darken and change to the eye. (Woolf 1966: 241)

"Scenes glow and darken and change to the eye", indeed, and scenes are what the pieces of shorter fiction that came under scrutiny mostly depicted. As Reynier put it: "By defining the short story as brief and honest, Woolf defines the ideal she is aiming at: a spatial moment of cross-fertilization between form and emotion, prose, poetry and drama" (64); to this list, we could add the arts.

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NOTES

1. Simonides's aphorism runs as follows according to Plutarch: "Simonides called painting silent poetry and poetry painting that speaks" (Yates 42). See also the story of the tragic banquet and its discussion in Chapter I "The Three Latin Sources for the Classical Art of Memory" (Yates 17-41).

2. Letter to Ethel Smyth, 16 Oct. 1930, L IV, 2254, 231, qtd in (Lee: 376).

3. See note 2.

4. See Jane Dunn, *A Very Close Conspiracy*, Diane Gillespie, *The Sisters Arts; The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*, and Liliane Louvel 2002.

5. Letter to Ethel Smyth, 16 Oct. 1930, L IV, 2254, 231, qtd in (Lee: 376).

6. 22 June 1937 D V 95, qtd by Dick in (Woolf 1989: 312).

7. Qtd by Dick in (Woolf 1989: 312).

8. Qtd by Dick in (Woolf 1989: 312).

9. We know that this story was called by Woolf her "little sapphist story" in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, see Dick in (Woolf 1989: 306-307). The text is clear enough under this respect.

10. Woolf wrote it first for her niece Ann Stephen on a visit in the country, see Dick in (Woolf 1989: 303).

11. See Dick's comment on "Three Characters" in (Woolf 1989: 307).

12. Woolf to E. Smyth, 16 Oct 1930, L IV, 2254 p. 231, qtd in (Lee 377).

RÉSUMÉS

Mon hypothèse de départ sera que l'écriture de Virginia Woolf, en particulier ses nouvelles, est fortement marquée par la présence du visuel. Je poursuis en cela un travail commencé par ailleurs. Woolf possédait ce que les peintres appellent "un œil", j'ajouterai un regard, ce qui donne à ses textes une qualité toute visuelle. J'essaierai de le démontrer dans cette analyse qui s'efforcera également d'en dégager la cohérence. Ceci devrait également permettre de définir ce que le mot visuel veut dire, quelles formes il peut prendre dans un texte littéraire et à quels usages il peut être soumis en tant qu'outil critique lorsqu'il s'agit d'ouvrir "l'œil du texte". Grâce à une étude attentive de certaines des pièces courtes de Woolf, j'essaierai de repérer les références explicites ou implicites à l'histoire de l'art et de voir en quoi elles "éclaircissent" le texte. Analyser les nouvelles de Woolf du point de vue du visuel, devrait permettre de repérer de quelle manière il fait partie intégrante de son imagination créatrice et de son processus d'écriture. Car le visuel fonctionne de deux manières: s'il est à l'origine de l'activité créatrice il est également inscrit dans l'écriture et donc participe de sa qualité littéraire. Ainsi, il pourrait être considéré comme l'un des critères permettant d'approcher la singularité de l'écriture woolfienne.

AUTEURS

LILIANE LOUVEL

Professor of British literature at the University of Poitiers and specializes in contemporary British literature and word/image relationship. She has written numerous articles on this particular subject and published three books on the interrelationship between word and image: *L'œil du texte* (Toulouse PUM 1998), *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *Le double miroir de l'art* (Ellipses, 2000), *Texte/image, images à lire et textes à voir* (Rennes PUR 2002). She has also edited three collections of essays on the subject published in *EJES*, *La licorne* and *P.U. Rennes II*. She has organized several conferences on the subject. Her work is currently being translated by Laurence Petit and will be edited by Karen Jacobs. Liliane Louvel is also the chairperson of the French Association of English Teaching Academics (SAES) and a member of the board of ESSE (European Society for the Study of English).