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# “The Art of Mis-Reading: Life’s Writing in Woolf’s Essays”

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As she wonders how she should raise the question of “Women and Fiction”, Woolf asserts: “one must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth.” (AROO, 20)<sup>1</sup> This statement suggests an opposition between the personal and truth that could set us on the wrong track regarding the function of life-writing in Woolf’s work. Woolf’s modernist style is, on the contrary, widely regarded as foregrounding the personal experience, and she seems to sponsor a vision of truth that is highly subjective and contingent. In her monograph on Woolf’s aesthetics of the essay, Elena Gualtieri precisely emphasises the role played by the personal:

[Woolf’s] approach to the history and to the nature of the genre was always marked by an attempt to identify within what she saw as a male tradition an alternative line of descent to which she could affiliate herself. This she outlined by stressing the connection between the essay and autobiography, but a type of autobiography which she insisted was essentially non-narrative and presented the self as a conglomeration of moments of perception and reflection.<sup>2</sup>

This description perfectly applies to *A Room of One’s Own*, because the essay also combines personal affects (‘moments of perception’) with a coherent demonstration (‘reflection’), playfully working its way through the *terra incognita* of women’s relation to fiction by offering a discourse that presents itself as an alternative to the patriarchal one. Woolf’s assertion, quoted at the beginning of this chapter, may indeed come as a surprise to those who readily associate Woolf with feminism, for it seems to oppose women, the object of the essay, and the personal, when it has become customary to consider that it was from their position or

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<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, with an introduction by Hermione Lee (London, Vintage Classics, 2001 (1929)), 1-98. All references to this edition in between brackets AROO.

<sup>2</sup> Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf’s Essays: Sketching the Past* (London, Macmillan, 2000), 49.

situation, through the personal, that the category “woman” could be addressed<sup>3</sup>. This is why Woolf’s short writings were reappraised favourably only recently, – and stopped being discarded for their autobiographical nature.<sup>4</sup> Critics’ slow recognition of the value of these texts were also caused by Woolf’s opinion about life-writing at large, which seems ambivalent: exhorting historians to take a look at women’s “infinitely obscure lives” that remain “to be recorded” (AROO, 77), she still criticises women for resorting to autobiography, which she seemingly regards as an uncreative form: “She may be beginning to use writing as an art, not as a method of self-expression.” (AROO, 68) It is this complex negotiation between essay- and life-writing that I wish to analyse in this chapter, through the question of reading, which Woolf uses to define her art. Stripping the text of its personal dimension does not amount to a rejection of the autobiographical: in order to highlight this, I want to look at Woolf’s “critical essays” as pertaining to the same continuum as her autobiographical ones, insofar as they also serve to construct her image, her story and to reflect the process by which the incidental becomes the essential. Woolf’s interest in the telling of lives (her own or that of others) lies in each individual’s singular trajectory towards truth.

So as to explore this aspect, it is necessary to try and delve into Woolf’s proposal concerning the choices of reading. In the beginning of *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf invites us to ‘follow’ her as she tries to answer the question of women and fiction. Her essay therefore starts like an autobiographical account by situating the writing subject in the anecdotal through the description of her surroundings, and her menial activities (AROO, 20). Despite the change of name (and the multiplication of what could be called “aliases” is an

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<sup>3</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (ed.), *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader* (Madison, Wisconsin, The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), 4-21.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Reynier, *Virginia Woolf’s Ethics of the Short Story* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009). Frédérique Amselle, *Virginia Woolf et les écritures du moi: le journal et l’autobiographie* (Montpellier, Presses Universitaires de Montpellier, 2008), introduction. Theodor Adorno, *Notes sur la Littérature*, « L’Essai comme Forme », Paris, Flammarion, « Champs Essais », 5-29.

indication of its fictional nature), *A Room of One's Own* does not follow “Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael” (AROO, 2), but another Virgin, Virgin-ia. We are asked to ‘follow’ ‘I’ (before Twitter – and it is a pleasant idea to think that Woolf is prefiguring the Twitter accounts of today, that is the promotion of personal opinions that must be followed, and derives from the current collapse of any guarantee of truth), an ‘I’ that paradoxically offers herself to view in confessing her lack of knowledge. The ‘I’ of the essayist inescapably stages her reflection in a way that undermines the traditional answers given to the question she asks, providing a very personal answer to a general question: “Every page in my notebook was scribbled over with notes. To show the state of mind I was in, I will read you a few of them, explaining that the page was headed quite simply, WOMEN AND POVERTY, in block letters.” (AROO, 23) The materiality of the text that is underlined here evokes the act of portraying that will continue throughout the essay to offer not “the truth”, but “a truth” derived from the articulation of thought that the essay proffers, and the subject that writes it. In this chapter, I intend to follow Woolf in her autobiographical acts of (mis)reading the other in order to read herself. The word itself “mis-reading” comes from Woolf’s essays, and casts a shadow of doubt on the possibility of any reliable knowledge that could be attained without the misleading track of fiction. I will argue that her celebration of acts of mis-reading corresponds to the delineation of an *Ars Poetica* of life-writing that in turn enables Woolf to create breakthroughs in auto/biographical writings.

### **On Mis-Reading Others**

Woolf starts *A Room of One's Own* with a personal anecdote. Lunching in Oxbridge has fostered many questions that, as suggested before, strike as an attempt at finding universal laws rather than emphasising subjective experience: “Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor? What effect has poverty on

fiction?” (AROO, 20) In order to answer these questions, Woolf wants to enter the Oxbridge library, and other places of knowledge like the British Museum, in order to pursue an investigation that is doomed to fail: when it comes to the History of Women, there is no fact to be found, but only layers of fiction – an opposition between facts and fiction that does not run counter to establishing some form of truth. The official reason for this absence has a cultural explanation: Oxbridge and the British Museum were patriarchal institutions designed by men for men’s benefit, and the deployment of a masculine rationality that has since been debunked in its self-representation as the norm. Perhaps the reason why there is only fiction to be told can also be related to the type of question the essayist is raising: as her study is meant to observe *all* women, she necessarily embarks upon a reflection that will situate her on the side of the phallographic, universal truth. However, the pleasure of her text derives, not only from the sarcasm of the educated lady confronting the domineering male “professor” of Oxbridge, who would then have been the educator of the British Museum curator (and probably still is), but from the fact that these grand questions are taken down to the level of the subject(ive), the personal, contrary to what she affirms. When Woolf asks why men drink wine and women water, what she really does is to show how she, a subject, responds to that truth that can only be fiction (men drink wine and women do not), and why it is that she should be struck by that truth. In other words, Woolf develops the various answers she can find to the questions, and in so doing distracts our attention from the fact that it is the truth of the question itself that should be challenged. For it is that aspect which is revealing of herself.

Her interpretation of facts can be likened to the way she reads. Woolf, like Clarissa Dalloway, obsessively reads: “Like most uneducated Englishwomen, I like reading – I like reading books in the bulk.” (AROO 94) What she mostly reads is lives;<sup>5</sup> but it is also what she

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<sup>5</sup> Anna Snaith, “‘My Poor Private Voice’: Virginia Woolf and Auto/biography,” in Alison Donnell and Pauline Polkey (ed.), *Representing Lives: Women and Auto/Biography* (London, Macmillan, 2000), 96-104; Susan Raitt, “Finding a Voice”, in Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000), 29-49.

mostly writes (about). The number of books she read and commented on throughout her life is impressive. Her multi-volume diary and autobiographical fragments reveal an interest in the reading of books – fiction and non-fiction –, and her obsession with finding the right way of telling other people’s lives: she is the renowned author of biographies *Roger Fry*, *Flush* – Barrett Browning’s dog – or *Orlando* – a thinly veiled portrait of her lover, Vita Sackville-West. These (auto)biographical acts were prolonged into a larger spectrum that could be called “autobiographical space,” following in the footsteps of Lejeune and my own reading of it.<sup>6</sup> Woolf writes about reading as much as she reads about writing, because it is in reading that she finds the truth that goes missing in the very places where she expects it to belong, and this is how she constructs her own experimental stance in relation to, or against, other writers she has criticized: on starting her work on ‘women and fiction’, she immediately turns to books (to find that there are none). As a result, *A Room of One’s Own* as a whole can be said to be a conversation in reading (despite the absence of any reliable books). Reading exposes Woolf to the complexity of her being, as reader, and the constraints of her art, but also to the kind of writer she is and the more complex question of her womanhood – a question that always surfaces in her reviews. The link between Woolf’s writing and her reading has been stressed by many (genetic) critics, who looked at the importance of intertextual references in her work.<sup>7</sup> However, what remains to be seen is whether the act of reading opens up a critical space for the author to half-say her truth and suggest other ways of reading her self.

In an article on “Two Women”, Alice Wood comments on an essay, largely forgotten even in Woolfian circles. This essay, “The Wrong Way of Reading” (May 1920), is the review of a biography of Mary Russell Mitford, who was a country novelist in the beginning

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<sup>6</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, « Points Essais », 1975). Nicolas Pierre Boileau, “Places of Being: Janet Frame’s Autobiographical Space,” in *a/b: Auto/biography Studies*, vol. 22, n°2, Winter 2007, 217-229.

<sup>7</sup> Claire Davison, *Translation as Collaboration* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>8</sup> “The Wrong Way of Reading” is crucial because it interweaves the questions of reading and of life-writing regarding the essay as such, but it also gives insights into Woolf’s own conception of her art. Besides, Alice Wood argues that this short text was the origin of *A Room of One’s Own*. Woolf’s essay advocates that a reader can be licensed to forge her own opinion of the subject she reads about, and is therefore allowed to wander off the trodden paths offered by the author.<sup>9</sup> It is paradoxically in mis-reading that truth can be found. In other words, Wood claims that Woolf finds in reading a way of escaping the “obstinate arbitrariness of ‘what happened’”<sup>10</sup> that enslaves the author, especially the author of life-writings. This is Wood’s conclusion, but I would like to take the problem the other way around, and start with the idea that reading is a way to escape the obstinate arbitrariness of ‘what is written’. For it seems that Woolf’s essays on the books that she has read would be likely to fail the Oxbridge tests that academics promote. The possibility for Woolf to mis-read (or ‘half-read’ to parody Lacan’s *mi-dire*) is of paramount importance, and the effects of this are multifarious in her appraisal of texts and genres. Woolf’s unreliable ways of reading will not be a great surprise to those familiar with “On Not Knowing Greek”, which explores the effect of a language she could not read, speak or understand: for all the phonological, and cultural reasons that are named, what interests Woolf in Greek as a language and the culture it is the vehicle of is how she interprets it without being able to understand it: “There is a cruelty in Greek tragedy which is quite unlike our English brutality.”<sup>11</sup> Woolf chooses to ‘not read’ Greek from the perspective of the English’s sense of propriety, which means that what she is reading is a negative portrait of herself as English (in terms of rank, class, religion, education,

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<sup>8</sup> Alice Wood “Virginia Woolf’s ‘Two Women’; or ‘The Wrong Way of Reading’” in Catherine Bernard (ed.), *Woolf as Reader/ Woolf as Critic, or the Art of Reading in the Present* (Montpellier, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2011), 51-62.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>10</sup> Philip Nicholas Furbank, ‘The Craft-like Nature of Biography’ in Joe Law and Linda K. Hughes (ed.), *Biographical Passages: Essays in Victorian and Modernist Biography* (Columbia, University of Missouri P, 2000), 18-27, 19. Quoted by Alice Wood, *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>11</sup> “On Not Knowing Greek”, in Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader* (New York, Harcourt Inc., introduction by Andrew McNeillie, 1984 (1925)), 25. All subsequent references to this text between brackets, CR.

etc.) and no analysis of the language *per se*. This is an observation that can be made about many essays: this does not suggest that she could not read the books she commented upon, but her opinion of them was very much personal, if not biased, and based on an appreciation of the reflexive act of self-portraits they inspire. She thus claims that life-writings are the only reliable texts: “other people may evade us, but our own features are almost too familiar.” (CR, 58) This statement appears in an article on “Montaigne,” which is of paramount importance for the argument developed here, as it is an essay on the genre of the essay as well as an essay in reading another essayist who will then become the figurehead of Woolf’s own style.

Woolf’s essays often raise the question of the representation of life and the definition of generic patterns: the essay on Montaigne continues with an argument in favour of “laying down rules” (CR 59) in order to undermine the absence of correspondence between language and life, the former stable and the latter changing. And yet, elsewhere, she worries about the expansion of biographical writings because this genre threatens the interest in the written text itself, and may endanger forms of writings that are deemed more complex to understand: “How far we are going to read a poet when we can read about a poet is a problem to lay before biographers.” (“Aurora Leigh,” CR II, 202<sup>12</sup>). Likewise, in an essay on “Lewis Carroll”, Woolf comments on ‘our’ failure to grasp Carroll:

The complete works of Lewis Carroll have been issued... in a stout volume of 1293 pages. So there is no excuse – Lewis Carroll ought once and for all to be complete. We ought to be able to grasp him whole and entire. But we fail – once more we fail. ... In order to cement it, we turn to the Life. (Woolf, 1948, 81)

The ‘Life’ seems to be the easy response to avoid the more difficult task of analysing the work of fiction. Yet these passing remarks are largely overbalanced by the amount of essays focusing on autobiographical writings, and if not, being twisted in a way that sees every fiction as an autobiographical act in disguise.

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<sup>12</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Second Common Reader* (New York, Harcourt Inc., 1986 (1932)). All references to this text noted CRII in brackets.



Woolf develops an *Ars Poetica* through the mis-reading of all these texts: staging herself as reader, Woolf is first and foremost a critic of literature whose review is marked by the impossible-to-escape figure of the critic that is usually sought to be erased out. Theodor Adorno, for example, endorses the commonly-held criticism that essays are often reproached for leaving out the person's point of view.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Woolf's essays are the opposite, promoting her vision in the way she selects the works she writes about; she seldom writes about one particular text, and the titles of her essays often correspond to the name of the author rather than the title of the texts she comments on, as if works and author were one and the same. For example, "Defoe," which takes a broad view at the whole *oeuvre* of the English writer, reads as follows:

The interpretation that we put on his characters might therefore well have puzzled him. We find for ourselves meanings which he was careful to disguise even from his own eye. ...

The advocates of women's rights would hardly care, perhaps, to claim Moll Flanders and Roxana among their patron saints; and yet it is clear that Defoe not only intended them to speak some very modern doctrines upon the subject, but placed them in circumstances where their peculiar hardships are displayed in such a way as to elicit our sympathy. (CR, 92)

The primary objective of this is to reveal that reading is unstable, not fixed, and that a text escapes the scope that was initially intended by its author: it is a justification of mis-reading others. This seems to confide the readers in the construction of the text's meaning, as shown in the quasi absence of quotes in Woolf's essays. Her texts unfold as if they were mere ramblings detached from the text(s) that triggered off her reflexion. According to Elena Gualtieri, in Woolf's introduction to the first collection of her essays, "[she] stressed both the humble character and the mediating nature of her ideal reader, whom she envisaged as a sort of third term, escaping the two extremes of either inaccessible scholarship or mindless consumption."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Notes sur la Littérature*, "L'Essai comme Forme" (Paris, Flammarion, "Champs Essais", 1984), 23.

<sup>14</sup> Elena Gualtieri, *op. cit.*, 58-59.

Reading certainly was a major concern of Woolf's. Numerous essays focus on the act of reading, such as "Reading," "On Re-Reading Books," "Reviewing,"<sup>15</sup> or "How should One Read a Book?", not to forget the titles of two of her published collections of essays in book form. Reading is often placed in relation to the taxonomical aspect of generic boundaries (*CR II*, 259), and Woolf both strengthens the function of genre distinctions while promoting the liberty of readers to freely accept the category the writer has chosen for his/ her texts. This often creates a reader figure that is akin to that of reviewer or critic, an expert in reading whose subjective response predominates. Her criticism of her own texts, which is on a par with the criticism she offers of other texts, creates the figure of an expert writer that knows better.<sup>16</sup>

The only advice, indeed, that one person can give another about reading is to take no advice, to follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions. If this is agreed between us, then I feel at liberty to put forward a few ideas and suggestions because you will not allow them to fetter that independence which is the most important quality that a reader can possess. ("How Should One Read a Book?", *CR II*, 258)

The liberty of the author/ reader as defined here is such that it amounts to an affirmation of power, as if indeed Woolf's opinion derived from the reading of other texts had contributed to improving her capacity to form notions and objects. Therefore, one may not be surprised that after asking for her readers' consent that they will not begrudge her for taking liberties with the texts she reads, she warns them elsewhere against certain ways of reading that would be fatal.

But let us, as we approach the danger-zone of Hardy's philosophy, be on our guard. Nothing is more necessary, in reading an imaginative writer, than to keep at the right distance above his page. Nothing is easier, especially with a writer of marked idiosyncrasy, than to fasten on opinions, convict him of a creed, tether him to a consistent point of view. (*CR II*, 254)

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<sup>15</sup> "The ambivalence towards the commodification of literature and literary journalism that is evident in 'Reviewing' sits uneasily with the celebration of women's access to the profession of literature for which Woolf is best known." Elena Gualtieri, *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>16</sup> Nicola Pierre Boileau, "Virginia Woolf's AutoReading in Moments of Being", in Catherine Bernard (ed.), *Woolf as Reader / Woolf as Critic or, The Art of Reading in the Present* (Montpellier, Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2011), 127-138.

It seems that her vision of the reader's liberty dovetails with the ideal of a reader who is in the know, a reader that is less common than she claims hers to be. In other words, there is an art of mis-reading and this art pertains to a delicate combination between the text and its author, the impression(s) and the fact(s), the style and the woman. Throughout her essays, Woolf seeks to track down the personality of the author. Christine Reynier helps us understand this aspect in her illuminating study of "Personalities":

Woolf's universality does not presuppose a unified subject; for her, a universal art form cannot be ascribed to a single voice but to a double one, both male and female, and even to a pluralist voice. In other words, instead of being emptied out and disappearing as in Eliot's case, the authorial voice becomes an anonymous and universal or collective voice, "the common voice singing out of doors" (Woolf 1979, 328), the voice of a multiple self and multiple selves, a polyphonic voice, what Gillian Beer calls "the nameless multiple author" in reference to Woolf's "Anon" that she compares with Walter Benjamin's "storyteller".<sup>17</sup>

This plurality of the author's voices and selves do not jeopardise the autobiographical project. It only means that this project finds many voices through an incessant, repetitive practice that only fails to complete the story.

### **On Mis-Writing Auto/biography.**

Amongst the various examples that could be taken to explore this aspect, I would like to take her essay "William Hazlitt" because it starts with a celebration of the presence of this overwhelming voice that unifies all his texts: "[Hazlitt's] essays are emphatically himself. He has no reticence and he has no shame. He tells us exactly what he thinks, and he tells us – the confidence is less seductive – exactly what he feels." (CR, 173) After this remark, Woolf launches in a biographical account based on her impressions of reading his essays. Woolf here interestingly directs her criticism at another essayist and points out the subjective experience that his essays are, when they would have certainly been appreciated for the objective, rational writing of a man of letters, at the time when the essays were published and when

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<sup>17</sup> Christine Reynier, *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story* (New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 55-65.

Woolf reviewed them. The liberty of reading Woolf advocates is linked to the importance for her to break free from the constraints of literary genres, and especially from the genres linked to the representation of lives, despite the strength she gives them in “How One Should Read a Book”: “It is simple enough to say that since books have classes – fiction, biography, poetry – we should separate them and take from each what is it right that each should give us.” (CR II, 259) *A Room of One’s Own* offers itself as scholarly lectures on the question of women. Instead of abiding by the traditional rules of objectivity, Woolf prefers to launch into the personal account of her encounter with the absence of women in fiction, both as characters and writers. This is the result of the very path she found in reading De Quincey’s *Autobiography*.

As Catherine Lanone says, “Woolf is fascinated by De Quincey’s subversive displacement of autobiography, his refusal to make it fit the ethical constraints of the day, to shape his tale into a normative narrative.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, when she writes about De Quincey, Woolf at first seems to find more to criticise than to praise: “Together with his fatal verbosity and weakness of architectural power, De Quincey suffered too as an autobiographer from a tendency to meditative abstraction.” (CR II, 137) This sounds anything but praise and shows that Woolf, despite her failing to have written any substantial work of autobiography in 1932 when the essay first came out, once again stresses her capacity to identify failings in the works of others. However, what she finds worthy in De Quincey is his attention to dreams and vision that supplant facts in his recounting of his life. She thus lays the emphasis on his use of prose to record visions that cannot be reduced to observable facts and therefore show his personality. In so doing, he can be likened to what she finds interesting in Hardy’s “moments of vision”, an expression she uses from one of his poems and collection of poems. This cannot but echo the “moments of being” which she uses as a theory at the heart of her own

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<sup>18</sup> Catherine Lanone, “Stereoscopic Displacement in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Street Haunting’”, in Catherine Bernard (ed.), *op. cit.*, 39-50, 40.

autobiography, which she writes in “between the acts”, as it were, of her novel and in between the bombings that were going to precipitate her death.<sup>19</sup> De Quincey, like Hardy (and Shakespeare, Coleridge and Keats if we are to trust *A Room Of One’s Own*), is a poet of prose, which both writers use to an end that Woolf agrees with: She writes that he “treats prose as a humble beast of burden, ... as an impure substance in which dust and twigs and flies find lodgement”. (“De Quincey’s Autobiography”, CR II, 132) The personification of prose or fiction is a recurring motif of Woolf’s essay that we find again in “The Art of Fiction,” her response to Forster’s *Aspects of the Novel*. What matters here is to see how reading still means reviewing and forming a criticism that sounds like a programme for herself rather than a stock of the current situation: “To tell the whole story of life the autobiographer must devise some means by which the two levels of existence can be recorded – the rapid passage of events and actions; the low opening up of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotion.” (CR II, 139) The use of the modal verb “must” is an injunction that can be read as self-directed and that will then be used in the texts she was writing at the same time (c. 1929):

Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact. Therefore I propose, making use of all the liberties and licenses of a novelist, to tell you the story of the two days that preceded my coming, here – how, bowed down by the weight of the subject which you have laid upon my shoulders, I pondered it, and made it work in and out of my daily life. (AROO, 2)

This quote points to the absence of a clear-cut opposition between fact and imagination, as truth can lodge itself in either. And this is something she found in her reading great male authors: “Lamb, Browne, Thackeray, Newman, Sterne, Dickens, De Quincey – whoever it may be – never helped a woman yet, though she may have learnt a few tricks of them and adapted them to her use.” (AROO 65) The word “adapt” is another trace of that operation by which a reader appropriates his or her own version of that story s/he is told. Moreover, the

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<sup>19</sup> Virginia Woolf, “Sketch of the Past”, in Jeanne Schulkind (ed.), *Virginia Woolf’s Moments of Being* (London, Pimlico Edition, 2002).

essay is presented as the work of a novelist – and at that time Woolf had been the successful writer of *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* and the lighter in tone, but rather successful *Orlando*. This can be read as an attempt to do what she suggests De Quincey should have done, or did at times; Woolf combines facts with the power of prose writing that derives in relation to the personal emotions created by the observation of that reality that is written about. *A Room of One's Own* can thus be seen as the end of the journey Woolf embarked upon as reader and finished as writer, conscious as she had become that truth lies in the things that are half-said in the same way that books are mis-read: “Truth is only to be had by laying together many varieties of error.” (AROO 91) It is not so much that texts are not read as they should be, but that reading is a form of interpretation by which things understood supplement the things that were actually written, prompting the writer to work on the ways in which her text will be in turn mis-read.

Jean Starobinski defines life-writing as impure, in the sense that it is always contaminated by other forms, other concerns, an impurity that Woolf was fascinated by<sup>20</sup>:

The Autobiographer is free to “contaminate” the story of his/ her life by the narrative of events s/he was the distant witness of: the autobiographer will then become a chronicler... s/he is free to precisely date the different times of his/her writing and to comment on the time when s/he wrote: the diary then comes to contaminate the autobiographical work and at times the autobiographer becomes a diarist. As can be seen, the conditions of autobiography are only a large framework for a great variety of specific styles to manifest themselves. It is therefore essential to avoid speaking of a style or a form linked to autobiography, for there is no expected style or form in this case. Here more than in any other genre, the style will depend on the subject.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Catherine Bernard and Christine Reynier (ed.), *Le Pur et l'impur* (Rennes, Presses Universitaires de Rennes, « Interférences », 2002).

<sup>21</sup> Jean Starobinski, *La relation critique* (“Tel”, Paris, Éditions Gallimard), 110. My translation of the following French text : “L’autobiographe est libre de “contaminer” le récit de sa vie par celui d’événements dont il a été le témoin distant : l’autobiographe se doublera alors d’un mémorialiste (...) : il est libre aussi de dater avec précision les divers moments de sa rédaction, et de faire retour sur lui-même à l’heure où il écrit : le journal intime vient alors contaminer l’autobiographie, et l’autobiographe deviendra par instants un « diariste ». On le voit, les conditions de l’autobiographie ne fournissent qu’un cadre assez large, à l’intérieur duquel pourront s’exercer et se manifester une grande variété de styles particuliers. Il faut donc éviter de parler d’un style ou même d’une forme liés à l’autobiographie, car il n’y a pas, en ce cas, de style ou de forme obligés. Ici, plus que partout ailleurs, le style sera le fait de l’individu. »

The “subject” here is pleasantly equivocal, meaning both the object of study and the subject of writing that is changed by the mission. The absence of stability, and even the objective impurity of the genre cannot but have appealed to Woolf, especially as she was progressing in her novelistic experimentations whose story reflect her changing attitudes towards fixed forms and definitions. She was comforted by the reading of others as an exercise in her own creative powers, derived from the observation of their failings and successes, as if she could place herself in the cracks and nooks of their shortcomings in order to establish herself as a writer: “How far is it safe to let the man interpret the writer?... / But also we can read such books [lives and letters] with another aim, not to throw light on literature, not to become familiar with famous people, but to refresh and exercise our own creative powers.” (“How should one...”, CR II, 263) That complex balance between autobiography and essays, between the serious tone of the researcher and the lighter tone of the novelist was achieved through a prolonged work on the image of the *flâneuse* and the form of the essay which enabled her to escape from dominant discourses and wander freely between texts, references and the point of view she’s arguing<sup>22</sup>. Woolf’s essays derived as they are from the works of others are the expression of her own tentative approach to art, which the best self-portrait she could draw and which corresponds to Adorno’s viewpoint:

The relevance of the essay is that of anachronism. The hour is more unfavourable to it than ever. It is being crushed between an organized science, on one side, in which everyone presumes to control everyone and everything else, and which excludes, with the sanctimonious praise of "intuitive" or "stimulating," anything that does not conform to the status quo; and, on the other side, by a philosophy that makes do with the empty and abstract residues left aside by the scientific apparatus, residues which then become, for philosophy, the objects of second-degree operations. The essay, however, has to do with that which is blind in its objects.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Catherine Lanone, *op. cit.*, 49; see also Rachel Bowlby, “Real Life and its Readers in *Mrs Dalloway*,” in C. Bernard, *op. cit.*, 19-38.

<sup>23</sup> Theodor Adorno, *op.cit.*, 28. The translation used here is Theodor W. Adorno, *The Adorno Reader*. Trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor & Frederic Will. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 170, available online at: <http://www.heathwoodpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Adorno-The-Essay-As-Form.pdf>.

## Conclusion

I think reading Woolf's development as reader, which remains inseparable from her activity as writer, enables us to move away from a strict understanding of how form and genres played a role in her art. Woolf's invitation to mis-read, or read as one pleases, is another example of her *flâneuse* attitude and reveals more about her than any confession she could have made to a priest or a psychoanalyst (AROO 26). For it is in her artistic stumbles and ambiguities that her figure comes to life behind the well-written prose of her essays. Notwithstanding her self-confessed refusal of autobiography, she resorts to "I", an "I" that at the very beginning of *A Room Of One's Own* she defines as "only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being." (AROO 2) What this suggests in the economy of *A Room Of One's Own* is that, as woman indeed, Woolf and others had no real being. But it could be argued that the writing of the essay, which exposed the absence of her being, was a way to fill in the absence with fiction "desiring to remain veiled" (AROO, 42). Woolf's respect of form is a way for her to suggest we mis-read her and look for her truth, always relative and subjective: what she seems to praise at first, the mechanics of the Oxbridge student, capable of "[extracting] pure nuggets of the essential ore every ten minutes or so" (AROO 22), is only another criticism in disguise, because this student is also the one that remained blind to the absence of women in fiction, despite his well-crafted technique of text analysis. In *A Room of One's Own*, she was witness to a world that was changing with incredible and probably unseen-before pace, in the aftermath of a Suffrage movement that didn't go without its drawbacks (AROO, 85). This is how she may have fostered the idea that far from being narcissistic, autobiography was another form of writing to survive:

They have been great egotists. That too was forced upon them by their circumstances. When everything is rocking round one, the only person who remains comparatively stable is oneself. When all faces are changing and obscured, the only face one sees clearly is one's own. So they wrote about themselves – in their plays, in their poems, in their towers. No other ten years can



have produced so much autobiography as the ten years between 1930 and 1940. No one, whatever his class or his obscurity, seems to have reached the age of thirty without writing his autobiography. But the leaning-tower writers wrote about themselves honestly, therefore creatively.<sup>24</sup>

Woolf's judgement here is unambiguously positive (c. 1940) and towards the end of her career she may have managed to find a (temporary?) answer to the long-running question of the validity of life-writing in relation to art. She also points to current research in the fluid nature of the genre that is often expressed in the spelling of auto/biography – or its more encompassing version found in the use of the term 'life-writing'.

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<sup>24</sup> Virginia Woolf, "The Leaning Tower", in *The Moment and other Essays* (London, Harvest Book, 1948), 148.



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