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‘Reading Physical’: Strategies for Recycling and Performing Woolf’s Works in the English Literature Classroom¹

Jean-Rémi Lapaire

Abstract

‘Physical thinking’ (Kirsch 2010) can be used to engage English literature students in dynamic acts of ‘performative reflexivity’ (Turner 1987). Woolf’s fiction and essays may be ‘resemiotised’ (O’Halloran et al. 2016) as a succession of scenes and tableaux that foster more holistic forms of understanding and aesthetic appreciation. As the *shift from page to stage* takes place, the language of thought and the sensory-motor imagery characteristic of Woolf’s writings are transmuted into visible displays of form, structure and understanding. Illustrations are given of the choreographic work done by young graduate students between 2015 and 2020. The vocal-kinetic actions performed during the workshops and multimodal seminars were inspired by Woolf’s novels, short fiction and autobiographical essays: *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), *The Lady in the Looking Glass* (1929), *The Waves* (1931), and ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (1939). Artistic creation was combined with personal observation and reflective journaling. Students were asked to recall and analyse their own ‘moments of being’ while reading and workshopping. Their written comments provide useful feedback for instructors to measure reception and learning gains.

Key words: dance – performance – gesture – embodiment – intersemiotic translation

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Introduction

‘Physical models of thought’ (Forsythe) may be developed that open new avenues of ‘performative reflexivity’ (Turner 24) in both science and the arts (see Rollinde; Lapaire, ‘La Kinéflexion’; Lapaire, ‘Mental action’). The strategy for ‘reading physical’ described in the following pages is a structured, learner-friendly way of ‘doing literature’ which I have been developing and testing since 2014. The language material used to design this particular type of embodied learning scenario is predominantly borrowed from Woolf’s essays and fiction (see Lapaire and Duval; Lapaire, ‘Performing MD’; Lapaire, ‘Breaking Virginia’s Waves’).

The proposed activities – written, spoken, and kinetic – may be defined as the *intersemiotic recycling of Woolf’s works*: the selection and conversion of written language material into physical displays of meaning, relation and interaction. The main objectives are pedagogical, heuristic and aesthetic:

1. ‘Using the body as an instrument of cognition’ (Kirsch 2864); staging immersive learning experiences that force students to engage personally and collectively in meaning making.
2. Showing that ‘the poetry of motion’ (Whorf 155) can be used to translate the ‘poetics’ and ‘prose poetry’ of Woolf’s works (Goldman 91).

The strategy is unconventional by common educational standards, yet accords with the general mechanisms of human cognition and expression. It is built on three principles:

1. *Embodiment*. From the moment we are born, we express our basic needs and emotions through vocalisations and bodily motions (see Birdwhistell). As we grow into articulate social beings, the sounds we emit and the movements we make become more abstract, patterned and controlled, yet our deepest ‘instinct to gesture’ never subsides (see Harrison). Our bodies are thus capable of expressing all kinds of meanings: concrete or abstract; personal or communal; episodic or ritualised; literal or symbolic; depictive or performative (see Turner; McNeill; Jousse, *The Fundamentals*; Streeck; Calbris). An embodied approach to literary education that ‘uses the body as an instrument of cognition’ (Kirsch 2864) and movement as its main expressive medium is thus consistent with the physical basis of ordinary semiotic behaviour. It is also ideally suited to Woolf’s description of conscious experience as a continuum of perceptual, kinetic, emotional and cognitive events.
2. *Intersemiotic translation*. Human beings are universally endowed with the ability to ‘translate’ what they mean (Jakobson 232-33) in their own language (‘intralingual translation’), into another language (‘interlingual translation’) or into a nonverbal sign system (‘intersemiotic translation’). As all language teachers and professional translators know, deciding on the best translation for something is the ultimate comprehension test for both ‘intention’ and ‘sentence meaning’ (Sperber and Wilson 3). An approach to Woolf’s art that uses intersemiotic translation challenges students to develop dynamic forms of

understanding. Asking oneself how Clarissa Dalloway ‘sat’ on the top of her omnibus or ‘stood’ among her guests at the party, and then deciding on ways of ‘doing it’ may sound trivial but forces one to reflect deeply upon character and situation.

3. *Compression and simplification.* The ability to ‘compress’ and ‘decompress’ meanings is a basic cognitive ability (Fauconnier and Turner 346). The source texts are reprocessed, using a radical abridgement technique. Up to 98 % of the existing material is edited out. This may be viewed as a crude form of ‘creative rewriting’ (see Deren and Patel). Yet, the drastic reduction process forces students to grasp essentials and find relevant arguments to defend their choices. Simplification – both dramatic and syntactic – is the natural adjuvant of compression, and has the same heuristic properties, as in: ‘The house was left, the house was empty / Night / Night succeeds to night / The nights now are full of wind and destruction! / Mrs Ramsay died in London last night / But what after all is one night?’ (A reduction of Woolf, TL, Part 2, Time passes).

Reading physical means converting ‘patterns of written words’ into ‘patterns of doing’ (Schechner 321). It is a learning strategy that relies on ‘the wisdom of the body’ (Piazzoli 24) and our inborn ability to stage a ‘total physical response’ to verbal and non-verbal stimuli (Asher, ‘The Learning Strategy’ 84). I will first show how the principles and methods of ‘modern educational dance’ (Laban 7) and silent ‘psychological replay’ (Lecoq 29) can greatly facilitate the transition from page to stage. I will then provide a brief insight into students’ responses by looking at the learning diaries they kept.

Dancing with Woolf

In 2015, Wayne McGregor composed *Woolf Works* – a ‘ballet triptych’ based on *Mrs Dalloway*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*. The piece was commissioned by the Royal Ballet and set to music by Max Richter (*Three Worlds: Music for Woolf Works*). McGregor’s choreography and Richter’s score were used to ‘translate’ Woolf’s pages into ‘something for the stage’ (Nunnely). The ballet met with instant public and critical acclaim,¹ and was praised for its ‘moving’ and ‘exhilarating’ sensitivity (Jennings). The production was revived in 2017, with premieres in Australia (Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane, 2017) and Italy (Teatro alla Scala, Milan, 2019). The ballet was eventually filmed (MacGibbon) and screened across Europe to the delight of dance lovers and Woolf readers. Not only did McGregor manage to reframe ‘Woolf’s works’ as a succession of silent dance actions – *pas-de-deux*, trios and tableaux – but he also resolved the thematic, stylistic and narrative complexity of his literary sources with surprising ease.

McGregor’s artistic achievement was the product of his own creative genius and perfect mastery of ‘intersemiotic translation’ (Jakobson 233) – a process whereby non-verbal signs – typically movements, but also sets, props, costumes and lighting – are used with symbolic intent to express meanings that were initially conveyed in writing. Physical analogies of written descriptions were created that translated the mental states, character interactions and shifting perspectives into visual-kinaesthetic displays of being, doing and becoming. Nowhere else was McGregor’s skill so manifest as in the duets and trios that he so elegantly composed for the choreographic

adaptation of *Mrs Dalloway*, in Part 1 ('I Now, I Then'). Estrangement and disconnectedness (Septimus / Riza), psychological entwinement (Septimus / Evans) were most cleverly 'resemiotised' (O'Halloran et al. 3) as spatial isolation or physical distance, divergent viewing angles and directions, failed attempts at coordination and physical union.

McGregor's choreographic skill and depth of understanding, his clever handling of compression and transposition, gave fresh impetus to my more modest trans-semiotic approach to literature, which rested on similar principles of reduction, schematisation and 'interpretation of verbal signs by means of [...] non-verbal sign systems' (Jakobson 233).

An instinct for choreography?

Dance space may be viewed as 'an alternative site of knowledge production,' where the intelligent human body goes beyond 'raw sensation' and 'thinks in the medium of gesture' (Forsythe). The 'choreographic thinking' that guides dance composition or improvisation is a particular artistic manifestation of the universal *choreographic instinct* that characterizes humans – a propensity to orchestrate 'global' – or 'holistic' – forms of expression, from early childhood onwards (Jousse, *The Fundamentals* 62, 152). Parades, processions, sports events, religious or masonic ceremonies, carnival displays, sacred dances are conspicuous cultural manifestations of our inborn ability to 'collaborate' in 'social performative systems' (Turner 32). Choreographic skill and 'performativity'² (Schechner 326) are also at work in the 'habitual and standardized practices' of our everyday 'interaction rituals' (Goffman, *Interaction Ritual* 13), such as greetings and partings, professional meetings, commercial transactions and the like. Remarkably, the most common form of choreography operates in ordinary speech, since speakers are essentially movers, engaged in 'body-motion behaviour' (Birdwhistell 111), 'doing their stuff' and 'putting on' their little 'shows' on the socio-interactional stage (Whorf 249).³ As social actors deliver their 'performances' (Goffman, *The Presentation of Self* 15, 22), vocal activity and kinetic activity – co-speech gesticulation, facial expressions, postural shifts – become closely integrated, thus confirming James Asher's claim that 'language is orchestrated to a choreography of the human body' ('Children's First Language' 134).

Although dance actions are ruled by their own principles, dance shares core symbolic and rhythmic properties with other semiotic systems carrying human expression, including speech (see Soullaine). As gesture studies have clearly established (see McNeill; Calbris), movements of the body are (co)-articulators of both abstract and concrete meanings. In dance, just as in speech, humans behave as *intelligent movers* performing 'conceptual acts' and displaying 'haptic understandings' of experience (Streeck 151-52, 160). The convergence between the *choreography of speech* – the union of speech and patterned movements – and dance composition was one of the main topics addressed by Jean Magnard⁴ and myself in the workshops that we jointly led in 2015 at Université Bordeaux Montaigne. We designed a short choreography based on Part Three of *To the Lighthouse* (1927). The students were first presented with an open selection of gestural forms – 'iconic', 'deictic', 'metaphoric' (McNeill 76) – which were congruent with the textual meanings expressed in the novel. They were then instructed to experiment with the movements they had chosen and develop

variations. A coordinated group performance was staged, which Jean Magnard led while I delivered the narrative orally. On this particular occasion, dance and recitation were synchronised, and thus used co-expressively. An inspiring moment was the evocation of Lily's struggle to finish her painting. In Woolf's novel, two embedded metaphors – painting and stepping / walking – are used to describe the process of remembering. Both have a strong bodily component that provided raw material for simple choreographic variations: 'Lily stepped back to get her canvas [...] into perspective. It was an odd road to be walking, this of painting. Out and out one went, further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea. And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past' (160).

Equally inspiring was Lily's sudden realization that language was failing her: '[S]he wanted to say not one thing, but everything [...] About life; about death; about Mrs Ramsay – no she thought one could say nothing to nobody [...]. Words fluttered sideways and struck the object inches too low [...]. For how could one express in words these emotions of the body, express that emptiness there?' (165). This time, students were presented with a selection of naturalistic co-speech gestures that typically occur with negation ('nothing to nobody'), maximization ('everything') and strikes ('struck the object'). These basic gestural forms were used as templates for designing more elaborate iconic – depictive –, symbolic and rhythmic movements connected with the scene.

During the discussion that followed, students were unanimous in reporting that they had never 'engaged' in an English literature class so thoroughly. They had been physically and emotionally 'moved' by Woolf's piece as never before, and brought to 'reflect on form and content' in 'a very special way'. They had experienced 'reflection in action (motion)' and opened up their senses. They had run the piece over and again, and in the process of acquiring greater movement fluency, they had internalized Lily's perspective; they had begun to 'feel like her' and 'see everything through her eyes'. But most importantly, they had experienced a strong feeling of 'cohesion' and 'connectedness' ('acting as one body', 'moving together'), while developing a kind of 'intimacy' with Woolf and her narrative.⁵

Modern educational dance

The guest choreographers who lead the dance workshops come from different artistic backgrounds. Yet Rudolph Laban's authoritative method for the 'observation' and 'practice' of 'dance movements' serves as a solid foundation for all, since it is openly 'educational' in spirit and emphatically promotes 'the mastery of movement in all its bodily and mental aspects' at different stages of life (9). The central tenet of Laban's theory of 'modern educational dance' is that 'the language of movement stimulates the activity of the mind' (26). This principle is also central to the learning strategy that permeates the 'reading physical' approach. When students are asked to *resemiotise* Woolf's essays, novels or short stories as a 'flow of movement', 'a composite of shapes and rhythms', a series of 'bodily actions' and 'dance phrases', they are clearly expected to do more than just move around. They are invited to produce 'physically instigated knowledge' (Forsythe) and engage in 'kineflexion' (Lapaire, 'La Kinéflexion' 194).⁶ Dance space thus functions as a particular kind of conceptual space where kinetic displays of understanding are staged, key narrative and aesthetic issues addressed, and complex meanings explored (see Lapaire and

Duval; Lapaire, 'Performing MD'; Lapaire, 'Breaking Virginia's Waves'). As 'the body is carried through space' and a 'total immersion in the flow of movement' occurs (Laban 97), the mind achieves unusual levels of concentration, perceptiveness and understanding. This is the very aim of 'embodied learning': creating an environment where 'cognition is intertwined with actions of the body'; where a 'convergence' is orchestrated between perception, physical action and concepts; in short, a situation where understanding and knowledge are 'enacted' (Lindgren and Johnson-Glenberg 445-46).

Woolf's writings illustrate this kind of 'convergence' to perfection. In her essays and fiction, experience is characteristically open to 'ception', and things are typically 'ceived' – jointly per-ceived and con-ceived – by the thinking and sensing subject. The term 'ception' was originally coined by the cognitive linguist Leonard Talmy to denote 'the conjunction of per-ception and con-ception' in language (Talmy139).⁷ Although some events may be placed more clearly at the 'perceptual end of the ception domain', the frequent conflation of physical and mental meanings suggests that there is no clear 'distinctional boundary' between the experiencing self and the cognizing self (140). Woolf's narrative and argumentative style is markedly 'ceptual' – or phenomenological: conscious experience is inseparable from sensorimotor experience. This would suggest that the mechanisms of 'ception' are constantly at work in her writings. And this would explain why Woolf's essays and fiction lend themselves beautifully to an embodied learning strategy that unites sensation, movement and understanding. The highest forms of revelation, the deepest states of consciousness are typically triggered by some – special, striking, unexpected – perceptual or motor experience. Central cognitive mechanisms, like understanding or remembering, rarely occur outside perception and physical action – e.g. 'roaming', 'entering', 'seeing', 'hearing'. Words whose primary meanings are spatial or perceptual are consistently used to access complex mental phenomena: 'paths', 'lanes', 'patterns', 'wholes', 'shapes', 'images', 'pictures', 'views', 'windows', 'lights', 'mirrors', 'voices', or 'containers'. Thus, in *A Sketch of the Past*, the act of remembering is described as 'roaming about' in a 'space of time', with a sense of 'movement and change'. Or standing in 'a great hall [...] with windows letting in strange lights; and murmurs and spaces of deep silence' (MB 92). This kind of imagery functions as an open invitation to mimetic and symbolic actions of the body.

In a three-hour workshop that I led at HEP Vaud (Lausanne, Switzerland) in 2016,⁸ twenty-one students were asked to produce a short, poetic abstract of Woolf's autobiographical essay *A Sketch of the Past* (MB 74-160). The focus was on Woolf's evocation of 'colour-and-sound memories' (77) – 'pictures', 'impressions' and 'moments' – which 'came to the surface unexpectedly' (83). In the author's own words, the act of remembering was construed as 'seeing', 'watching' and 'listening' (78). Woolf's characterisation of the process was intensely physical: 'I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things as if I were there' (77). The group's attention was drawn to the various spatial and sensorimotor metaphors connected with 'childhood memories' (78). The students walked around, then stopped a number of times for a slow visual exploration of the space around them, thus beginning to experience Woolf's metaphors in the flesh: first, in simple iconic – depictive – mode, then in a more symbolic way.

Choreographic guidance was provided to help participants develop variations, like transferring an arm movement to the chin or shoulders or converting hand gestures into facial displays. Inspired by Woolf's physical imagery, students first stood on 'the little platform of present time' (98) then moved into the 'great hall' (92) or 'cathedral like space' of 'childhood' (94). They stood in silence, surrounded with 'invisible presences' (93), hearing the faint echo of distant 'voices' getting 'closer' (96) and clearer. Particular attention was paid to gaze orientation, since it is not uncommon for eyes – in real life – to look up sideways when the past is being evoked (Calbris 129). Max Richter's music for Mc Gregor's *Woolf Works* was played. At times, students would freeze and close their eyes, as short passages from *A Sketch of the Past* were read out aloud. In those suspended moments of stillness, light head tilts would be allowed, as well as random vocal productions – faint 'echoes' from the text, or spontaneous voice over translations in French, German, Italian, Spanish and Arabic. With their eyes closed, students would allow mental images to form and dissolve and form again, before engaging in renewed kinetic action. The piece was performed a number of times for students to achieve true kinetic fluency.

In this workshop, as in most others, core features of Laban's comprehensive model for 'movement analysis' (LMA) were explained. The first theoretical construct to be presented was the 'sphere of movement' – or 'kinesphere' (85) – which provides 'a simple means of orientation in space', with 'directions and counter-directions irradiating from the centre' (c) (86): high (*h*) vs. deep (*d*); right (*r*) vs. left (*l*); forward (*f*) vs. backward (*b*). The 'space orientation' may be simple – e.g. 'high' or 'right' or 'forward' – or compound – e.g. 'high right forward' *hrf* –, depending on the planes – coronal, sagittal, transverse – and directions involved.

Students had no difficulty understanding that movements are short 'excursions', staged by 'transferring the body or parts of the body' from one 'position' or 'point of orientation' to another, along an imaginary 'path' (86-88), according to a chosen 'orientation pattern' (38). Variations in shape – 'straight', 'round', 'zigzag' –, speed – slowing, accelerating –, rhythm, 'mood' (45) and 'effort' (46) – 'firm' or 'light', 'direct' or 'flexible', 'sudden' or 'sustained', 'bound' or 'free' – create 'a language of action' (44) out of which 'movement drama' (50) may proceed.

Laban's insistence on 'effort', as a key parameter in the ecology of movement, was also paid due attention to: 'The basic idea [...] is that actions in all kinds of human activities, and therefore also in dance, consist of movement sequences in which a definite effort of the moving person underlies each movement' (8). Working on effort – not just movement patterns – allowed students to reach remarkable levels of expressiveness in very little time. So did the discovery of 'motion factors': 'Weight, Time, Space, and Flow' (106).

In her choreographic adaptation of *To the Lighthouse* (Lapaire and Duval), Hélène Duval did just that. While encouraging students to 'use their own ideas and efforts' (Laban 20), she provided technical training in 'the art of movement' (Laban 7). Her approach was primarily based on Laban's 'free dance technique', a method that emphasizes 'the richness of liberated movement forms' and recruits kinetic material from 'the movements that (humans) use in everyday life' (Laban 8). In keeping with Laban's educational philosophy, she gave priority to understanding and experiencing 'the principle of moving' over practising 'stylised dance forms' (Laban 10). She

accordingly defined ‘motion factors’ in terms of ‘Space, Time and Weight’ (Laban 99-100) and drew the attention of students to such parameters as ‘shape’ – flat, pointed or spherical –, ‘direction’, ‘extension’, ‘transfer’, ‘time rhythm’ and sets of oppositions such as ‘fluent’ vs. ‘angular’, ‘narrow or small’ vs. ‘wide or large’ (Laban 92-94). Different group configurations were first tested: lines, columns, ‘shrinking’ and ‘growing’ circles (43), ‘symmetric’ or ‘asymmetric’ groupings (Laban 44). In her choreographic adaptation of Woolf’s novel, Duval chose to open the piece with an evocation of the bay. She established a powerful kinetic theme for the ‘moving waves’, ‘shaping themselves’ into ‘bars’ with their ‘foaming crests’; ‘rising’, ‘rolling’, ‘tossing and sinking’; some ‘as high as church towers’; ‘flooding the bay’; ‘falling’ and ‘breaking on the beach’, ‘gently’ or roughly, ‘brightly’ or drearily in ‘white splinters’, ‘week after week’ (Woolf TL 10, 24, 59, 147, 176, 187). All the students stood in a line, fully erect on their tip toes – rising together – then suddenly lurched forward – sinking together – some running downstage to evoke the sea ‘coming in’, others stopping and rotating to evoke ‘the hoary lighthouse, distant, austere’ with its ‘long steady stroke’ ‘coming regularly across the waves.’ (Woolf TL 17, 60-61)

Duval’s powerful kinetic rendition of the waves falling, pausing, drumming on the shore, then drawing out again, was artfully recycled by Melissa Blanc and turned into a central *kinetic leitmotiv* for her choreographic adaptation of *Breaking Virginia’s Waves*, two years later:

The [students] now split into three groups. [They] travel across the stage in short successive runs, stopping midway, tipping over, falling to the ground, lying across the floor, picking themselves up, and finally retreating, as the next wave swells, propels itself forward, and eventually rolls onto the beach, only to be sucked back again [...] What the [performers] are now [enacting] with their bodies, Bernard will express verbally later, in the closing lines of the Epilogue: ‘This is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and rise again! The waves forever breaking on the shore.’ (Lapaire, ‘Breaking Virginia’s Waves’ 39)

It is interesting to note that no one ever objected to becoming a rolling wave in Duval’s or Blanc’s choreographies. There is a good reason for accepting such a radical transformation of the self without resistance. In *The Anthropology of Geste and Rhythm*, Jousse explains why humans are physically and mentally equipped to give a kinetic rendition of just about anything. World experience, he claims, impresses itself upon ‘the anthropos’ (29). The body is constantly exposed to a flow of sounds, shapes, colours and movements, which it absorbs and eventually assimilates. Rich experiential knowledge is thus acquired, with shapes, movement forms and rhythms imprinting themselves upon the *body-mind compound*. All become available for symbolic re-enactment through expressive movements of the body. This is why, as we recall some meaningful experience, we spontaneously engage in the symbolic replay of the scene.

Developing a rich movement vocabulary for intersemiotic translation: general principles and proven strategies

Finding meaningful movement vocabulary becomes much easier the moment students understand Jousse’s principle of ‘mimistic gesticulation’ (*The Anthropology* 44). A good starting point is for them to observe the world around them and collect material

relevant to their dance composition project (Lapaire and Duval). An equally valid option is to scan through their kinetic memories of people, objects, pictures, scenes, in real life or the arts. An image or situation is chosen, and a kinetic rendition of form, emotion or interaction proposed. Once ‘elementary movement-themes’ associated with a given topic have been found (Laban 29-33), form motifs may be agreed upon, developed or contrasted, using elementary dance-composition techniques.

***Mrs Dalloway* (Woolf 1925) – UBM 2018**

In the opening scene of *Performing Mrs Dalloway* a group of students were asked to ‘flock’ or ‘shoal’ together as birds or fish (Lapaire, ‘Performing MD’ 196), then see themselves as a pack of wolves, thus foreshadowing Septimus’s manic outbursts: ‘They hunt in packs. Their packs scour the desert and vanish screaming into the wilderness. They desert the fallen’ (Woolf, MD 83). The coordinated group formation moved like one body, travelling across the stage, with alternating leaders, then no leader at all, so as to achieve perfect cohesion and connectedness. Guest choreographer Melissa Blanc asked the students to draw on their knowledge or sensory experience of swarms (of insects), schools (of fish), and flocks (of birds), which they had no difficulty doing. Many were surprised at how much perceptual knowledge they had internalised and were now able to replay.

The distant sound of heavy artillery was played. All dropped to the ground, as if killed in action, their dead bodies spreading over the battlefield – a simple kinetic metonymy for the trauma and destruction wrought by the Great War – then gradually rose to their feet again, one by one or in small groups, delivering the condensed and simplified lines of the prologue (Lapaire ‘Performing MD’):

Chorus voice #1: Westminster in the Middle of June

Chorus voice #2: The War is over

Chorus voice #3: The cabs, the people, and the parks.

Chorus voice #4: The ebb and flow of things.

Lucy: Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.

Clarissa Dalloway: What a morning! What a lark! ... What a plunge!

***The Lady in the Looking-Glass* (Woolf 1929) – UBM 2019**

In 2019, sixteen master’s students enrolled in the French as a Foreign Language program produced a multimodal adaptation of *The Lady in the Looking-Glass* (1929), combining creative script-writing and intersemiotic translation. Hard copies of Woolf’s short story were handed out; pairs of readers and choreographers were formed; specific sections were assigned to each for active reading and multimodal recycling. All the participants were encouraged to respond physically to what they were reading, using a mix of scribbles, simple line drawings, vocalisations, musical sounds and bodily moves.

An abridged version of the story was compiled during the first fifty minutes of that intense three-hour workshop. Participants were simply asked to select key words or sentences from the original Woolf narrative. The script was read aloud a number of

times. A silent prologue was then staged, built around some of the salient terms that had been selected. Students were asked to draw on their own experience of feeling 'empty'; of 'standing naked (in the light)'; of looking at one's 'reflection' in a mirror; of standing by a 'window'; of 'picking flowers' in a 'garden'; of 'opening' and 'reading' letters, and the like. The physical expressions produced were spontaneous 'replays' of past experience, to use Marcel Jousse's terminology (*The Anthropology* 60), which became the form motifs for a rich tableau vivant. Performances were finally given of the scenes or key moments in a variety of modes: synchronous or asynchronous; plain or enhanced; with or without words, but all working up to a crescendo and culminating in a sudden revelation of the bare truth, as in the original story: 'Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody' (Woolf LLG). And then the lights went off. The students were asked to stand meditatively, recording their sensations – a very intense and moving moment ('I liked it so much when we stood together in the dark. The emotion was tangible' [Laetitia]).

In their learning diaries, the students reported feeling 'anxious' (Clara, Laure) or 'apprehensive' (Garance) at first – even 'sceptical' (Julie) – because 'reading physical' was something they had never done before: 'I never thought I could read and perform a short story in this way, in a foreign language, in front of everyone' (Caroline). As it turned out, the prevailing mood was one that combined 'freedom', 'excitement' (Zoe) and 'relaxation' (Marion 1): 'It felt good to be active and watch others being so creative' (Annaelle); 'It was liberating to move one's body and bring a story to life' (Lukas). The basic training in movement and gesture which they received during the workshop was deemed 'very helpful' and a necessary condition to 'engage' and 'enjoy oneself' thoroughly (Marion 2). The 'mirror and flower-picking exercises' were considered the most 'pleasant' (Estelle). Drawing a floor plan was quite 'unexpected' (Loris). The task sounded 'simple at first' but turned out to be quite hard, and even 'unpleasant' to some (Yamina), because it required 'reading the text very closely, over and again to get things right' (Elina).

Eventually, participants were asked to rate their overall response to the proposed activities, on a scale of 1 (very low) to 5 (very high). The average scores given exceeded my highest expectations – which were in the 3-4 range. In order of preference: watching the other pairs perform their pieces separately (4.4); performing together as a group in full 'orchestral / corps de ballet mode' (4.3); working with a fellow student to extract material from the text and create a piece (4.3); concentrating on guidance and instruction on movement and gesture (4.3); warming-up (4.2).

Rising up to the challenge

Using 'drama pedagogy' as 'a gateway to performative teaching and learning' (Schewe 5) is just as challenging as it is exciting, so language students usually enjoy the time they spend together outside normal hours, running creative 'investigations' in small groups (Lecoq 96-99) to design and rehearse long and difficult pieces, such as *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse* or *The Waves*. Those independent work sessions are based on the 'self-training classes' – or *auto-cours* – prescribed by Jacques Lecoq in his 'creative theatre' method (96): small groups of drama students 'working on their own without direct supervision', preparing a short performance that will later be

‘presented in front of the whole class’. Each group is assigned a specific scene, or theme, or relevant skill to develop. It is not uncommon for tensions to arise – usually short-lived and inconsequential – which fuel rather than hinder creativity. Attitudes undergo a radical change, from bafflement to excitement, inhibition to engagement, private conceptions to shared understandings. Because mutual teaching is established as a viable alternative to regular instruction, a process of self-discovery and empowerment is set in motion: consensual forms of ‘collective imagining’ emerge (Linds and Vettraiño), different recycling options are discussed and the internal group dynamics changes dramatically.

Another challenge to be met by students is the adoption of *reflective practice* as their main ‘learning stance’ (Giroux et al. e48). The shift from the note-taking student to the ‘reflective-analytic’ learner is by no means a natural one. Students are encouraged to develop a ‘conscious awareness’ of the mechanisms of sensing and thinking through ‘narrative accounts’ of ‘classroom experience’ (Reagan and Osborn 25). This means that all students taking the ‘language and gesture’, ‘read physical’ or ‘literature in the flesh’ seminars have to compose a web-based learner diary, complete with cover and illustrations. The typed or scanned journals they produce replace the traditional ‘essay’ or ‘term paper’ while providing useful feedback for the guest artists and invaluable data for education research. Although ‘assessing insight’ and ‘measuring contemplation’ (Hyams 25) might sound tricky and elusive in the first place, evaluation grids can be set up and a percentage assigned to different categories such as style; presentation – including creativity and multimodality; descriptive accuracy; diversity – of the topics, facts or events reported; degree of self-disclosure; general analytic skill; transferability and inter-connectedness – i.e. the ability to cross-fertilise domains and establish new connections. The diary weighs as much as workshop practice to evaluate student ability and engagement, and assign a final grade for the course.

Setting up a learner diary as an integrated tool for learning and (self-)evaluation allows teachers to create a special one-to-one connection to students and acknowledge them as full individuals. It also provides precious insight into the learning events or teaching moments that may take place during classes. Experience shows that students can develop good reflective writing skills, integrating ‘critical’ and ‘narrative elements’ (Reagan and Osborn 25), if proper guidance and stimulation are provided. What is more difficult to achieve is a deep personal commitment to regularity, since the reflective-analytic learner must continually be on the lookout for the small but meaningful events that might occur at any time during or after class. In typical Woolfian fashion, students are invited to become perceptive observers of life, to track their own thoughts and sensations, to ‘put (things) into words,’ ‘to discover what belongs to what’ and in doing so, ‘to make it whole’, to make it ‘real’ and ‘have a revelation of some order’ (Woolf, MB 84). The diary gives learners a space to do just that, as they recall the interactions that took place during the seminars or workshops. Answers range from one-word expressions of feelings, with little or no attempt at cohesion, to articulated sentences and structured paragraphs, with word clouds and poetic compositions offered as more creative alternatives.

Rhythm, tension, flow.⁹ (Julien)

During this week's workshop (Breaking Virginia's Waves) I went through some very special 'moments': bodies running across the stage and breaking like waves, and that wonderful feeling of connectedness as we stood together in the auditorium, and looked at one another silently – 'Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda / Bernard, Neville and Louis' – then moved our arms together up and around, finally dropping to the ground in unison, as Bernard exclaimed 'I am all of them!' (Amine)

Few students are familiar with reflective journaling and most have to learn how to use their learner diary as a tool for observing, recording, and analysing experience. The fact that Virginia Woolf herself kept lengthy journals and produced numerous autobiographical writings adds special relevance and meaningfulness to the task in this particular context. Students are therefore invited to adopt a truly Woolfian stance: they should think of the seminars or workshops not just as classes that they must attend, but as 'spaces of time' filled with perceptual, emotional and cognitive events, with a general 'sense of movement and change [...] everything approaching and then disappearing, getting large, getting small', with selected 'scenes' or 'moments' standing out (Woolf, MB 92). Someone said something or did something; some book or article was mentioned, some definition given, some film or photograph shown, some text read, some emotion felt, whatever: out of the constant flow of things said, things happening or things felt, some strike the senses more than others and linger in the mind, and those may be worth noting and reflecting upon. Learners are asked to scan through their mental or written records, then make a selection of the inspiring moments they wish to recall and elaborate upon. For this, they are advised to use different formats and writing techniques: key words summing up their experience during a seminar or workshop session; prose poems; short imitations or clever paraphrases of the literary pieces studied in class; disconnected sentences pieced together in collage fashion; chunks of structured narrative, descriptive or argumentative discourse.

Concluding remarks

We are sensing, moving and thinking beings, sharing a basic instinct for 'performativity, theatricality and narrativity' (Schechner 321). Part of that instinct manifests itself very early in infancy as an irrepressible 'urge to dance' (Laban 105), a strong 'impulse to gesture' (Harrison 1-2). Any kind of situation that we experience may therefore be described, shared and interpreted using 'the language of movement' (Laban 26). Just as syntax is the general structuring principle of verbal language, choreography structures all the bodily moves that we make as we think and express ourselves. Choreography goes beyond composing dance steps for the stage. Choreography is the central organizing principle that guides all forms of kinetic action, conscious or unconscious. Choreography is 'choreographic thinking': 'action-based knowledge' that fuels 'physical thinking' and 'elicits action upon action' (Forsythe).

As I have tried to show, 'performative teaching and learning' (Schewe 5) is an enactive and experiential educational strategy that engages the sensing, moving and 'miming bodies' of learners in 'the perception and recognition of reality' (Lecoq 173). It is in many respects a natural method since it relies on our natural disposition to give

physical displays of emotions and understanding. Its educational potential is therefore considerable in literature.

Reading physical can be empowering and transformative for all, teachers and students alike. Reframing understanding as a *collaborative art form* that brings together language, literature, dance and theatre specialists, tends to produce high levels of learner-engagement. In my experience, the hours spent *doing Woolf* – so to speak – have always been ‘exceptional moments’ (Woolf, MB 83). As students recycle original discourse material, design movement sequences and perform their little pieces, they seem ‘to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together’ (Woolf, MB 84). All of them stepping into Woolf’s world, reinventing form, and becoming ‘parts of the work of art’ (Woolf, MB 84).

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¹ *Wolf Works* earned two major distinctions: the Critics' Circle Award for Best Classical Choreography and the Oliver Award for Best New Dance Production.

² ‘Performativity – or, commonly, ‘performance’ – is everywhere in life, from ordinary gestures to macrodramas’ (Schechner 326).

³ ‘Speech is the best show man puts on’ (Whorf 249).

⁴ Jean Magnard is an independent dancer and choreographer who was initially trained in Poitiers, and later founded his own dance company in Bordeaux, *Made in Movement*.

⁵ Verbatim. Sources include student diaries, and my own notes taken during classroom discussions.

⁶ ‘Kineflexion’ (Lapaire) denotes the process whereby the thinking-and-moving body engages in visible acts of conceptualization by using the rich semiotic resources of movement.

⁷ For example, English and French speakers routinely use verbs like ‘see’ – and related terms like ‘viewpoint’ or ‘perspective’ – to denote both perceptual and cognitive phenomena, vision and understanding. They also use words like ‘hold’ or ‘grasp’ in a physical – ‘support / grip with the hands’ – or mental sense – ‘believe’, ‘understand’.

⁸ The invitation to *Haute École Pédagogique Vaud* was extended by Dr. Isabelle Capron Puozzo. The participants were mainly graduate students in education and trainee teachers from local French-speaking school districts.

⁹ Participants are asked to ‘sum up their feelings in just 3 words’ upon leaving the workshop.