

Voices against Violence: Virginia Woolf and Judith Butler

ELSA HÖGBERG
UPPSALA UNIVERSITY

1. “Suspending the demand for self-identity or, more particularly, for complete coherence,” Judith Butler writes, “seems to me to counter a certain ethical violence, which demands that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same.”¹ In her work on ethics and politics during the past decade, Butler takes issue with a psychological ideal of absolute subjective autonomy which, she argues, is indissociably related to the aggressive American defence of state sovereignty. Published a few years after 9/11, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* casts the assertion of the autonomous ‘I’ as an ethically violent act which causes and perpetuates private as well as public forms of violence. Directing a sharp critique against the militaristic foreign policy adopted by the US government after the attacks, Butler asks: how can the vicious circle of violence and counter-violence be broken, and is there a more sustainable way of relating to others?²
2. Virginia Woolf’s fiction of the 1920s and ’30s poses similar questions in response to the rise of extreme nationalisms and the increasingly hostile international relations which would bring about a second world war. Since Alex Zwerdling wrote *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* and scholars like Jane Marcus and Mark Hussey drew attention to the fact that Woolf’s writing reflectively engages with the experience of “living in a war zone”,³ critics have examined the ways in which the pacifist convictions expressed in texts such as *Three Guineas* fundamentally shaped her modernist writing of the inter-war years. Reading Woolf alongside Butler’s recent works can make us see that Woolf depicts violence as an ethical problem of subjectivity and representation. Woolf and Butler both hold the psychological and the intersubjective to form the basis of politics, and both seek to explain

1 J. Butler, *Giving and Account of Oneself*, 42.

2 Butler argues in *Precarious Life* that a non-violent and more globally sustainable response to the attacks would have been not to deny but to acknowledge the state of national vulnerability, and to suspend the first-person perspective sustaining the American “fantasy of omnipotence” (9).

3 M. Hussey, *Virginia Woolf and War*, 1.

aggression between nations through focusing on relations between an ‘I’ and a ‘you.’ According to Butler, an individual whose subjective perspective is suspended in the encounter with an irreducible other will not commit acts of violence. Introspection is central to Butler’s ethics; the act of looking within, of reflecting on the self and its formation, achieves not the assertion of the conscious and thinking subject of Western philosophy *vis-à-vis* a world of objects, but a Levinasian dislocation of the first-person point of view in the recognition of the psychologically complex subjects whose worldviews might conflict with, and thereby undermine, that coherent ‘I.’ Analogically, as Butler puts it in *Precarious Life*, “If national sovereignty is challenged, that does not mean it must be shored up at all costs.”⁴ In this way, Butler argues for the ethical necessity of acknowledging the vulnerability which never ceases to destabilise the autonomous entities of self and nation.

3. Woolf anticipates Butler’s thought in emphasising the capacity of introspection and the representation of interiority to produce a notion of, on the one hand, the individual subject and, on the other, the nation-state, as not strictly autonomous. Butler’s theory enables a new insight about Woolf: her modernist focus on interiority and psychological complexity does not suggest the detachment of her most radically experimental fiction from socio-political concerns, as has often been claimed. It is, on the contrary, central to the ethical and political comment delivered by her inter-war novels, three of which will be examined here: *Jacob’s Room*, *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*. I propose that Woolf’s writing in these novels performs, in Butler’s sense of the word, an interrogation of the psychological motivations of violence and war, and that it conceptualises ethical and non-violent relations between individuals as well as between nations. Also and crucially, as Jessica Berman has observed, Woolf’s modernist texts create multiple “connections among ethics/politics/aesthetics” which “cannot be severed.”⁵ It is through their aesthetically innovative form and style that these texts both highlight the dangers of maintaining at all cost the integrity of the ‘I’ and imagine an alternative way of being with others.
4. *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf’s first novel to radically break with realist practices, engages in complex ways with the impact of the First World War on the modernist literary imaginary. In particular, the novel depicts the sense of a crisis of knowledge and morality which pervaded modernist representation in the aftermath of the war,⁶ a crisis analysed recently by Robert B. Pippin and Martin Halliwell. As they both show, the loss of certainty and truth problematised by many post-war writers and thinkers is also a loss of the moral foundations upholding realist writing. In Woolf’s novel, this anxiety is represented as a crisis pertaining to the narrator’s status. Rather than an omniscient mediator of epistemological certainties and moral val-

4 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, xii.

5 J. Berman, “Ethical Folds”, 170.

6 R. Hollander, for one, observes that “In *Jacob’s Room* [Woolf] both portrays and enacts the crises of knowledge and ethics that followed the Great War”. (“Novel Ethics: Alterity and Form in *Jacob’s Room*”, 42).

ues, Woolf's narrator faces the inscrutable presence of Jacob, whose inner life remains enigmatic. The novel persistently draws attention to the narrator's incapacity to depict the protagonist's interiority, which throughout the novel stands for that which cannot be known or communicated in writing. In this sense, the modernist crisis of knowledge and ethics dramatised in *Jacob's Room* cannot be distinguished from a pervasive crisis of representation; Woolf conspicuously contrasts her novel's experimental and fragmented narrative to realist omniscience and narrative continuity. As Rachel Hollander puts it, Woolf "struggles [in *Jacob's Room*] with the question of the role of the novel once faith in a literature capable of speaking in a common language to a known audience — and thus potentially able to inspire or reinforce morally responsible actions — has been eroded".⁷ Hollander makes an important point by suggesting that *Jacob's Room* interrogates realist conventions in order to raise the question: what constitutes an ethical way of being with others in a time when moral certainties are perceived to have been lost, and what, if any, would be the ethical role of post-war fiction?

5. If *Jacob's Room* questions the capacity of literary writing to communicate established norms and values, it does so by drawing attention to the problematic assumptions of mastery and control informing realist representation. As William Handley notes, realist omniscience is linked in *Jacob's Room* to the ideal of authority and individual autonomy embodied by Jacob, an ideal which enabled the nationalistic promotion of militarism in Britain during the First World War. Handley points out that autonomous subjectivity is furthered in fiction through an omniscient narrator's mastery over an unbroken narrative, and that Woolf relates such control to the notion of epic "wholeness" and "authority" which served the patriarchal and nationalistic ends of British war-time politics.⁸ Handley's reading of *Jacob's Room* is representative of a broader postmodern line of Woolf criticism indebted to Toril Moi's argument, in *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), that Woolf's unsettling of the realist notion of "unified, integrated self-identity"⁹ was a political gesture. In the wake of *Sexual/Textual Politics*, a range of critics, particularly in a deconstructive feminist tradition, explored the complex political implications of Woolf's metaphor, in *A Room of One's Own*, of the writer casting the shadow of his 'I' like "a straight dark bar"¹⁰ across the pages of his novels. For critics such as Handley, Makiko Minow-Pinkney, Bonnie Kime Scott and Susan Stanford Friedman, her writing performs a radical break with realist narrative conventions, and this break achieves a decentering of the self-assertive subject embodying the possessiveness and aggression which, in Woolf's account, lead to violence and war. These critics made a crucial contribution to Woolf scholarship by showing that her modernist texts foreshadow postmodern theory in their awareness that the writer of fiction takes part in or resists cultural narratives through the very art of writing. From this perspective, the disruptive

7 *Ibid.*, 61.

8 W. R. Handley, "War and the Politics of Narration in *Jacob's Room*", 112-113, 115-116.

9 T. Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 17.

10 V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 115.

and fragmented fictional style of *Jacob's Room* unmasks the coherent narratives of the patriotic discourses which supported the war, discourses in which Woolf considered realist narration to be complicit.

6. As valuable as these postmodern readings have been for pointing out Woolf's linking of autonomous subjectivity and realist writing to political forms of violence, shifting the focus from her dismantling of the 'I' to her configuration of encounters between an 'I' and a 'you' enables the tracing of a non-violent ethics elaborated across her inter-war fiction, an ethics which can be understood via recourse to Butler's theory. For Butler, the construction of coherent and unbroken narratives sustains subjective autonomy and, thereby, the impulse to inflict violence on others. In this sense, the narrator's failure, in *Jacob's Room*, to know and represent Jacob's inner life reveals the realist narrator's omniscient perspective to be problematic because it sustains the kind of ethical violence theorised by Butler. However, as I argue, Woolf's breaking with realist methods does not only achieve a decentering of the masculine 'I' critiqued in *A Room of One's Own*. Out of this critique emerges a notion of the individual subject as capable of ethical and non-violent relations. Read from the theoretical perspective of Butler's recent works, Woolf's texts do not enact a postmodern politics of subversion as much as they develop aesthetic strategies for reconfiguring individuality, and central to her experimental aesthetic is the writing of individual psychic life.
7. In her essays of the 1920s, Woolf's conviction that fiction should represent psychological complexity emerges out of her discontent with contemporary realist writing. What she finds problematic about the focus on external, rather than inner or psychological, detail in the novels of Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells is these authors' claim to master the art of writing fictional character without considering the difficulties involved in the representation of interiority. This argument with the Edwardians is played out in *Jacob's Room* as an engagement with the problem articulated in "Character in Fiction" (1924): how can interiority, the life of the mind, be adequately and convincingly represented? Woolf addresses this problem by complicating the narrator's role in the novel. Overwhelmed by the inscrutable presence of the one whose story she sets out to tell, the narrator's relationship to Jacob is frequently that of one character to another. Her position resembles the railway carriages where the narrators in "Character in Fiction" and "An Unwritten Novel" (1921) find themselves face-to-face with the individuals whose complex inner life they seek to decipher. However, like the narrator of "Character in Fiction," who faces the enigmatic Mrs Brown, the narrator of the earlier short story fails to see beyond the "Marks of reticence"¹¹ on her fellow-traveller's face. The novel about Minnie Marsh will remain unwritten, just as Mrs Brown's interiority continues to elude her observer. By asking questions about the narrator's position, writings such as "An Unwritten Novel" and "Character in Fiction" suggest that the novelist's creation of "real, true, and convincing" characters is

11 V. Woolf, *Shorter Fiction*, 112.

necessarily a complicated task because “human character,”¹² the inner life of those we meet, cannot be known or described.

8. For Woolf, then, the act of imagining the interiority of another enables the recognition of this other as a psychologically complex individual whose subjective perspective cannot be reduced to that of the observer. In each of the texts above, Woolf turns the hierarchical vertical relationship between narrator and character, observer and observed — a relationship which structures the realist novel — into a one-to-one horizontal encounter between two individuals. In so doing, she imagines a new role for the writer of fiction. Emerging as subjects realising that other perspectives and worldviews coexist with and complicate their own, the narrators of “An Unwritten Novel,” “Character in Fiction” and *Jacob’s Room* are also writer figures who renounce the realist narrator’s assertive position. In contrast to realist omniscience, these texts stage a loss of narrative control which is directly related to Woolf’s reconfiguration of individuality. On this point, Woolf’s thought anticipates Butler’s. Grounded in Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical philosophy, Butler’s theory focuses on his notion that the limitation of a subject’s worldview is exposed in the encounter with another individual whose alterity is “irreducible to sameness.”¹³ The subject, Butler writes, addresses another with a question: “Who are you?” This question assumes that there is another before us whom we do not know and cannot fully apprehend.¹⁴ In this way, the question to the other is ultimately a calling into question of the self. Butler sees this moment, in which the other’s inscrutable presence unsettles the perspective of the individual self, as an ethical moment of recognition. Her theory is central to my reading of Woolf, and *Jacob’s Room* in particular, because it locates an ethical bond in an individual’s incapacity to know another. Indeed, *Jacob’s Room* affirms the possibility of rebuilding ethical bonds around the insight, shared by writer and reader, that an individual’s access to another subject’s interiority is limited and partial.¹⁵

9. The narrator’s failed efforts to know and describe Jacob’s inner life is represented as a refused access to his lodgings; resembling a character stalking along the outside of buildings, she gives up the omniscient perspective accorded the realist narrator. While the descriptions of Jacob’s lodgings at Cambridge appear to mimic realist omniscience and detailed observation of externals — “Jacob’s room had a round table and two low chairs. There were yellow flags in a jar on the mantelpiece”¹⁶ — the narrator realises that these impersonal details will say nothing about his inner life. Addressed throughout the novel with remarks such as “There is something absolute in us which despises qualification” and “It is no use trying

12 V. Woolf, *Selected Essays*, 43, 38.

13 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 27.

14 *Ibid.*, 31.

15 My reading here concurs with R. Hollander’s. In her study of alterity and form in *Jacob’s Room*, Hollander relies on Levinas’s ethical model to explore “Woolf’s engagement with absolute otherness — with the limits of knowledge.” Through her concern with the limits of “knowing,” Hollander argues, Woolf “emphasizes the inaccessibility of a deep understanding of another’s consciousness.” (“Novel Ethics: Alterity and Form in *Jacob’s Room*”, 44).

16 V. Woolf, *Jacob’s Room*, 31.

to sum people up”¹⁷, the reader is confronted with a question from the narrator of “Character in Fiction”: “May I end by venturing to remind you of the duties and responsibilities that are yours as partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs Brown?”¹⁸ In *Jacob’s Room*, such Levinasian reflections disrupt the continuity of the unfolding narrative, thereby implicating the reader in what Woolf calls the “duties and responsibilities” of literary production.¹⁹ If the writing of fiction is a railway carriage in which writer and reader are fellow travellers, Woolf holds both “responsible” for the concern that the Georgian writer’s effort to “catch” Mrs Brown might never be fully realised.²⁰ In other words, whereas the novel’s critique of realist conventions expresses a crisis of epistemological and moral certainties, this crisis is turned into an affirmative outlook marking a need to respect the integrity of different perspectives. Through its dislocation of the self-assertive and all-knowing ‘I,’ then, *Jacob’s Room* articulates a new ethical ground for the reading and writing of fiction.

10. The link, established in *Jacob’s Room*, between the representation of interiority and political as well as ethical commitments is pursued and reinforced in *Mrs Dalloway*, where Woolf’s concern with psychological complexity becomes a vehicle for social critique. It is no coincidence that Woolf set out to “criticise the social system” in a novel focalised through the “beautiful caves” of its characters’ inner lives.²¹ By creating psychologically complex characters, Woolf undertakes in *Mrs Dalloway* the exploration of the “dark places of psychology” advocated in her essay “Modern Fiction”.²² When Zwerdling, in *Virginia Woolf and the Real World*, attempted to rescue Woolf from a persistent understanding of her writing as introspective and therefore disconnected from her socio-political reality, he traced the complex relations in her fiction between the world of the mind and the world outside. Zwerdling’s argument for Woolf’s social and political engagement relies nonetheless on a distinction between a concern with interiority and what he terms “the real world” of society and politics. While this distinction has remained largely unchallenged, I propose that Woolf’s writing of interiority opposes a “social system” founded on an ideal of absolute subjective autonomy.

11. As has frequently been observed, the medical authorities satirised in the novel insist on the need for the shell-shocked soldier Septimus to practice self-control and emotional restraint. In this respect, Woolf’s portrayal of Septimus’s doctors directs a broader critique against a pervasive ideal of self-control within a medical tradition with which she was intimately familiar.²³ Elaine Showalter makes a crucial point by suggesting that Woolf

17 *Ibid.*, 126, 135.

18 V. Woolf, *Selected Essays*, 53.

19 For Levinasian readings of Woolf, see R. Hollander, A. K. Jonsson and T. Monson.

20 V. Woolf, *Selected Essays*, 36-37.

21 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 248, 263.

22 V. Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 108.

23 See T. C. Caramagno, E. Showalter and H. Lee for accounts of the ways in which Woolf’s personal experience of authoritarian medical doctors and ineffective treatments shaped her representation of Sir William Bradshaw and Dr Holmes in *Mrs Dalloway*. T.C. Caramagno points

links Septimus's expressions of intense emotion with the act of introspection.²⁴ Septimus is advised repeatedly by his doctors to "take an interest in things outside himself" and to "think as little about [him]self as possible".²⁵ Health, Holmes tells his patient, "is largely a matter in our own control. Throw yourself into outside interests; take up some hobby".²⁶ In this way, Bradshaw and Holmes' demand that Septimus take a supposedly objective interest in "things outside" instead of exploring his inner life enforces an ideal of composure and strict rationality. Woolf shows, in these passages, how the medical establishment of her time viewed introspection as a threat to the rational self because the act of looking inwards involves the expression of instinct and emotion. Here, as elsewhere, Woolf configures the psychological as bound up with the social and political. Insofar as Woolf set out to "criticise the social system, & to show it at work" in *Mrs Dalloway*²⁷, her novel succeeds in showing how the psychological norm of self-control was also "at work" in post-war Britain on a public and political level. Alex Zwerdling and Christine Froula's respective accounts of *Mrs Dalloway* both focus on Woolf's insight that in the politically turbulent inter-war years, the ideal of self-control served as a means for strengthening national identity. The memory of the recent war, a rapid disintegration of the British Empire, the tensions between nations following the Treaty of Versailles and the emergence of totalitarian formations in Europe all posed threats to Britain as a nation in the 1920s. Zwerdling points out that a society which equates complete composure and mental health is sustained through "the iron hand in a velvet glove"²⁸, and in Froula's psychoanalytic reading, *Mrs Dalloway* "indicts post-war nationalisms that, while pretending to battle external threats to peace and security, actually produce enemies, dominators, and war by an unacknowledged violence within".²⁹ As Froula emphasises in *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*, Woolf shared Maynard Keynes's assessment of the Versailles Treaty as a display, by the Allied powers, of the aggressive nationalisms which had led to one war and would bring about another.³⁰

12. Zwerdling and Froula, then, both stress Woolf's awareness that, in the inter-war years, the psychological and private could not be distinguished from the realm of the public and political. *Mrs Dalloway* conveys this insight by showing that in a nationalistic society, the repression of instinct and emotion is the psychic mechanism which makes oppression,

out that in the nineteenth-century medical tradition to which most of Woolf's physicians belonged, manic-depressive illness was treated as a neurotic disease in which manifestations of "excessive emotionalism" were to be cured with "self-discipline" (*The Flight of the Mind*, 14), and Showalter, in her study of attitudes to shell shock or "war neurosis" in post-war Britain, emphasises the Victorian ideal of self-discipline which inspired treatments of "hysterical soldiers who displayed unmanly emotions or fears" (*The Female Malady*, 167-70).

24 E. Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 192-193.

25 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 18, 83.

26 *Ibid.*, 78.

27 *Ibid.*, 248.

28 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 75.

29 C. Froula, "Postwar Elegy", 139.

30 For an account of Keynes, Freud, Virginia Woolf and Leonard Woolf as avant-garde thinkers aspiring to a peaceful international civilisation, See Chapter 1 in Froula's *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*.

coercion and violence possible. However, Woolf's suspicion of self-control and emotional restraint has implications beyond a critique of the autonomous subject and the social order it sustains: her interrogation of Bradshaw's ideal of being "master of" oneself and one's actions also shaped her configurations of intersubjectivity and ethics. Butler's theory of ethical violence is directly relevant to Woolf's novel because it considers autonomous subjectivity as a question of intersubjective relations. Eighty years before Butler's *Precarious Life*, which exposes the connections between a psychological norm of strict self-control and US militarism, Woolf demonstrated in *Mrs Dalloway* how this norm sustained British nationalism in the inter-war years. The novel anticipates Butler's work also by pointing out that the political violence of aggressive nationalisms cannot be distinguished from the ethical violence inflicted by one individual on another. For Butler, a "deman[d] that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times"³¹ leads the self-assertive subject to impose its worldview, norms and values on others. Conversely, Butler argues, ethical as well as actual violence can be countered through the suspension of the first-person perspective. As I will show, Woolf's aesthetic practice in *Mrs Dalloway* opposes the forms of violence defined by Butler, thereby claiming an ethical and political role for experimental literary production in the years following the First World War.

13. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the intersubjective mechanisms of ethical violence are depicted most vividly in the encounters between Septimus and his doctors, whose psychological ideal sustains a coercive process of socialisation. For Dr Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw, characters based on physicians such as George Savage and Silas Mitchell, the doctor in control functions as a model for the patient by pointing out the patient's lack of control.³² This assumption is treated satirically in *Mrs Dalloway* as the narrator reports how, "receiv[ing] the impress of Sir William's will," his patients are made to watch him "go through, for their benefit, a curious exercise with the arms, which he shot out, brought sharply back to his hip, to prove (if the patient was obstinate) that Sir William was master of his own actions, which the patient was not".³³ In Bradshaw's normalising rhetoric, to repress intense emotion and avoid introspection is to be "master of [one's] own actions." The ideal of self-control, which is central to what Bradshaw terms "proportion," is a social norm insofar as it sets up a distinction between sane and insane, between those included in and those excluded from a social community: "Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalized despair, made it impossible for the unfit to

31 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 42.

32 T.C. Caramagno writes about Woolf's doctor George Savage, whose medical approach was inspired by Silas Mitchell: "Savage, like Mitchell, evaluated his patients' progress in terms of their submission to his conservative view of reality: the patient was asked to relinquish control to the doctor, to follow directions without question. Because Savage identified sanity with social conformity, he denigrated the value of self and brushed aside the patient's experience of her illness" (*The Flight of the Mind*, 16).

33 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 86.

propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion”.³⁴ Bradshaw is depicted here as a representative of the patriarchal and patriotic establishment critiqued in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*, where Woolf polemically casts educational, legal and military authorities as forming what she refers to in her diary as one “social system.”³⁵ The social critique of *Mrs Dalloway*, then, is articulated through Woolf’s astute observation of the dynamics of intersubjective encounters in which a privileging of self-mastery induces an individual to inflict ethical violence on another. In Butler’s definition, ethical violence is the failure to recognise another as a psychologically complex subject whose worldview and a normative horizon may be different from those of the perceiving ‘I.’ This is how Bradshaw’s disregard for his patient’s interiority posits Septimus as the outsider of a society defining itself through the norm of being “master” of one’s mind and action.

14. A systematic disregard for interiority — one’s own and that of others — is depicted in the novel as a cause of actual violence; Bradshaw’s problematic notion of the subject as strictly autonomous and in control cannot be separated from his barely hidden aggression. In this sense, *Mrs Dalloway* anticipates Butler’s observation that aggression and violence follow from the “deman[d] that we manifest and maintain self-identity at all times and require that others do the same.”³⁶ Septimus remarks about the medical establishment represented by Bradshaw and Holmes: “They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness. The rack and the thumb-screw are applied”.³⁷ Septimus’s metaphors — the bird of prey, the instruments of torture — suggest that aggressive instinct and violent coercion are indistinguishable from the “proportion” of his doctors’ psychological ideal. A similar image is used by the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own* to describe male professors who possess “money and power, but only at the cost of harbouring in their breasts an eagle, a vulture [...] the instinct for possession, the rage for acquisition”.³⁸ By associating figures of high social standing with predatory birds, these passages evoke the psychoanalytic theories of aggression which were largely contemporaneous with the composition and publication of *Mrs Dalloway*. Lyndsey Stonebridge writes about Freud’s *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1929), which elaborates on his theory of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), that the “scandal” of the later work “rests with [Freud’s] image of a super-ego which does not simply repress murderous desires but draws from them and repeats their ferocity with all the violence that it at the same time prohib-

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁵ As H. Lee observes, Woolf offers in *Mrs Dalloway* “a political reading, ahead of Foucault, of the conspiracy between social engineering, the restraint of the mentally ill, and the patriarchal self-protection of the establishment” (*Virginia Woolf*, 193). Unlike Quentin Bell’s biography of Woolf, Lee stresses the ways in which her fiction turns personal experience into a textual politics. Thus, in her chapter entitled “Madness,” Lee maintains that “There is no doubt that [Woolf’s] development of her political position, her intellectual resistance to tyranny and conventionality, derived to a great extent from her experiences as a woman patient” (*Virginia Woolf*, 184).

³⁶ J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 42.

³⁷ V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 83.

³⁸ V. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 44-45.

its”.³⁹ Melanie Klein’s theory of primary aggression embraced Freud’s notion of the death drive, and Stonebridge traces the influence of Klein’s work on numerous British accounts, in the 1920s and ’30s, of instinctive aggression as a cause of violence and war. The psychoanalytic notion of the individual’s violent instincts as inextricable from public and political violence structures Woolf’s images of establishment figures as birds of prey; William Bradshaw embodies civilisation as well as its discontents.

15. Regardless of whether Woolf read Freud’s and Klein’s contemporaneous writings in the 1920s or not,⁴⁰ her inter-war novels confirm their assumption that the individual’s aggressive desire to inflict violence on others poses a constant threat to civilisation. However, while, for Freud, violence can be resisted and civilisation saved only through repression of the death drive, Woolf reverses this logic. Among her novels, *Mrs Dalloway* shows with particular insistence that the mechanism of psychic repression functions in the same way as what Butler calls ethical violence: the “shoring up” or “recentering” of the autonomous ‘I.’ If, as Andrew John Miller suggests, Woolf found herself in a social order threatened by perpetual war, she described the inextricable connection between civilisation and its discontents from a different angle than Freud. For Woolf, the fault lies within social expectations rather than natural instinct; the individual subject becomes capable of ethical and actual violence when shaped by the norm of absolute self-control, or subjective autonomy, to use Butler’s term. In this respect, Butler’s recent works enable a more adequate account of Woolf’s fiction than the psychoanalytic writings of Freud and Klein could do. Because it combines psychoanalysis and ethics not only in order to account for the aggression of which the unitary ‘I’ is capable, but, also, to delineate an understanding of individuality as something other than autonomous subjectivity, Butler’s theory highlights that while Woolf’s novels frequently dramatise aggressive encounters, they also explore the psychology of non-violent relations. In anticipation of later developments in psychoanalytic thought, Woolf suggests that violence can be avoided not through repression, but through the suspension of the first-person perspective.⁴¹

16. Woolf’s writing in *Mrs Dalloway* confronts Sir William’s ideal of absolute self-control by delineating a more inclusive category of the social. The novel, I propose, foreshadows Butler’s claim that social recognition and non-violence are possible only between individuals who do not assert their subjective perspective always and at all cost. By taking into account unconscious processes which exceed the mastery of rational reflection, the novel develops a notion of the individual subject as not strictly autonom-

39 L. Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element*, 7.

40 As E. Abel points out in *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*, Woolf claimed not to have read Freud properly until 1939. E. Abel’s book remains the most extensive study of Woolf and psychoanalysis. See E. Abel and L. Stonebridge’s *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism* for readings of Woolf in relation to the work of Melanie Klein.

41 The idea that a suspension of autonomous subjectivity enables an ethics which counters violence and/or objectification is elaborated in recent works such as A. Cavarero’s *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (2005), L. Irigaray’s *Sharing the World* (2008) as well as J. Kristeva’s *Intimate Revolt* (2002) and *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt* (2000).

ous. On this point, Woolf makes ethics a question of aesthetics: the ethical violence of self-assertion and nationalism is countered in *Mrs Dalloway* on the level of form and style. While the novel shows that opposition to a nationalistic society may proceed through a critique of absolute subjective autonomy, it also demonstrates that such critique may be articulated through the fiction writer's stylistic strategies, as Rebecca Walkowitz notes. As Walkowitz puts it, Woolf was convinced "that social norms are embedded in traditions of literary style and that literary style is embedded in the politics of national culture," and she "sought to imagine models of social critique that would resist social codification".⁴² Insofar as *Mrs Dalloway* elaborates a textual critique of violence, this critique is delivered, performatively, through the novel's poetic, metaphoric language. We are offered a glimpse of the workings of this language when the opening pages of *A Room of One's Own* distinguish Woolf's narrator — and Woolf herself — from the fictional author Mr A, whose 'I' dominates his writing like a Lacanian "straight dark bar":

Here then was I [...] sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought. [...] Thought [...] had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift and sink it, until — you know the little tug — the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out?⁴³

17. The passage dramatises the idea of introspection, the act of looking inwards, as a self-reflexive gesture which calls the writer's coherent 'I' into question. The fishing metaphor enables the showing of this gesture: the images of looking into the depths, the capturing of a thought, the "hauling of it in" and the "laying of it out" illustrate a process that could not be described literally, precisely because it eludes conscious reflection. Woolf's very writing here counters the "male values"⁴⁴ of militarism and patriotism by affirming the "dark places of psychology"⁴⁵: the unconscious dimension of the psyche, that which defies the strictly rational self. *A Room of One's Own*, then, begins by articulating a critical poetics which takes as its starting point the modernist "assumption that a part of human psychic life — what James termed 'the hidden self' and Virginia Woolf described as the 'hidden depths' of the psyche — escapes our conscious knowledge".⁴⁶
18. In *Mrs Dalloway*, too, Woolf configures metaphoric writing as a way of suspending the coherent self and, thereby, the norms of the social order in which this self is inscribed. This is the mode of social critique theorised by Butler, whose work relies on the assumption that an individual who undergoes a momentary loss of the first-person perspective can attain a

⁴² R. Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 84, 80. See also P. Matson's deconstructive reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, which explores the novel's concern with the "interconnected processes of writing, reading, meaning, and resistance" ("The Terror and the Ecstasy", 164).

⁴³ V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 5.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 118.

⁴⁵ V. Woolf, *Collected Essays*, 108.

⁴⁶ M. S. Micale, *The Mind of Modernism*, 9. See M. S. Micale's collection *The Mind of Modernism* for recent accounts of the "massive turn inwards" which shaped the emergence of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis as well as early modernist writing in a time when disciplinary boundaries were less distinct than today.

critical position *vis-à-vis* the norms which constitute him/her as a subject. For Butler, the dismantling of subjective autonomy reveals the persistence of a primary relationality. We continue to be formed, Butler says, through the pre-subjective, fluid relations in which ‘I’ cannot be fully distinguished from ‘you.’ She describes a fundamental affinity between the awareness of primary relationality and the ethical imperative to refuse violence. Woolf’s writing in *Mrs Dalloway* enacts, or performs, Butler’s insight that ‘I’ cannot speak of “my unconscious” since our primary attachment to others “is a domain in which the grammar of the subject cannot hold. [...] we cannot achieve by consciousness and language a full mastery over those primary relations of dependency and impressionability that form and constitute us”.⁴⁷ Reflecting on her sense of “not knowing people; not being known,” Clarissa Dalloway is nonetheless aware of the “Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to”.⁴⁸ Clarissa, it seems, apprehends the relations which shape the self in unconscious ways: “since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that”.⁴⁹ Woolf’s metaphoric transformation of an abstract inner state into something concrete which can “spread” and “be attached” refers to a psychic dimension which resists literal description. The image of the spreading self points back to an earlier passage:

somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there [...] part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist [...] but it spread ever so far, her life, herself.⁵⁰

19. Compare this passage to Septimus’s experience of his self as unbounded:

But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white and blue, barred with black branches.⁵¹

20. Through the metaphor of the infinitely spreading self, the mist or pattern merged inextricably with trees, branches and other solid objects, Woolf points to a shared state. Septimus’s psychotic receptivity and Clarissa’s apprehension of a persistent primary fluidity — which connects two characters who have indeed never met. It is well known that Woolf intended Septimus to be Clarissa’s “double.” Woolf’s use of shared metaphors to connect Clarissa and Septimus’s characters affirms the merging of self and other in what Clarissa calls the “unseen part” of the psyche. In this way, Woolf’s poetic writing acknowledges the primary relations which continue to complicate any strict division between ‘I’ and ‘you.’ Through

47 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 78, 58.

48 V. Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, 129.

49 *Ibid.*, 130.

50 *Ibid.*, 8.

51 *Ibid.*, 19.

its representation of “beautiful caves” of interiority, *Mrs Dalloway* opposes the ethical and actual violence sustained by a systematic disregard for each individual’s complexity as a subject.

21. Woolf’s exploration of psychological complexity attains its high point in *The Waves*, her most radically experimental novel, which has long been read as detached from social and political concerns. Even Zwerdling, as he sets out to contest the persistent notion of Woolf as “the immured priestess in the temple of art — dedicated, solitary, out of touch with the life of her time”⁵², omits *The Waves* from his argument. For Zwerdling, Woolf is “solitary” and “out of touch” when she looks inwards instead of outwards, and he sees *The Waves* as the high point in what he calls her “intense scrutiny of individual psychic life,” a novel which may reinforce the idea of Woolf as a novelist concerned with “mapping the intricate labyrinth of consciousness”.⁵³ In contrast to the “intense political commitment in *Three Guineas*,” he claims, *The Waves* lacks “a realistic base”.⁵⁴ A forceful critique of the assumption that *The Waves* is not about social and political reality was articulated in “Britannia Rules *The Waves*,” where Jane Marcus reads the novel as “a cultural icon of the 1930s” and “part of the discourse about [...] fascism, war, and imperialism in which it participated”.⁵⁵ Woolf’s experimental writing in *The Waves*, she argues, becomes a vehicle for an anti-imperialist textual politics. Since Marcus’s essay, critics from Cathy J. Phillips to Jessica Berman have argued convincingly that the novel problematises nationalism, imperialism as well as the fascist movements spreading in Europe.⁵⁶ Woolf’s novel, these critics claim, articulates a timely response to a worrying political climate. Mussolini’s fascist party ruled Italy from 1922, and, as Berman observes, the emergence of fascism in Britain was contemporaneous with Woolf’s writing of *The Waves*.⁵⁷ I follow Berman in arguing that *The Waves* can and should be read as a response to the aggressive nationalisms gaining ground in the time of its composition. Counter to Zwerdling’s understanding of the novel, I propose that some of the key questions of violence and non-violence which he discusses in his reading of *Three Guineas* are also problematised in *The Waves*. The politics of the novel, I suggest, proceeds precisely through its concern with what Zwerdling calls “mapping the intricate labyrinth of consciousness” and, crucially, through Woolf’s use of the dramatic soliloquy. A decade before the publication of *Three Guineas*, Woolf was, in writing *The Waves*, spelling

52 A. Zwerdling, *V. Woolf and the Real World*, 9.

53 *Ibid.*, 9-10.

54 *Ibid.*, 12.

55 J. Marcus, “Britannia Rules *The Waves*”, 77.

56 See, for instance, P. McGee, C. J. Phillips and J. Berman’s *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community*.

57 In her reading of notions of community in Woolf’s novels, J. Berman contrasts Woolf’s aesthetic practice in *The Waves* to the rhetoric of action, decision and resolution furthered by Oswald Mosley’s New Party, which became a part of the British Union of Fascists, founded by Mosley, in 1931 (*Modernist Fiction* 114-56). See C. Froula for an account of critical responses by Woolf and other Bloomsbury members to the emergence of fascism (*Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* 1-32). C. Froula does not, however, discuss *The Waves* in this context.

out by aesthetic means the convictions informing her opposition to aggressive militarism and violence.⁵⁸

22. In *Three Guineas*, Woolf remarks that a new war is inevitable because of “false and unreal positions” in England as well as Germany.⁵⁹ What she calls “positions” is the ideological boundaries and geographical borders defining a nation-state, and she relates the aggressive defence of these boundaries to the nationalist doctrines which found their most extreme expression in fascism. War for Woolf amounts to a meaningless protection of boundaries between nations whose leaders are “childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks”.⁶⁰ As the image of the child drawing suggests, Woolf considered the defence of national boundaries to originate in the process of self-formation, and, as we have seen, the coherent self is depicted throughout her work as a precarious entity. In *Modernism and the Crisis of Sovereignty*, Andrew John Miller points out that *Three Guineas* problematises the pervasive crisis of political, personal and national sovereignty represented in modernist writing between the two world wars. Miller describes inter-war Europe as “a geopolitical situation in which national boundaries came to seem increasingly permeable”.⁶¹ In Britain, the massive redrawing of national borders after the First World War caused a “sense of unstable boundaries” as well as “a heightened anxiety regarding both internal and external threats to the homeland”.⁶² This crisis, Miller shows, led Woolf and other modernist writers to assume an “unabashedly postnational” attitude and to question national sovereignty as well as national identities.⁶³ Building on Miller’s work, I focus here on Woolf’s analysis of the self as an autonomous entity. I have argued that her fiction of the inter-war period interrogates the social and ethical implications of asserting at all cost the autonomous ‘I’ denounced in *A Room of One’s Own*.⁶⁴ In the mid-1920s, while composing *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf warned that a social ideal of strict self-control inevitably causes ethical as well as actual forms of violence. This warning is reiterated in a section left out of the final version of *Three Guineas*, in which the violence sustaining patriarchy as well as nationalism and fascism is connected with an urge to “always writ[e] about I.”⁶⁵

23. Judith Butler, too, proposes a psychological model which links subject formation to the formation of social and political communities. Butler theorises “a non-violent ethics” based on “a primary vulnerability to others,

58 Only in recent years have critics observed that *The Waves* engages political questions around violence and aggression. See especially J. Marcus, C.J. Phillips and J. Berman.

59 V. Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 131.

60 *Ibid.*, 121.

61 A.J. Miller, *Modernism and the Crisis of Sovereignty*, xi.

62 *Ibid.* viii.

63 *Ibid.* xxi.

64 V. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 115.

65 Woolf writes, in this omitted passage, about the figure of the dictator, the hyper-masculine man critiqued throughout *Three Guineas*: “He has become an egomaniac; always writing about I; an egotist on such a scale that to assuage the pangs of his egotism he must keep a whole sex devoted to his service. The recreation of heroes. Women’s place is in the home. She must devote herself to the recreation of heroes. What is that but the cry of a goose’s swollen liver?” (*Three Guineas* later typescript, Berg Collection, qtd. in Zwerdling, *Real World* 263).

one that one cannot will away without ceasing to be human”.⁶⁶ Because an exposure to and dependency on others precede the subject’s formation as autonomous, each individual is tied to others, and these ties complicate any notion of ‘I’ as irrevocably separate from ‘you.’ The experience of vulnerability, she writes, does not have to “lead straightaway to violence and retribution”; “If national sovereignty is challenged, that does not mean it must be shored up at all costs”.⁶⁷ For Butler, acknowledging one’s continuous exposure to others before acting to protect subjective autonomy and national sovereignty is an ethical stance, and ethical relations between individuals lay the ground for a non-violent politics. These aspects of Butler’s thought illuminate a non-violent ethics in *The Waves*. The novel, I propose, anticipates the anti-nationalism and anti-fascism of *Three Guineas* by depicting the defensive drawing of boundaries around the self as a direct cause of aggression and violence. Insofar as the novel remains her most thorough engagement with self-formation and the formation of self-other relations, it also posits these processes as the basis of the political as well as the ethical. Intersubjective relations are represented in *The Waves* in terms of boundaries which are alternatively upheld, transgressed and dissolved. The novel connects the absolute autonomy of the self with aggression and warfare at the same time as it depicts this self as a fragile entity subject to what Bernard calls a continuous “shattering and piecing together”.⁶⁸ Woolf, I argue, exposes in *The Waves* the fragility of the constructs of self and nation, and she suggests that an awareness of this fragility may form the basis for non-violent relations.

24. Throughout the novel, nakedness appears as a metaphor of vulnerability. Rhoda’s conviction that “I am the youngest, the most naked of you all” echoes Louis’s reflection — “You are all protected. I am naked” — a few pages earlier.⁶⁹ The shared metaphor suggests that the unsettling exposure they both experience is a common predicament. In Butler’s terms, “The condition of primary vulnerability” which continues to form us emanates from “a primary helplessness” and “a passivity that is prior to the subject”.⁷⁰ By contrast, the formation of an autonomous ‘I’ is depicted in *The Waves* as a hardening process in which becoming an individual is to grow invulnerable. This process is forcefully dramatised through the birds in the interludes. Insensitive and acting out of pure instinct, they function as a metaphor of, on the one hand, autonomous subjectivity and, on the other, blind aggression: “*their heads turned this way; that way; aware, awake; intensely conscious. [...] Then one of them, beautifully darting, accurately alighting, spiked the soft, monstrous body of the defenceless worm, pecked again and again*”.⁷¹ The bird-snail imagery merges ominously into the human world of the soliloquies as Bernard likens his friends to birds

66 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, xvii, xiv.

67 *Ibid.*, xii.

68 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 207.

69 *Ibid.*, 79, 72.

70 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 31-32, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 77.

71 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 54-55.

breaking “their snails on stones [...] hard, avid, remorseless”.⁷² This metaphor recalls Bernard’s notion of the coherent self as a “hard shell which cases the soul”.⁷³ If the “soul” is the receptive mind exposed and unprotected like a snail without shell, then the figurative “shell [...] upon which sensations tap their beaks in vain” describes the ‘I’ prone to inflict violence on others.⁷⁴

25. The consolidation of autonomous subjectivity is also linked in the novel to the aggressive social formations and unreflected action denounced in *Three Guineas*; in a later interlude, the attack is performed through the synchronised action of many birds: “they descended, dry-beaked, ruthless, abrupt. [...] They spied a snail and tapped the shell against a stone”.⁷⁵ The birds’ cruelty evokes the passages in *Three Guineas* where Woolf contrasts, provocatively, the letter as an exchange between two individuals with “the conglomeration of people into societies,” which, she argues, “releases what is most selfish and violent, least rational and humane in the individuals themselves.” Societies, she writes, are “conspiracies” which “inflate [in men] a monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks”.⁷⁶ Woolf does not, in this polemic, attribute the description of societies as nationalistic and aggressive “conspiracies” to the fascist state only. She suggests, instead, that while the fascist state exemplifies the most extreme form of conspiracy, there is something about the organisation of individuals into societies, whether in Italy, Germany or Britain, which makes fascism possible.⁷⁷
26. In *Three Guineas*, then, Woolf imagines the intersubjective, relations between an ‘I’ and a ‘you,’ as a space in which individuals can become something other than autonomous subjects. This assumption is developed in *The Waves*, where the formation of a “hard shell” is described as a response to the dislocation of autonomous subjectivity by the presence of another irreducible being. The moment of disruption is depicted as what Bernard calls “The shock of the falling wave”; it is the “humiliation” of being “utterly unprepared” for the “blow” dealt to the coherent self by the questioning presence of another subject.⁷⁸ As Bernard seeks a set of phrases capable of accounting for the unsettling presence of another ‘I’ — “There is no panacea (let me note) against the shock of meeting”⁷⁹ — so Woolf developed in *The Waves* a range of images suggesting the “shattering” of the self: a “blow”; a “stab”⁸⁰; the smashing of something whole; the “shock” of a wave breaking.

72 *Ibid.*, 190.

73 *Ibid.*, 222.

74 *Ibid.*, 196.

75 *Ibid.*, 82.

76 V. Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 120-21.

77 As H. Lee has shown, this claim met with sharp critique from Woolf’s family and friends (*Virginia Woolf*, 691-92). In a recent essay, Q. Bell points out the weaknesses in Woolf’s argument that “men, unlike women, positively rejoice in war” while “the male pacifist is a rarity” (“*A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*”, 15-16).

78 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 224, 183, 195, 225.

79 *Ibid.*, 161.

80 *Ibid.*, 66.

27. All these images express what Butler calls a disruption of the first-person perspective, that is, the painful ways in which “we’re undone by each other”.⁸¹ To be “undone” is to be forced into a state of total passivity, as Bernard becomes aware in a visit to the hairdresser:

I leant my head back and was swathed in a sheet. Looking-glasses confronted me in which I could see my pinioned body and people passing; stopping, looking, and going on indifferent. The hairdresser began to move his scissors to and fro. I felt myself powerless to stop the oscillations of the cold steel. So we are cut and laid in swaths, I said.⁸²

28. His paralysing incapacity to act is depicted here as an acutely physical experience; with his arms tied and the metal of the hairdresser’s scissors against his head, Bernard is literally given over into the hands of another. The “oscillations of the cold steel” suggest the menace of potential violence against which he is “powerless” and incapable of protecting himself. The image of his arms “pinioned” by the sheet is also metaphoric of the reduction of his ‘I’ in the moment he sees himself simultaneously as a reflection in the mirror and as an object of the indifferent gaze of the passers-by. Woolf describes in this passage the kind of vulnerability theorised by Butler. The scene at the hairdresser reads as a dramatisation of Butler’s insight that “The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well”.⁸³

29. In *Precarious Life*, Butler distinguishes between two ways of handling the unsettling experience of being under the threat of violence, an experience which, she argues, is bound up with the loss of subjective autonomy. To “shore up the first-person point of view” in a “recentering” of the subject is to assume a defensive position in order to respond with violence if need be.⁸⁴ On the other hand, to acknowledge our corporeal vulnerability as a formational condition which we cannot “will away” is an ethical stance and a way of resisting violence.⁸⁵ In *The Waves*, Woolf delineates alternative responses to what Rhoda and Louis calls “nakedness” and what Bernard experiences as a paralysing passivity. One is a recentering, to use Butler’s term, of the autonomous ‘I.’ As he signs his name: “I, and again I, and again I,” Louis perceives himself as “compact” and “gathered together”.⁸⁶ Another, more painful way of responding to vulnerability is problematised through Rhoda’s character. Rhoda, for whom encounters with others are “intermittent shocks, sudden as the springs of a tiger”⁸⁷, remains exposed and highly sensitive. This is a state of threatening disintegration in which no subject position can be assumed. Rhoda cannot, like Bernard, identify with her reflection in the mirror: “That is my face [...] in the looking-glass behind Susan’s shoulder. [...] But I will duck behind her

81 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

82 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 215.

83 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 26.

84 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 6-7.

85 *Ibid.*, 29.

86 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 127.

87 *Ibid.*, 47.

to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face”.⁸⁸ Rhoda’s incapacity to “shore up the first-person point of view,” as Butler puts it, entails an absolute passivity which makes violent action impossible. As Rhoda’s suicide illustrates, though, a permanent rather than momentary passivity also makes survival unsustainable. One of Rhoda’s soliloquies distinguishes her exposure from the hard “shells” developed by the other characters: “[Jinny and Susan] say, Yes; they say, No; they bring they fists down with a bang on the table. But I doubt; I tremble, [...] afraid [...] to make even one sentence”.⁸⁹ Throughout *The Waves*, the movement of the fist hitting something hard depicts the gathering together of autonomous subjectivity as well as the act of delivering the figurative “blows” which reduce others to objects of the imagination. As Bernard describes the loss of his autonomous self, he speaks of this self as a person incapable of verbal as well as physical forms of fighting: “He threw up no opposition. He attempted no phrase. His fist did not form”.⁹⁰ If *The Waves* is one of the central texts in which Woolf articulates her critique of violence, as I argue here, then the novel delineates a mode of individuality which acknowledges and encompasses Rhoda’s extreme sensitivity. In this way, Woolf posits an ethics of vulnerability against the fascist rhetoric of insensitivity and violence.

30. This notion of individuality is articulated through Woolf’s use of the dramatic soliloquy. Her soliloquies emulate the theatrical dynamics of address, in which an actor speaks on stage to an audience. The novel is framed as a narrative addressed to the reader through Bernard’s last soliloquy, which begins: “Now to sum up. [...] Now to explain to you the meaning of my life”.⁹¹ Bernard, the writer, tells a story which is as incomplete and subject to disruption as the account defined by Butler. In Butler’s theory, an individual is called upon by another to give an account of him/herself. Because it implies an exposure to the presence of another subject, the process of telling becomes a “Self-questioning”; it “involves putting oneself at risk”.⁹² Like Butler’s account, Bernard’s story is addressed to a ‘you’ whose presence dislocates his coherent ‘I.’ Bernard himself conceives of his life as something complete and self-contained to be given away through his narrative: “I would break it off as one breaks off a bunch of grapes.” The moment he addresses his interlocutor, however, he realises that his notion of his life as a coherent whole is an “illusion”.⁹³ His introspective narrative functions like Butler’s account in that it has a performative dimension: the telling of his life story is a process in which his autonomous ‘I’ is called into question. In this sense, Woolf’s dramatic soliloquy becomes a site for performative self-reflection and self-questioning. According to Butler, to give an account of oneself is to produce a “broken form of communication” which draws attention to “the limits of articulability”.⁹⁴ In the moment “the

88 *Ibid.*, 30-31.

89 *Ibid.*, 79-80.

90 *Ibid.*, 218.

91 *Ibid.*, 183.

92 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 23.

93 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 183.

94 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 57-58.

thread of my story unravels,” she writes, I “relive an abandonment and dependency that is overwhelming”.⁹⁵ This abandonment is a primary physical dependence on caretakers; my life is implicated in the lives of those on whom I depend, and this primary disposition, in which “the boundary is yet to be installed, the boundary between that other and this ‘I’” is “a scene [...] to which we return”.⁹⁶

31. Like Butler’s subject, Bernard gradually becomes aware that the “shell” he has tried to form cannot protect him against the persistence of an earlier way of relating to the world around him. As he speaks, he realises that his life cannot be told as a completed and self-sufficient entity because it is implicated in the lives of others. Facing his interlocutor, Bernard recalls the scene, to use Butler’s term, of his formation as a separate self. The scene is one from early childhood, in which his nurse lifts her sponge and pours warm water over him.⁹⁷ Once abandoned to the care of his nurse, Bernard has never developed the autonomous ‘I’ which he likens to an impenetrable shell. He eventually realises that he has never been entirely distinct from his five friends, all of whom developed into separate individuals as children:

And now I ask, “Who am I?” I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. [...] I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt “I am you.” This difference we make so much of, this identity we so feverishly cherish, was overcome.⁹⁸

32. Bernard’s story, then, makes possible his return to the primary condition in which the boundary between self and other is yet to be established. Like Butler’s individual in constant formation, Bernard relives continuously moments in which he cannot tell his self apart from other embodied selves. “We’re undone by each other,” Butler writes. “And if we’re not, we’re missing something”.⁹⁹ She also emphasises, however, that there is a constructive and affirmative dimension to being “undone”: “The purpose here is not to celebrate a certain notion of incoherence, but only to point out that our ‘incoherence’ establishes the way in which we are constituted in relationality”.¹⁰⁰ This is how Bernard’s insight reshapes his self as well as his narrative, both of which emerge, as he resumes his telling, as non-static entities: “Thus when I come to shape here at this table between my hands the story of my life and set it before you as a complete thing, I have to recall things gone far, gone deep, sunk into this life or that and become part of it”.¹⁰¹ As he tries anew to “sum up,” Bernard realises that his narrative can only be “a complete thing” if it encompasses his continuous exposure to and affinity with other individuals.

95 *Ibid.*, 58, 68.

96 *Ibid.*, 70-71, 81.

97 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 221-222.

98 *Ibid.*, 222.

99 J. Butler, *Precarious Life*, 23.

100 J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64.

101 V. Woolf, *The Waves*, 222.

33. Throughout *The Waves*, the characters' selves are represented as at once distinct and fluid also on a formal level through Woolf's use of the dramatic monologue. Each soliloquy forms a unit by establishing the identity of a new speaker, yet the monologues are not independent, autonomous entities. As Susan Gorsky observes, they are structured to a great extent through images and metaphors which recur irrespectively of the rhetorical devices marking them as separate. The structural interdependence of the soliloquies suggests a mode of individuality which is different from autonomous subjectivity. While Woolf uses "a pattern of images" to identify each character and to give the soliloquies "an impression of individual style"¹⁰², the characters' sharing of the same phrases, images and metaphors creates an effect of unity across divisions, a unity similar to Bernard's incapacity to distinguish between 'I' and 'you.' This is one way in which the narrative of *The Waves* depicts pre-subjective relationality as not only a subversive force undermining the self but, also and crucially, the precondition for ethical and non-violent relations. Through her use of the form of the dramatic monologue, Woolf opposes violence by the pointing to the ways in which, as Butler writes, "our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others."¹⁰³ Her poetics in this novel develops key aspects of the pacifist arguments articulated in *Three Guineas* by contrasting subjective autonomy and aggressive, unreflected action to a form of individuality which acknowledges passivity, exposure and extreme sensitivity. In this sense, *The Waves* highlights the interrelation between ethics and aesthetics which structures Woolf's experimental writing of the inter-war years. By alerting her reader, through aesthetic means, to separate perspectives which are contingent on others and subject to momentary dissolution, Woolf delivers, in her novels from *Jacob's Room* to *The Waves*, a forceful interrogation of the causal relationships between autonomous subjectivity and violence.

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