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The Shuffling of Feet on the Pavement

Virginia Woolf on Un-Learning the Mother Tongue

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ABSTRACT: The essay focusses on how Woolf's quest for a 'universal' language of the mind can be read as redefining and even reinventing the notion of mother tongue. In particular, *The Waves* offers a reconfiguration of the process of language acquisition that symbolically reverses its linear development. Woolf's stress on a dynamic, ever-moving conception of language, her connection with Coleridge's perspectives on language, and her view of ancient Greek as an ideal lost language reveal her questioning of the idea of a culturally homogeneous and monolithic language. The notion of mother tongue is thus reconfigured by the writer in terms of a dreamed and imagined ideal language combining familiarity and foreignness, reality and ideality, exactness and the perpetual deferral of meaning.

KEYWORDS: Modernism; Woolf; feminist theory; consciousness; linguistics

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Modernist experimentation has famously emphasized linguistic instability by means of a focus on the mingling of different languages, the coining of new linguistic codes, and the forms of intermediality and transcodification. Within such forms of overt experimentation, Virginia Woolf sets a rather different case, by seemingly remaining within the boundaries of one single language, her mother tongue, while performing constant processes of transgressions of those boundaries.

Woolf's experimentation has been related to her will to undermine the patriarchal nature of her mother tongue, thus allowing the maternal (i.e. feminine) qualities of language to emerge. My essay focusses on Woolf's processes of deconstructing her mother tongue from a different perspective, relating the writer's reflection on and experimentation with language to her quest for a 'universal' language of the mind. In particular, Woolf's novel *The Waves* can be seen as a culminating point of the author's search for a new narrative form capable of conveying 'some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night, all flowing together'.¹ The novel's focus on the six characters' development from childhood to adult life offers a symbolic reconfiguration of the process of language acquisition, which is portrayed as

1 Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 52.

reversing linear development. The process moves from the characters' fictive linguistic hyper-competence in childhood to their final longing for 'some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement', rather than for 'phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground'.²

Woolf's essays, as well as her connection to Coleridge's views on language, suggest that we can read her experimentation as redefining and even reinventing the notion of mother tongue. Woolf's stress on a dynamic, ever-moving conception of language, as well as her view of ancient Greek as an ideal lost language capable of bringing the meaning 'just on the far side of language',³ reveal her questioning of the idea of a culturally homogeneous and monolith language. In Woolf, the notion of a mother tongue is reconfigured in terms of a dreamed and imagined ideal language combining familiarity and foreignness, reality and ideality, exactness and perpetual deferral of meaning.

MOTHER TONGUE AND NATIVE SPEAKER: QUESTIONING THE MYTHS

Since the 1960s, linguistic reflection on the concept of mother tongue has undermined common assumptions in the field, such as the linguistic competence of native speakers vs non-native speakers, coming ultimately to question the very foundation of the concept. The stress has been especially on the idea of mother tongue as an artificial construct, as suggested by inquiries incorporating the perspective of the history of language(s). Giulio Lepschy's analysis of the etymology and usage of the two terms *mother tongue* and *native speaker* in English, German, and Italian has pointed out their late incorporation into dictionaries and their varied origins.⁴ In the same line, Thomas Bonfiglio has underlined the absence of such notions in ancient Greece and the Roman Empire, thereby calling attention to 'the submerged racial, ethnic, and gender ideologies present in the concept of mother

2 Ibid., p. 143.

3 Ibid., p. 27.

4 Giulio Lepschy, 'Mother Tongues and Literary Languages', *The Modern Language Review*, 96 (2001), pp. 33–49.

tongue and the native speaker.⁵ Gender, especially, has entered the picture in the 1970s with the work carried out by feminist linguists to deconstruct the gender-biased and sexist implications in the expression 'mother tongue'. In particular, Alette Olin Hill refers to the idea of mother tongue as part of an analysis in which she draws on and advances Robin Lakoff's seminal singling out of the specificities of women's language.⁶ Intending to push the debate forward by debunking the stereotypes connected to women and language, Olin Hill challenges the two images of *mother tongue* and *father time*, seeing them as embodying the sexist dichotomy of patriarchal culture that associates women with the corporeal and men with abstract thinking.⁷

As I intend to show in this paper, all the above-mentioned issues acquire complex and contradictory implications when related to the way the notion of mother tongue features in Virginia Woolf's work. An initial problematic consideration derives from the way that feminist thought has disputed the stereotypical implications in the feminine/maternal component of the notion. Drawing on Woolf's affirmation that 'a woman writing thinks back through her mothers',⁸ feminist perspectives on the author embarked on a conceptual path that was the opposite of the above-mentioned questioning of the expression 'mother tongue' as implying a patriarchal stereotype. Seminal feminist essays on Woolf, such as those by Jane Marcus and Frances Restuccia, refer to the idea of mother tongue as pivotal to the writer's 'effort to valorise female difference',⁹ and to her attempt at 'untying the Mother Tongue, freeing language from bondage to the fathers and returning it to women and the working class'.¹⁰ This discloses how contemporary feminist studies tended to undertake opposing directions in relation to

5 Thomas Paul Bonfiglio, *Mother Tongues and Nations: The Invention of the Native Speaker* (New York: De Gruyter Mouton, 2010), p. 3.

6 Robin Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place* (New York: Colophon Books, 1975).

7 Alette Olin Hill, *Mother Tongue, Father Time: A Decade of Linguistic Revolt* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. xi-xvii.

8 Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth, 1935), p. 146.

9 Frances L. Restuccia, "'Untying the Mother Tongue': Female Difference in Virginia Woolf's *A Room's of One's Own*", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 4 (1985), pp. 253-64 (p. 254).

10 Jane Marcus, 'Thinking Back Through our Mothers', in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane Marcus (London: MacMillan, 1981), pp. 1-30 (p. 1).

the notion of mother tongue, which, on the one hand, was employed to reaffirm the matriarchal cultural lineage suppressed by patriarchal society, while, on the other, was stigmatized as an implicit validation of patriarchal oppression. To add further complexity to the issue, feminist criticism during the 1970s and 1980s also proved divided on whether Woolf's texts were meant to value the notion of female difference, or rather that of the gender-blind synthesis of the 'androgynous mind'.¹¹ Yet rather than pointing at irreconcilable views, this division shows how the complex and multilevelled nature of literary texts tends to perpetually defy rigid categories.

Another example relevant to our topic is Marcus's remark that Woolf's writing had the underlying intent of empowering two oppressed categories: women and the working class. The tie established between the two is significant considering that if the Woolfian notion of the female subject and the 'motherly' implications of language represents a complex crux, her role as a writer portraying inequalities in society is even more debated. Famously, Woolf long suffered from the stereotype of a snobbish author unable to incorporate in her writing the diversity of social groups and a true-to-life representation of the lower classes. The point has often been made in comparison to the way the linguistic experimentation of other modernist writers, like Joyce, recombined languages and codes with overt political and societal implications. *Mrs Dalloway* may be taken as paradigmatic in this field, given that Woolf's intent with the novel was not only to 'give life and death, sanity and insanity side by side', but also 'to criticize the social system, and to show it at work at its most intense'.¹² Class differences dramatically emerge in the dynamics between Septimus and the two doctors examining him, as well as in his specular relation with the character of Clarissa Dalloway. Nonetheless, such differences, oppositions, and inequalities are not conveyed via linguistic variations in the characters' speeches and thoughts; furthermore, interestingly

11 Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 148. In light of the connection that I will draw later it is worth remembering that Woolf quotes Coleridge on the issue: 'Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous' (ibid.). On the different perspectives in Woolfian feminist criticism see Restuccia, 'Untying the Mother Tongue', pp. 253–55.

12 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell, 5 vols (London: Penguin Books, 1980–85), II (1981), p. 248.

for our topic, the character of Rezia, Septimus's Italian wife, manifests estrangement from the foreign culture she lives in, but her speech and thoughts show no linguistic mark of her condition as a non-native English speaker. Yet it is precisely such overt violation of verisimilitude that suggests how the (apparent) homogeneity of the language employed by Woolf can hardly be seen as proof that she was unable or unwilling to provide genuine diverse voices for her characters; rather, the writer seemed to follow the specific intent of creating an anti-mimetic 'universal' voice for consciousness. A whole line of inquiry into Woolf's exploration of the relationship between language, mind, and experience has stressed the *intentionally fictive* quality of her representation of consciousness, ranging from Auerbach's remarks on the anti-mimetic perspective from which the reader is given access to consciousness in her novels,¹³ to Ann Banfield's linguistic examination of Woolf's techniques as revealing 'the essential fictionality of any representation of consciousness, of any approximation of words to thought, even of our own.'¹⁴

In the following analysis, I will focus on how learning and unlearning language (and literary language) is explored in *The Waves*, where the overt fictionality of the Woolfian language of consciousness radically emerges. My aim will be to show how Woolf's emphasis on the conventional, fictitious nature of language represents a powerful, though oblique, challenge to linguistic myths. More specifically, Woolf's experimentation proves to inscribe the myth of the mother tongue — the existence of a language to which we adhere and in which we best express ourselves — into the wider questioning of how and to what extent language is capable of providing expression for our thoughts and experience. In this respect, the elements that I intend to highlight in Woolf's reconfiguration of linguistic competence in the transfigured terms of her 'play-poem' show convergence with Lepschy's powerful point that 'no one is a native speaker of the language of poetry'.¹⁵

13 Erich Auerbach, 'The Brown Stocking', in *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard R. Trusk (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp. 525–53.

14 Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences: Narration and Representation in the Language of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1982), p. 260.

15 Lepschy, 'Mother Tongues and Literary Languages', p. 48.

UNFINISHING SENTENCES: LEARNING AND UN-LEARNING
LANGUAGE IN *THE WAVES*

Conceived by Woolf through a complex process of revision, the 'abstract mystical eyeless' novel *The Waves* came to acquire, in its final version, the form of a 'play-poem' structured on 'a series of dramatic soliloquies'.¹⁶ Innumerable epistemological and aesthetic implications arise from the highly experimental form of the work, which Woolf came to consider capable 'to embody, at last, the exact shape my brain holds. What a long toil to reach this beginning — if *The Waves* is my first work in my own style!'.¹⁷ I will focus here on those elements that specifically connect to the relationship between language and experience, with reference to how the issue is conveyed in the novel as an ever-evolving and contradictory process. In particular, I will underline those instances in *The Waves* that point to language seen, simultaneously, as *the* instrument for elaboration and expression of experience, and as a limited and limiting tool. This, as we will see, is symbolically mirrored in the novel by the portrayal of language acquisition as paradoxically entailing both *learning* and *un-learning*.

As mentioned, *The Waves* can be seen as paradigmatic of Woolf's anti-mimetic poetics, not only for its abstract, anti-conventional structure, but also for the way the six (or seven, counting the immaterial presence of Percival) characters are portrayed. Woolf's project was to 'do away with exact place & time' as well as to move towards a polyphonic narration that works as a 'gigantic conversation' and that includes not only human consciousness but also, as it happens in the interludes, the natural world: 'some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night&c, all flowing together'.¹⁸ Woolf's challenge with this work was to build narration on the deconstruction and gradual reconstruction of the essential elements of linguistic expression, starting with the key anchoring provided by deixis.¹⁹ At the beginning of the novel, after the first interlude, the

16 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III (1982), pp. 203 and 312.

17 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, IV (1983), p. 53.

18 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, pp. 230, 285, and 139.

19 As per John Lyons's classical definition: 'by deixis is meant the location and identification of persons, objects, events, processes and activities being talked about, or

characters are introduced as isolated perceptual subjects deprived of a clear spatio-temporal location: time is suspended in the perpetual present of the language of description, and no elements of spatial deixis anchor the voices to a setting. Time and space appear gradually and in a fragmented form: the passage of time is first introduced via the shift from the present simple to the present perfect tense ('Biddy has smacked down the bucket on the kitchen flags'),²⁰ while Bernard's act of pointing ('Look at the spider's web'),²¹ although still not locating the voices, opens a space of shared deixis among the characters. However, as I will show later, the most radical deconstruction is operated in relation to person deixis, in line with Woolf's intention to portray in this work the constant symbolic merging of different consciousnesses:

'But when we sit together, close,' said Bernard, 'we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory.'²²

The reference to 'phrases' is crucial here, as it is via the interaction of their soliloquies that the characters merge, but language also defines the borders of one's identity thus separating the subject from both the world and the others:

But we were all different. The wax — the virginal wax that coats the spine melted in different patches for each of us. [...] I made notes for stories; drew portraits in the margin of my pocket-book and thus became still more separate.²³

The dynamics between merging and separation are conveyed, especially, in the process that brings the characters to move from their osmotic perception in childhood to an acknowledgement of their individual identities, a turning point recalled by Bernard in the final section

referred to, in relation to the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance and the participation in it, typically, of a single speaker and at least one addressee.' See John Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 637. For deixis in narrative, and in particular the notion of deictic shift, see *Deixis in Narrative: A Cognitive Science Perspective*, ed. by Lynne E. Hewitt, Judith F. Duchan, and Gail A. Bruder (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1995).

20 Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 7.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 11.

23 *Ibid.*, pp. 202–03.

of the novel: ““therefore”, I said, “I am myself, not Neville”, a wonderful discovery.²⁴ Nonetheless, the time span following the characters from childhood to adult life is not depicted as a linear progression, but rather as a contradictory movement also entailing regression and loss:

We saw for a moment laid out among us the body of the complete human being whom we have failed to be, but at the same time, cannot forget. All that we might have been we saw; all that we had missed, and we grudged for a moment the other's claim, as children when the cake is cut, the one cake, the only cake, watch their slice diminishing.²⁵

The reversal is actually anticipated in the opening chapter, where the characters are portrayed as small children showing an unrealistic linguistic competence. This appears to align their complex sensorial experience to language, thus filling that gap between perception and expression typical of childhood.²⁶ In the novel, such a (fictive) ideal state of felicitous matching of words and experience becomes lost in the process of building — via language and its conventions — one's identity ('some crack in the structure — one's identity') and, in this sense, the work appears to trace, while also questioning it, the entire parabola of language acquisition.²⁷

Particularly revealing on the topic is the second chapter, where the children are portrayed as entering school. This entails their gendered separation — the boys in one college and the girls in another — as well as the 'orderly progress' of formal education.²⁸ Differences among the characters acquire here a more distinct shape, in line with Bernard's remark on how the emergence of one's identity implies a process of differentiation. Distinctions had however already surfaced in the first section:

24 Ibid., p. 201.

25 Ibid., p. 231.

26 Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', in Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1985), pp. 61–160 (p. 67): 'Perhaps this is the characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength. Later we add to feelings much that makes them less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete.'

27 Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 94.

28 Ibid., p. 25.

‘I will not conjugate the verb’, said Louis, ‘until Bernard has said it. My father is a banker in Brisbane and I speak with an Australian accent. I will wait and copy Bernard. He is English. They are all English. Susan’s father is a clergyman. Rhoda has no father. Bernard and Neville are the sons of gentlemen. Jinny lives with her grandmother in London.’²⁹

Louis’s sense of estrangement is determined by his different cultural and linguistic background but, as it happens with Rezia in *Mrs Dalloway*, this is not rendered by linguistic marks like the phonetic rendering of his accent, but only via the content of his soliloquy. Rezia’s marginalization comes from her different mother tongue, while Louis embodies, long before the theorization of World Englishes, the socio-cultural stratifications active in each single language: ‘I am now a boy only with a colonial accent.’³⁰ Significantly, Louis welcomes the order and hierarchy of institutional (religious) education, which allows him to feel as part of an indistinct homogeneous group:

‘Now we march, two by two’, said Louis, ‘orderly, processional, into chapel. I like the dimness that falls as we enter the sacred building. I like the orderly progress. We file in; we seat ourselves. We put off our distinctions as we enter. I like it now, when, lurching slightly, but only from his momentum, Dr Crane mounts the pulpit and reads the lesson from a Bible spread on the back of the brass eagle. I rejoice; my heart expands in his bulk, in his authority.’³¹

By contrast, the feeling of melting into a crowd is experienced by Rhoda as a destabilizing deprivation of identity (‘But I am nobody. I have no face. This great company, all dressed in brown serge, has robbed me of my identity’),³² and Neville resents the oppressive authority symbolized by Dr Crane’s sermon:

The brute menaces my liberty [...] when he prays. Unwarmed by imagination, his words fall cold on my head like paving-stones, while the gilt cross heaves on his waistcoat. The words of authority are corrupted by those who speak them.³³

29 Ibid., p. 30

30 Ibid., p. 40.

31 Ibid., pp. 25–26.

32 Ibid., p. 25.

33 Ibid., p. 26.

Bernard's reaction to the sermon is equally negative, and, in line with the character, especially pointed towards the linguistic distortion operated by Dr. Crane:

He sways slightly, mouthing out his tremendous and sonorous words. I love tremendous and sonorous words. But his words are too hearty to be true. Yet he is by this time convinced of their truth.³⁴

The disjunction between language and truth, leading to deceptive and self-deceptive rhetoric, is amplified by the fact that the adjective 'sonorous' was present also, a few lines before, in Neville's soliloquy:

those are laboratories perhaps; and that a library, where I shall explore the exactitude of the Latin language, and step firmly upon the well-laid sentences, and pronounce the explicit, the sonorous hexameters of Virgil, of Lucretius; and chant with a passion that is never obscure or formless the loves of Catullus, reading from a big book, a quarto with margins.³⁵

Formal education is embodied here first by the official places where knowledge is acquired — laboratories, library — and then by the unequivocal language ('never obscure or formless') of the classical heritage preserved and transmitted in beautifully authoritative publications ('a big book, a quarto with margins'). Latin language is portrayed as combining the famous 'granite & rainbow' pair,³⁶ which recurs in Woolf's writing: a language endowed with 'exactitude', solid syntactical structures, and a regular versification in poetry ('hexameters'), all elements capable of providing the dynamic and sensorial elements of experience ('explicit', 'sonorous', 'passion') with a neat form. Nonetheless, the fact that the adjective 'sonorous' is employed in the two instances with opposite implications discloses the novel's focus on the double nature of language: the sonorous quality may render words exact by resorting on the phono-symbolic potentialities of language, but it may also lead language to the opposite, the twist of authenticity

34 Ibid., p. 24.

35 Ibid., p. 23.

36 This is the title of one of Woolf's collection of essays: Virginia Woolf, *Granite & Rainbow* (London: Hogarth, 1960).

via rhetorical emphasis. This is further reinforced by the fact that Virgil is mentioned also by Louis with reference again to his desire to see his physical and linguistic features ('my large nose, my thin lips, my colonial accent') blur into the new identity granted him by education: 'I am then Virgil's companion, and Plato's.'³⁷

In this sense, the path of education travels along *The Waves* in a double-faceted fashion, representing both the building of a structure providing individual personalities with solidity and a cultural background, and, at the opposite, a dangerous blurring of differences, of individualities, as they merge into the formal, institutional, and canonical ordering of language and culture. With reference to the ordering potentiality of language, at the end of the sermon Bernard imagines storing the details of the episode for his future writing, in the paradoxical intent of cataloguing experience in the form of phrases meant to fix the moment in its definitive form — the one that would provide it, once for all, with its exact description:

I note the fact for future reference with many others in my notebook. When I am grown up I shall carry a notebook — a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered. I shall enter my phrases. Under B shall come 'Butterfly powder'. If, in my novel, I describe the sun on the window-sill, I shall look under B and find butterfly powder. That will be useful. 'The tree shades the window with green fingers.' That will be useful.³⁸

Bernard's cataloguing project is however contradicted not only by his flying mind ('But alas! I'm soon distracted'),³⁹ but also by the process he operates in storing the phrases: reference is not direct, but it rather works via metaphorical transferral, connecting 'butterfly powder' to the description of 'the sun on the window-sill'. In search of an impossible exactitude ('there is about both Neville and Louis a precision, an exactitude, that I admire and shall never possess'),⁴⁰ Bernard will be 'eternally engaged' in 'finding some perfect phrase that fits this very moment exactly'.⁴¹ The perfect 'phrase', however, will

37 Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 41.

38 Ibid., p. 27.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., p. 54.

41 Ibid.

always escape him, and he will be instead 'breasting the world with half-finished sentences',⁴² or, as he will describe them in the last chapter, 'unfinishing' phrases.⁴³

In the last chapter, which is entirely devoted to Bernard's soliloquy, the need and desire for a less structured language is made explicit. In the character's perception, the above-mentioned 'well-laid sentences' have become a mystification that orders experience in falsifying 'neat designs of life': 'how tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground!'.⁴⁴ In contrast, Bernard begins to 'long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement',⁴⁵ 'a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, pealing song to replace these flagging, foolish transcripts',⁴⁶ as 'what is the use of painfully elaborating these consecutive sentences when what one needs is nothing consecutive but a bark, a groan?'.⁴⁷ The radical questioning of language unfolding in the last chapter brings to a climax the confrontation between words and experience lying at the core of *The Waves*. Language is disclosed by Bernard as an imperfect tool:

my book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor. [...] What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up some scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl; a cry. When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts, making wild music, false phrases. I have done with phrases.⁴⁸

42 Ibid., p. 55.

43 Ibid., p. 236.

44 Ibid., p. 199.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., p. 209.

47 Ibid., pp. 209–10.

48 Ibid., p. 246.

The structured form of language proves incapable of conveying the unstructured, primordial aspects of experience: the resonances, the echoes, the subtle, nuanced, and inexplicable sensations appear unfit to be categorized via the consecutive and well-structured form of language:

but it is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly and military progress; a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it [...] a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights.⁴⁹

The most symbolic character, in this sense, appears to be Rhoda, with her inability to fix her perception in the stability of language:

Louis writes; Susan writes; Neville writes; Jinny writes; even Bernard has now begun to write. But I cannot write. I see only figures. The others are handing in their answers, one by one. Now it is my turn. But I have no answer. [...] The figures mean nothing now. Meaning has gone. [...] 'There Rhoda sits staring at the blackboard', said Louis, '[...] her mind lodges in those white circles, it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone. They have no meaning for her. She has no answer for them. She has no body as the others have.'⁵⁰

Melting with the others and the world, perpetually traversed by 'the arrows of sensation',⁵¹ Rhoda will ultimately prove unable to sustain perception and, as hinted by the other characters, will commit suicide. Bernard, the writer, will instead finally revert to silence, overwhelmed by the inability of language to catch the fluid and sensorial aspects of life:

but how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red — even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words again? — save that it fades, save that it undergoes a gradual transformation, becomes, even in the course of one short walk, habitual — this scene also.⁵²

49 Ibid., p. 213.

50 Ibid., pp. 15–16.

51 Ibid., p. 200.

52 Ibid., p. 239.

Yet *The Waves* appears to trace not a path of progressive disenchantment towards language, but rather a circular process bringing the characters back to the ideal synergy between mind, senses, and language that was depicted at the beginning. As previously mentioned, the opening of the book is entirely structured on I-centred perception:

‘I see a ring’, said Bernard, ‘hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light.’

‘I see a slab of pale yellow’, said Susan, ‘spreading away until it meets a purple stripe.’

‘I hear a sound’, said Rhoda, ‘cheep, chirp; cheep chirp; going up and down.’

‘I see a globe’, said Neville, ‘hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill.’

‘I see a crimson tassel’, said Jinny, ‘twisted with gold threads.’

‘I hear something stamping’, said Louis. ‘A great beast’s foot is chained. It stamps, and stamps, and stamps.’⁵³

Woolf’s exploration in this work of I-less perception requires her to confront the challenge of registering the ‘unrecorded’, ‘unattended’, ‘unfeeling universe’ via the unavoidably I-centred tool of language.⁵⁴ In line with this, the opening portrays the characters as the overt deictic centres of their utterances. Their linguistic acts convey what may be seen as the origin of the encounter between the subject and language, when no meanings, interpretations, and not even descriptions are attached to the choice of words, which appear to register the sensorial (‘I see’, ‘I hear’) encounter between the subject and the world. This is depicted as an agglomerate of figures (‘a ring’, ‘a loop’, and ‘a globe’), colours (‘yellow’, ‘purple’, ‘crimson’, and ‘gold’), and sounds (‘cheep’, ‘chirp’, and ‘stamping’). As anticipated, subtle shifts in the utterances progressively come to build the narrative setting by adding the spatial and temporal coordinates. In terms of person deixis, an essential shift is operated when the *I-origines* become implicit and language takes the form of pure description:

53 Ibid., p. 5.

54 Ibid., pp. 214, 239, and 234. On this point see, especially, Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

‘The leaves are gathered round the window like pointed ears’,
said Susan.

‘A shadow falls on the path’, said Louis, ‘like an elbow bent’

‘Islands of light are swimming on the grass’, said Rhoda. ‘They
have fallen through the trees.’

‘The birds’ eyes are bright in the tunnels between the leaves’,
said Neville.⁵⁵

Interestingly, when the characters shift from I-centred to object-centred description figurative language is employed, first in the explicit form of similes (‘like pointed ears’ and ‘like an elbow bent’) and then in that of metaphors (‘islands of light are swimming on the grass swimming’).⁵⁶ Shortly later, in the scene that sees the children gathered around a table for a lesson, the words that they are learning undergo the same figurative transformation and are rendered in synaesthetic terms:

‘Those are white words’, said Susan, ‘like stones one picks up
by the seashore.’

‘They flick their tails right and left as I speak them’, said Bernard.
‘They wag their tails; they flick their tails; they move through
the air in flocks, now this way, now that way, moving all to-
gether, now dividing, now coming together.’

‘Those are yellow words, those are fiery words’, said Jinny. ‘I
should like a fiery dress, a yellow dress, a fulvous dress to wear
in the evening.’⁵⁷

In the process of learning, words enter the perception of the children as objects: rather than being mere tools of expression, they are felt by the characters as living elements possessing the same physical qualities as the other objects they are encountering, and are thus equally expressed via figurative language, in an endless self-reflective process. This living

55 Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 5.

56 I have explored the different implications of Woolf’s employment of metaphors and similes in *The Waves* in Teresa Prudente, ‘From “The Aloe” to “Prelude” and from *The Moths* to *The Waves*: Drafts, Revisions and the Process of “Becoming-Imperceptible” in Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield’, *Textus: English Studies in Italy*, 27.3 (2015), pp. 95–118.

57 Woolf, *The Waves*, pp. 14–15.

quality also coincides with the conception of language to which Bernard finally longs to return:

the crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers.⁵⁸

In this sense, *The Waves* represents a poignant and radical rediscovery of any idea of a language capable of expressing with exactitude the subject's relationship with the world. The symbolic parabola of language acquisition traced by the novel discloses Woolf's questioning of the myth of exact referentiality implied in our language learning processes: 'but meanwhile, while we eat, let us turn over these scenes as children turn over the pages of a picture-book and the nurse says, pointing: "That's a cow. That's a boat."⁵⁹ As I will show in the last section, the issue traverses Woolf's writing, building a complex design touching upon essential cruxes in the philosophy as well as in the history of language, and hinting at what I propose to read as Woolf's redefinition of the expression mother tongue and its implications.

'GREEK IS THE ONLY EXPRESSION': REINVENTING THE MOTHER TONGUE

The elements that I have underlined in *The Waves* show how in Woolf there appears to be a constant, pervasive hint at, and struggle for, an ideal universal language — one capable of connecting mind and senses as well as one subject to others. It is in this sense, I argue, that the notion of mother tongue becomes in Woolf rediscovered and, ultimately, redefined in terms that actually do appear to tie the notion of mother/origin and that of tongue/language — only in complex and reversed terms with respect to their traditional interpretation.

To explain this point better, I will widen the angle of that circular design that ties together, in *The Waves*, beginning and end: the first

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 214.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 200.

encounter, in childhood, between language and experience and the longing, in adulthood, to disarticulate language in order to return to that same fluid, osmotic, and mythic coinciding. In order to do so, it is necessary to place *The Waves*' portrayal of language acquisition and (symbolic) dis-acquisition in the context of Woolf's view on the history of language(s), for which her 1925 essay 'On Not Knowing Greek' proves revealing. The lack of knowledge of ancient Greek to which Woolf points in the title is in fact not a lack derived from not knowing the language, but rather the perpetual separateness we experience from a language and culture we will never be able completely to appropriate:

we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition.⁶⁰

Woolf's emphasis on the fact that Greek literature represents impersonal literature discloses the strong nexus between the essay and *The Waves*, or, better, once again clarifies how the 1931 novel condensed the many intricate directions of her thinking and experimentations.⁶¹ Greek literature is for Woolf an 'imaginative literature, where characters speak for themselves and the author has no part, the need of that voice is making itself felt.'⁶² This quality derives for Woolf from the language itself and, more specifically, from the feeling of distance that we, modern readers, experience and that mirrors our distance from *the origin*, the (mythical) point in time when things were experienced for the first time:

a fragment of their speech broken off would, we feel, colour oceans and oceans of the respectable drama. Here we meet them before their emotions have been worn into uniformity. Here we listen to the nightingale whose song echoes through English literature singing in her own Greek tongue.⁶³

60 Virginia Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek', in *Collected Essays*, 4 vols (London: Hogarth, 1966–67), 1 (1966), pp. 1–13 (p. 1).

61 *Ibid.*, p. 1.

62 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

As I have underlined in *The Waves*, the mythical origin coincides for Woolf with the initial true encounter between the subject, experience, and language, before habits, repetition, conventions come to order and uniform experience and its expression: 'those habitual currents in which after a certain time experience forms in the mind, so that one repeats words without being aware any longer who originally spoke them.'⁶⁴ In Woolf these hints at an idealized initial coinciding between words and things, an oblique and revisited version of the pre-Babelian myth, prove to coalesce with a multitude of further elements, among which are those coming from the philosophy of language contemporary to her, as well as from the tradition of Romantic poetry. As Ann Banfield has singled out,⁶⁵ Woolf's treatment of language appears to be strongly influenced by Bertrand Russell's theory of descriptions, which represented a fundamental step in the logico-philosophical reflection on language that departed from Frege and culminated in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. But Woolf's focus on the opposition between the conventional and the genuine quality of language also seems to incorporate the redefinition of language proposed by Romantic poets and, above all, by S. T. Coleridge.

The living quality of words underlined by Woolf in *The Waves* is stressed by Coleridge in his *Aids to Reflection*:

Horne Tooke entitled his celebrated work, *Ἐπεα πτερόεντα*, winged words: or language, not only the vehicle of thought but the wheels. With my convictions and views, for ἔπεα I should substitute λόγοι, that is, words select and determinate, and for πτερόεντα ζῶοντες, that is, living words.⁶⁶

For Woolf, words cannot be fixed, pinned down, 'because the truth they try to catch is many-sided, and they convey it by being themselves many-sided, flashing this way, then that.'⁶⁷ Yet words are also solid,

64 Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 233.

65 Banfield, *The Phantom Table*.

66 Samuel T. Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, in *The Complete Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge with an Introductory Essay upon his Philosophical and Theological Opinions*, ed. by William Greenough Thayer Shedd, 7 vols (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853–54), 1 (1953), p. 114.

67 Virginia Woolf, 'Craftsmanship', in *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life: Selected Essays*, 2 vols (London: Penguin, 1993), II, pp. 137–43 (p. 143).

both for Coleridge ('not only the vehicle of thoughts but the wheels') and for Woolf:

they are the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things [...] And how do they live in the mind? Various and strangely, much as human beings live, by ranging hither and thither, by falling in love, and mating together.⁶⁸

As Woolf writes in 'The Man at the Gate' (1940), the 'labyrinth of what we call Coleridge' is characterized by a verbal abundance that ignites infinite multiplications ('the innumerable, the mutable, the atmospheric') and that becomes however ultimately distilled in poems 'in which every word is exact and every image as clear as crystal'.⁶⁹

There is a striking resemblance between the words employed by Woolf to convey Coleridge's language and the ones we find in *The Waves*. At the end of the novel, the crystal comes to embody life itself ('the crystal, the globe of life'),⁷⁰ but the image rapidly transforms into that of a malleable nucleus that loses its hard quality to become porous and expand to the bursting point ('has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst').⁷¹ Thus the hard, stable, multifaceted crystal reverses back to the globe, the image present at the beginning of the novel: "I see a globe", said Neville, "hanging down in a drop against the enormous flanks of some hill."⁷² The globe is however in its turn a transformation of the very first image opening *The Waves*: "I see a ring", said Bernard, "hanging above me. It quivers and hangs in a loop of light."⁷³ In the last part of the novel, even the solidity of the globe is in fact revealed to be a convention, the epistemological mystification we build in order to understand and communicate our experience:

let us again pretend that life is a solid substance, shaped like a globe, which we turn about in our fingers. Let us pretend that we can make out a plain and logical story, so that when one

68 Ibid., pp. 141–42.

69 Virginia Woolf, 'The Man at the Gate', in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (New York: Harcourt, 1974), pp. 104–10 (pp. 104 and 110).

70 Woolf, *The Waves*, p. 214.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid., p. 5.

73 Ibid.

matter is despatched — love for instance — we go on, in an orderly manner, to the next.⁷⁴

What recurs in the novel as an alternative to the globe is the thinner and more stylized figure of the ring:

that is, I am fiercer and stronger than you are, yet the apparition that appears above ground after ages of nonentity will be spent in terror lest you should laugh at me, in veerings with the wind against the soot storms, in efforts to make a steel ring of clear poetry that shall connect the gulls and the women with bad teeth, the church spire and the bobbing billycock hats as I see them when I take my luncheon and prop my poet — is it Lucretius? — against a cruet and the gravy-splashed bill of fare.⁷⁵

Significantly, it is here Louis — the character whose socio-linguistic estrangement we have mentioned — that dreams of the ‘steel ring of poetry’ capable of holding together the several contradictory elements of human experience. Reference is again to the heritage of the classics, Lucretius, and a hint of the above-mentioned ‘sonorous’ quality of Latin language is rendered via the polyptoton playing on the plosive sound (‘the apparition that appears’). The ‘steel ring of clear poetry’ — not a globe but a thin, resistant structure encapsulating a portion of emptiness⁷⁶ — appears however to result precisely from the opposite of rhetorical excess, for it stems from that process of depurating and distilling that brings us back to Coleridge and Greek (‘words select and determinate’).⁷⁷

Within the wider context of the Romantic poets who redefined language by rejecting rhetorical artifice insofar as it was employed ex-

74 Ibid., p. 210.

75 Ibid., p. 105.

76 I have explored the interplay between ecstasy and emptiness in Teresa Prudente, *A Specially Tender Piece of Eternity: Virginia Woolf and the Experience of Time* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2009), pp. 45–67.

77 Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, p. 114. For this process in Woolf see especially *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, p. 209: ‘The idea has come to me that what I want now to do is to saturate every atom. I mean to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes.’

clusively ‘as a mechanical device of style’,⁷⁸ Coleridge holds a special position in virtue of the ample angle of his reflections. Dynamically engaging with the empiricist and idealist philosophical traditions, Coleridge’s positions on language represent a complex and multifaceted stage in the evolution of the philosophy of language.⁷⁹ The poet appears to signal a way out from the Lockean affirmation of the arbitrariness of language not so much by insisting on a lost mythical stage of coincidence between words and things but, on the contrary, through a diachronic perspective unfolding the history of words — the multidirectional paths of significance that they undertake in time. Thus, Coleridge’s method constantly refers back to the etymology of words in order to seek their origin: the first encounter between words and experience, which does not, however, point to a static coincidence of signifier and signified, but rather — as it happens at the beginning of *The Waves* — to the process allowing things to come into existence by being named:

The name of a thing, in the original sense of the word name (*nomen, νοῦμενον, τὸ intelligibile, id quod intelligitur*), expresses that which is *understood* in an appearance, that which we place (or make to *stand*) *under* it, as the condition of its real existence, and in proof that it is not an accident of the senses, or affection of the individual, not a phantom or apparition [...]. Thus, in all instances, it is words, names, or, if images, yet images used as words or names, that are the only and exclusive subjects of understanding. In no instance do we understand a thing in itself; but only the name to which it is referred.⁸⁰

Although Coleridge’s apparent one name-one thing association may seem the opposite of Woolf’s emphasis on the ever-moving quality of words, the two perspectives actually converge into the project of freeing language from the conventions that have grown about words

78 William Wordsworth, ‘Preface (to the Second Edition)’, in William Wordsworth and Samuel T. Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, ed. by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 95–116 (p. 100).

79 See William Keach, ‘Romanticism and Language’, in *The Cambridge Companion to British Romanticism*, ed. by Stuart Curran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 95–118.

80 Coleridge, *Aids to Reflection*, pp. 248–51.

and of reviving their ever-living, generative power. Woolf underlines how words tend progressively to lose their meaning as

words, English words, are full of echoes, of memories, of associations — naturally. They have been out and about, on people's lips, in their houses, in the streets, in the fields for so many centuries. And that is one of the chief difficulties in writing them today — that they are so stored with meanings, with memories, that they have contracted so many famous marriages.⁸¹

Woolf's idea is then to free words from established associations and to bring them back to life by allowing them to live not in dictionaries, but 'in that deep, dark and only fitfully illuminated cavern in which they live — the mind',⁸² so as to restage, every time, that genuine encounter between the mind, experience, and language. In this sense, the exactness to which Woolf refers both in *The Waves* and in her essay on Coleridge may actually coincide with the opposite of the idea of one single, static, codified language, in the same way Coleridge insisted on the infinite variations of language.⁸³ In 'Craftsmanship', the emphasis is again on the idea of reversing back to an extraverbal system of communication, and, especially, on the power of suggestion of words: the set of associations, memories, images that they suggest as they 'combine unconsciously together'.⁸⁴ For Woolf, each word contains 'so many sunken meanings', and it is necessary 'to allow the sunken meanings to remain sunken, suggested, not stated'.⁸⁵ In this sense, an exact language would need to retain that power of suggestion, similar to how the 'buzz of words', the 'hypnotic fume' of Coleridge's language, ultimately results into the clear crystal of his poetry where 'meaning dwindles and fades to a wisp on the mind's horizon'.⁸⁶

81 Woolf, 'Craftsmanship', pp. 140–41.

82 Ibid., p. 142.

83 Samuel T. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1847), p. 170: 'Every man's language varies according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth or quickness of his feelings. Every man's language has, first, its individual peculiarities; secondly, the properties common to his class; and thirdly, words and phrases of universal use.'

84 Woolf, 'Craftsmanship', p. 140

85 Ibid.

86 Woolf, 'The Man at the Gate', pp. 104, 110, and 106.

Reference to Greek represents a powerful conjunction between Woolf's and Coleridge's conceptions of language, for these conceptions both focus on that original power of words that both writers meant to reactivate. More importantly, and crucial to our topic, is the fact that the *fragmented* nature of our reappropriation of that original state appears to be the element that renders ancient Greek a language capable of reactivating the potentialities of words:

we cannot pick up infallibly one by one all those minute signals by which a phrase is made to hint, to turn, to live. Nevertheless, it is the language that has us most in bondage; the desire for that which perpetually lures us back.⁸⁷

It is thus the separateness, the lack, the perpetual desire for what we fail to appropriate that may reignite 'sunken' potentialities by leading us far from the comfort and the confidence provided us by the language we feel we possess — our native language. Significantly, it is precisely this power that equates, for Woolf, to poetry:

to understand him [Aeschylus] it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. It is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words which Shakespeare also asks of us. For words, when opposed to such a blast of meaning, must give out, must be blown astray, and only by collecting in companies convey the meaning which each one separately is too weak to express. Connecting them in a rapid flight of the mind we know instantly and instinctively what they mean, but could not decant that meaning afresh into any other words. There is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means. [...] The meaning is just on the far side of language. It is the meaning which in moments of astonishing excitement and stress we perceive in our minds without words.⁸⁸

As meaning is, for Woolf, 'on the far side of language' it is there, to unknown lands, that one needs to travel to experience the perpetual deferral of meaning that reactivates the endless potentialities of words: 'Chief among these sources of glamour and perhaps misunderstanding

87 Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek', p. 11.

88 Ibid., p. 7.

is the language. We can never hope to get the whole fling of a sentence in Greek as we do in English.⁸⁹

Yet Greek is obviously for Woolf, as it was for Coleridge, not just a foreign language, but one of the distant mothers of their mother tongue — a point of origin to which the English language is connected via the indirect lineage of Latin and the Romance languages. It is perhaps in this sense that for Woolf Greek represents what her (direct) mother tongue lacks: ‘the compactness of the expression’ (‘Shelley takes twenty-one words in English to translate thirteen words of Greek’),⁹⁰ offering words that are ‘so clear, so hard, so intense, that to speak plainly yet fittingly without blurring the outline or clouding the depths, Greek is the only expression.’⁹¹

In this sense, Woolf’s notion of mother tongue does speak of that sense of identity discussed at the beginning of this essay: the building of our individualities on the maternal/linguistic lineage that defines us. Nonetheless, instead of being a datum, that heritage is placed by Woolf into a dynamic process that recombines native and non-native language, real/individual and imagined/universal identities. Woolf’s quest seems to be pointed towards debunking all the elements that constrain language into homogeneity: habits, as we have seen, but also the falsifying idea of a culturally homogeneous language:

royal words mate with commoners. English words marry
French words, German words, Indian words, negro words, if
they have a fancy. Indeed, the less we inquire into the dear
Mother English the better it will be for that lady’s reputation.⁹²

Such emphasis on the mixed nature of languages allows Woolf to question a monolithic and codified conception of language and to embark instead on the search for a *different* universal, all-encompassing, form of expression. The common ground is, for Woolf, not a common culture or language — one providing us with the false belief that we are able to understand each other as speakers of the same mother tongue — but rather a system of communication cutting across differences —

89 Ibid., p. 11.

90 Ibid.

91 Ibid.

92 Woolf, ‘Craftsmanship’, p. 142.

of culture, language, class, gender — to reach and express the shared experience of the encounter between the world and the mind. Woolf's perpetual quest for a universal, fictive, and ideal language of the mind entails constant tension between, on the one hand, her awareness of the essentially private, subjective, culture-bound, and I-centred quality of language, and, on the other, the challenge to overcome these boundaries to reach a universal, I-less form of expression. The language of the mind thus becomes a dreamed language, an ideal whose origins may be reinvented via a reappropriation of the past where the foreign, rather than the familiar, becomes the matrix:

In spite of the labour and the difficulty it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there. These are the originals, Chaucer's the varieties of the human species.⁹³

Significantly, to go back to the connection between mother and tongue, a similar process seems to apply for Woolf to her own origins, in the way her parents and her childhood are transfigured and reinvented in the 'elegy' of *To the Lighthouse*:⁹⁴

I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse*, laid them in my mind. And now he comes back sometimes, but differently. (I believe this is true — that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthy; & writing of them was a necessary act).⁹⁵

The figures of her parents and the memory of her childhood had to become unreal, to lose the reality of what was familiar, so as to acquire a different, universal, even impersonal reality⁹⁶ — similar to how, according to Woolf, in Greek poetry 'we are drawn to steep ourselves

93 Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek', p. 4.

94 *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, p. 34: 'I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel." [...] But what? Elegy?.'

95 *Ibid.*, III, p. 208. See also Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', pp. 80–81: 'Until I was in the forties — I could settle the date by seeing when I wrote *To the Lighthouse* [...] the presence of my mother obsessed me. [...] I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother.'

96 See also, on the composition of *The Waves*, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, III, p. 236: 'this shall be Childhood; but it must not be *my* childhood; & boats and the pond; the sense of children; unreality; things oddly proportioned.'

in what, perhaps, is only an image of the reality, not the reality itself, a summer's day imagined in the heart of a northern winter.⁹⁷

The image of reality resulting from the transfiguration implied in the artistic process reveals how for Woolf the true common language, the one attempting to express the core of our shared human experience, is actually the language of imagination: literary language, or, more widely, the language of artistic forms. The shared literary/artistic heritage can provide us with the sense of an alternative collective identity cutting across transcultural and translinguistic differences, although, as I have shown with reference to the character of Louis, this idea may again lead to dangerous consequences, in terms not only of levelling individualities but also of establishing sociocultural hegemonic classes. The shared heritage of literary imagination can in its turn become a discriminating tool dividing societies, this time not in terms of national identities but rather on the basis of socio-economic (and, in Woolf's times, also gendered) power.⁹⁸ In this sense, as it happens in *The Waves*, even the 'well-laid sentences [...] never obscure or formless' of the classical past may need to lose their too solid, monolithic, explicit configuration: 'how tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground!'⁹⁹ In Woolf the quest for a universal language of the mind seems never to be disjoint from a constant emphasis on preserving differences so as to avoid a mystifying homogeneity. As mentioned, the stress is on the sense of lack and distance revealed by differences and by impossible appropriations, as Woolf underlines also in her point regarding the impossible equivalence in translation.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the dreamed and ideal universal language of imagination constantly needs to undergo processes of refinement so as to become light, quick, dynamic, as in Coleridge's idea of words as wheels: 'we must shape our words till they

97 Woolf, 'On Not Knowing Greek', p. 11.

98 It is worth recalling Woolf's own experience of not accessing the college education that her brothers benefitted from. On Woolf's self-education to the Latin and Greek classics see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 142–44.

99 Woolf, *The Waves*, pp. 23 and 199.

100 Besides 'On Not Knowing Greek' see Virginia Woolf, 'The Russian Point of View', in *Collected Essays*, 1, pp. 238–46. On Woolf and translation, see Emily Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Migrations of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

are the thinnest integuments of our thoughts.’¹⁰¹ Ancient Greek thus becomes for Woolf the ideal language, in the fashion of an alternative, reinvented, and forever-lost mother tongue: ‘spare and bare as it is no language can move more quickly, dancing, shaking, all alive, but controlled.’¹⁰² In this sense, Woolf’s reinvention of the idea of mother tongue connects to Lepschy’s point that ‘no one is a native speaker of the language of poetry’: it is a language to which we are bound to remain forever separated, and that we simultaneously feel as familiar and foreign, in those dynamics between real and ideal, between the exactness and the perpetual deferral of meaning, that I have singled out in *The Waves*.

101 Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (London: Vintage, 1992), p. 111.

102 Woolf, ‘On Not Knowing Greek’, p. 11.

Teresa Prudente, 'The Shuffling of Feet on the Pavement: Virginia Woolf on Un-Learning the Mother Tongue', in *Untying the Mother Tongue*, ed. by Antonio Castore and Federico Dal Bo, *Cultural Inquiry*, 26 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2023), pp. 127–53 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-26_6>

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