A SEARCH FOR LITERARINESS BASED ON THE CRITICAL RECEPTION OF VIRGINIA WOOLF’S MRS DALLOWAY

By

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Dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree MASTER OF ARTS (ENGLISH) in the Faculty of Humanities, University of Johannesburg.

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Date: January 2012
# Contents

Affidavit iii

Abstract iv

Acknowledgments v

Introduction 1

Chapter 1: The Formalist Search for Literariness 13

Chapter 2: Defamiliarization in *Mrs Dalloway* 47

Chapter 3: Critics on Woolf: Questions of Form, Language and Defamiliarization 82

Conclusion 113

Works Cited 130
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Abstract

This dissertation begins by examining the central tenets of Russian Formalism and American New Criticism. Although it is a term coined by the Russian Formalists, both these schools of thought, in their own ways, are concerned with literariness – that is, that which distinguishes the literary work from other forms of writing. This study traces the ways in which these two critical movements account for the specifically literary language that they claim characterises literary works. Based on the principles derived from these two schools I analyse aspects of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* and demonstrate that defamiliarization is at work on various levels of this novel. Thereafter, I examine criticism pertaining to Woolf and illustrate that there are numerous illuminating parallels that can be drawn between recent critics’ studies on Woolf and the principles of the formalists. In particular, I attempt to show that the principle of estranged form continues to inform our critical thought about Woolf’s works. I focus primarily on the arguments posited in two critical studies: Edward Bishop’s *Virginia Woolf* (1991) and Oddvar Holmesland’s *Form as Compensation for Life: Fictive Patterns in Virginia Woolf’s Novels* (1998). These studies were selected because they centre on questions of language and form and, as such, coincide in a number of interesting ways with the tenets of formalism.

Keywords: literariness; Russian formalism; New Criticism; defamiliarization; form; Shklovsky; Brooks; Woolf
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Rory Ryan, who asked me when I was fresh out of Honours – “What is literature? What is it that we study?” – I still don’t have an answer to your question, but the search for an answer has added many intriguing questions to this one. Thank you for encouraging me to explore these ideas and for your patience throughout this dissertation.

I would also like to thank the members of the English Department at the University of Johannesburg. In particular, Professor Karen Scherzinger, who was always willing to read over my work and discuss ideas with me; your comments have helped make me a better writer. I also want to thank Dalene Labuschagne and Bridget Grogan for proofreading some of my chapters and cheering me on. Lastly, I would like to thank Professor Craig MacKenzie, who never tires from trying to explain to me the proper use of the semi-colon.

I must also express my gratitude to the University of Johannesburg for granting me a New Generation Scholarship.

Last, but most importantly, I want to thank my family and friends for never wavering in their support throughout this trying time. I would like to thank my parents for their constant encouragement and my brother, for supporting me and forcing me to have fun occasionally, despite my reluctance. To Rustin, thank you for listening to me rant (and joining in), for assuring me that I am capable, and for positive reinforcement in the form of Kinder Joy eggs. To my dear friend Karen, I am sure I would have abandoned this project if it weren’t for your constant cheerful camaraderie. To Mila, Colleen and Minesh, thank you so much for your continuous cheerleading and timely proofreading. I also have to express my thanks to my friend Werner, who so often watched movies late into the night, so I wouldn’t have to stay up alone.
Introduction

In his book *How to Read a Poem* (2007), Terry Eagleton remarks that “Literary critics live in a permanent state of dread – a fear that one day some minor clerk in a government office, idly turning over a document, will stumble upon the embarrassing truth that we are actually paid for reading poems and novels” (2007: 22). Eagleton’s humorous remark reveals deeper concerns about the public’s perception regarding the relevance and value of a discipline such as literary studies. In recent years, a number of countries have decreased funding for the humanities substantially (Perloff 2011: 153). These cutbacks reflect the growing perception that disciplines within the humanities, particularly disciplines such as English, are less valuable than other areas of knowledge, such as science and economics (155). This perception is compounded by the lack of agreement between members of English departments concerning the basic axioms of the discipline: what our object of study is and how we attend to it. This issue was addressed at the nineteenth annual Alabama Symposium on English and American literature, where critics such as Gerald Graff, Stanley Fish and George Garrett, to name a few, debated the disciplinary status of English. James Raymond, editor of *English as a Discipline: Or, is there a Plot in this Play?* (1996), the collection of papers given at this symposium, asserts that English as a discipline “is a collection of disparate activities with multiple objects of inquiry, vaguely articulated methodologies, and diverse notions of proof” (1996: 1).

The symposium highlighted the debate about whether the boundaries that define English as a discipline should be narrowed, and whether the use of certain critical approaches that stray into related disciplines within the humanities should be curtailed. Many critics welcomed the dissolution of disciplinary boundaries and argued that to limit “English to the study of aesthetic effects, to deprive it of attention to social and political consequences, is to make it, tautologically, less consequential” (Raymond 1996: 6). Yet for some, like Fish, this view represents the “English department’s death wish” (6). Fish maintains that without the necessary exclusions that define a discipline as such, “it is hard to see what you are doing and why you should consider doing it” (1996: 172).

Gerald Graff adopts a divergent perspective in his paper “Is there a Conversation in this Curriculum? Or, Coherence without Disciplinarity” (1996). He observes that this debate
concerning the disciplinary margins of English is unlikely ever to be resolved; indeed, he claims he is not troubled in the least by the fact that literary studies is not a coherently defined discipline (1996: 11). His concern is, rather, “whether English studies is conceptually coherent” (11) from students’ perspectives. Graff fears that the diverse methods of inquiry and the multiple theoretical approaches applied within literary studies leave the student in the position of having to draw his/her own connections between these disparate modes of analysis (20). He proposes that, instead of trying to narrow the scholarly purview of literary studies, students should be exposed to these debates and encouraged to reflect on the implications of the different critical approaches that can be applied to the study of literature. According to Graff “potential coherence lies precisely in the conversations between different and conflicting languages of justification and practices” (12). He has elsewhere described this position as “teaching the debate itself” (Graff 1995: xvi).

Although I disagree with Graff’s insouciant attitude regarding the current disciplinary status of English, I find his proposal – that the foregrounding of such critical debates would “enable students and other nonacademics to begin decoding and mapping the academy’s mysterious signals” (1996: 22) – persuasive. Graff’s proposition has, however, been criticized from various perspectives. Rory Ryan, in his article “Literary Studies, Disciplinarity and Symbolic Anthropology” (2000), compares Graff to a modern day Don Quixote, “trying to disarm the problem of disciplinarity with gallant intentions and insufficient weaponry” (2000: 72). Ryan is unconvinced by Graff’s claim that “a site for staging conversations or conflicts will provide some sort of centre which, if not satisfying the criteria for disciplinarity, will nevertheless constitute a place for literary studies” (72). This “conflictual model”, Ryan contends, is “itself a sadly pathetic substitute for disciplinarity” and “does not adequately account for activity in literary studies” (72).

Josephine Guy and Ian Small similarly consider the status of English as a discipline in universities in Politics and Value in English Studies: A Discipline in Crisis? (1993).¹ They

¹ Guy and Small have also criticized Graff’s position. They argue that Graff pays attention to the institutional, rather than epistemological problems associated with the disciplinary status of English studies. Graff, for example, faults universities for stifling the potential that inheres in critical conversations “between different and conflicting languages of justification and practices” (Graff 1996: 12). He claims that within tertiary institutions, curricular disputes have been “resolved by appeasing opposing factions with a portion of the curricular turf and then keeping them as separate as possible so they cannot bicker” (19). However, according to Guy and Small, such arguments place “the institutional cart before the intellectual horse” (1993: 22).
evaluate whether literary studies complies with the necessary criteria which “distinguish disciplines of knowledge from bodies of knowledge” (1993: 156). The criteria encompass “a clearly defined object of study, a set of specialist practices appropriate to explaining it, a theory (or theories) of those practices, and ways of evaluating theories” (156). Their study attempts to locate the controversy over English studies “within the context of disciplinary knowledge in general” (1993: 1). In particular, they are concerned that the multiplicity of theoretical perspectives permitted within the realm of literary studies threatens its continued existence as a distinct discipline. Guy and Small raise the significant point that in other disciplines when new theoretical paradigms are introduced these usually usurp the positions of older ones. Yet this is not the case with literary studies: our borrowing from other disciplines has “led to a simple accumulation of theories rather than to the supersession of one by another” (28). Interestingly, Guy and Small note that few “literary critics have questioned such a situation; fewer still seem aware that it might produce difficulties” (28).

Graff defends literary studies’ absorption of a wide array of theoretical approaches, describing it as “a source of vitality” that reflects the “emergence of the contemporary multiversity” (1996: 19). However, Ryan concurs with Guy and Small (and Fish) that this pluralism may eventually lead to the dissolution of English departments as we know them. As Ryan observes, “once it becomes generally and institutionally known that the disciplinary status of literary studies has irrevocably disintegrated, institutional adjustments might well occur which acknowledge this disintegration” (2000: 73).

These disputes concerning the disciplinary status of English have by no means been resolved, as recent titles such as Marjorie Perloff’s “The Decay of a Discipline: Reflections on the English Department Today” (2011) and Robert Scholes’s The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline (1998) indicate. Although this dissertation does not deal with the arguments posited in these studies, they are relevant to the theoretical paradigm of my study, as my project begins by examining the principles of two schools of thought that were, in the first decades of the previous century, similarly concerned with the contend that “specialization within disciplines of knowledge tends to occur at precisely the point when theoretical conflicts have proved themselves incapable of resolution at a theoretical level: specialization does not in itself cause the impasse” (22).
establishment of literary studies as a distinct and legitimate discipline – I refer, of course, to Russian Formalism and the New Criticism.

The Russian Formalists and the New Critics desired to establish literary studies as a precise field of study, with a clearly defined object of study and specific methodological practices suitable to its explication. For the Russian Formalists, the “methodological confusion” that characterised Russian literary scholarship at the turn of the last century (Erlich 1973: 627) meant that it could not properly be called a discipline. The New Critics similarly rejected the diverse and eclectic modes of scholarship practised by the critical schools that preceded them (Wellek 1978: 614). Although it is a term coined by the Russian Formalists, both these schools of thought, in their own ways, are concerned with literariness – that is, the question of what distinguishes the literary work from other forms of writing. This study arose out of a desire to reinspect the principles that surround this critical concept – bearing in mind the ways in which these principles have been criticised subsequent to the decline of formalism.²

This dissertation does not make a case for a return to the theories and methods espoused by these two critical movements; instead, it examines, in part, the principles related to the concept of literariness and attempts to see whether, despite the recent shift away from purely intrinsic modes of criticism, this concept retains a measure of validity and applicability in literary critical inquiry. I begin by examining the central tenets of Russian Formalism and New Criticism in my first chapter. Thereafter, drawing on the principles that derive from the concept of literariness, I analyse an example of what is regarded widely as ‘good’ literature and attempt to locate these principles within the chosen literary text. I have selected to scrutinize Virginia Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway for this purpose. In addition to my own close reading of Mrs Dalloway, I explore criticism pertaining to Woolf in an endeavour to establish whether the aspects of her works that recent critics deem noteworthy correspond in any significant way with the principles that stem from the concept of literariness.

² At times I refer to the ‘formalists’ or ‘formalism’ and include both the New Critics and the Russian Formalists in this term. This is not to suggest that there are not substantial differences between these two groups; I only use this term when discussing ideas that pertain to both groups. I am also aware of the objections that have been raised against the description of New Criticism as formalism (Graff 1979: 569 & Wellek 1978: 618). When I use this term it is merely for ease of expression.
In chapter one, I explore the theories of the New Critics and the Russian Formalists and posit that the most significant similarity between these two schools of thought is their belief that the language used in literary works differs substantially from language used for practical purposes of communication. For the Russian Formalists, literary language is distorted language: it transgresses the rules that govern practical modes of discourse and compels us to experience the texture and sensuousness of the linguistic sign, not to see it merely as an instrument for communication. They contend that in practical uses of language the emphasis is predominantly on the message, with the result that we routinely think of language as a transparent medium. In literary works, this dynamic is subverted: the language consistently draws attention to itself; the emphasis is on the medium of expression and not only the message. This view of literary language is underpinned by Viktor Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization. Shklovsky asserts that the function of literature, and of art in general, is to rouse the reader from habitual modes of perception by taking objects out of their familiar contexts and presenting them in new and unexpected ways, thereby allowing the reader to perceive objects as if for the first time (Shklovsky 1916: 16). Similarly, poetic language’s consistent foregrounding of the medium of expression itself forces us to reconsider our conventional perceptions of language.

The New Critics also conceive of literary language as a distinct form of language usage; for them, poetic language is characterised by its ambiguous and paradoxical nature. It is because poetic language is essentially ambiguous and paradoxical that the New Critics are so fervently opposed to paraphrase: to paraphrase a work of literature is to attempt to make literal what is expressed in figurative terms precisely because the meaning that is gestured toward can only be approached in an approximate way. The essential ambiguity of literature is also generated by its connotative power; in literary works, words modify each other and potential meanings proliferate. In ordinary speech, by contrast, words are used in such a way as to reduce ambiguity and promote effective communication. The New Critics emphasise (as do the Russian Formalists) the inextricable nature of form and content. They argue that once an idea is expressed in a certain form, that idea cannot simply be extracted and the form discarded. According to the formalists, the intrinsic properties of the text should determine the critic’s task; this involves examining the language used, the structural relations in the work and the techniques used to give a specific form to the ideas expressed.
Both the New Critics and the Russian Formalists posited their theories concerning literary language as universal and enduringly valid principles. This is an aspect of their theorizing that has received considerable commentary. Subsequent to the decline in popularity of these critical movements, literary theorists have persuasively argued that the formalist principles were informed by particular biases. Pavel Medvedev and Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, demonstrate in their critique of formalism, *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship* (1978), that the poetic movement of Russian futurism exerted a profound influence on the theories propounded by the Russian Formalists, going so far as to say that the futurists provided practical examples and “the formalists were their theoreticians” (1978: 59). According to Medvedev and Bakhtin, the close connection between futurism and Russian Formalism narrowed the “scholarly purview of formalism in the highest degree by providing it with a system of biases for the selection of only certain of the phenomena of literary life” (64). In other words, Medvedev and Bakhtin argue that the Russian Formalists’ conception of poetic language was determined in advance and when they attended to the poetic construction they “had to illustrate the theory of poetic language they had already developed” (78).

Similarly, Gerald Graff argues in his essay “New Criticism Once More” (1979) that in the formation of their theories, the New Critics took the “high priory road” (1979: 574). Graff asserts that by claiming all poems make use of the “language of paradox”, the New Critics in effect “knew the meanings of poems” before they examined them (574). This argument derives from R. S. Crane’s critique of New Criticism. Crane once asked of the New Critics how they knew that poetry consists “of the language of paradox” (574). He argued that their distinction between literary language and practical forms of language stems from their belief that industrial society increasingly encroaches upon our humanity. The alienation from nature and more organic modes of living that the New Critics perceive in the modern world caused them to cast poetic language in opposition to scientific language (or language

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3 According to Edward Wasiolek, the Russian Formalists and the Russian Futurists were united in their revolt “against the debasing of language by the civic and utilitarian view of language” (1972: 370). Futurist poetry encourages a celebration of the textures and sounds of verse independent of its semantic meaning (370). Their experiments with “pure sound” involve the foregrounding of the sensory aspects of the word and the suppression of its meaning (370). Often writing nonsensical verse, the Futurists force the reader to attend to the acoustical aspects of language – in these compositions “only the shadow of meaning hover[s] in the linguistic background” (370).
with practical use) and to invest the former with all the opposite qualities of the latter (574).
For Crane, this conception of literary language is not necessarily wrong, but arises from “a
deductive scheme formulated in advance” rather than “genuine inquiry into the subject”
(574).

The formalists have also been criticised for constructing a false dichotomy by polarizing
poetic and prosaic forms of language: not all literary works transgress the conventions of
practical discourse in order to foreground its linguistic construction; similarly, when
language is used for practical purposes it may simultaneously employ words in a non-
referential way. Jacques Derrida, for example, stated in an interview that

We know that there is no such thing as what they called twenty or forty years ago
‘literariness’, that is, an essence of the literary, as if language could be literary in itself,
intrinsically – there is no such thing. The same sentence, the same page, may belong to
literature in a given context and to everyday life or newspapers in a different context.

(Derrida in Payne and Schad 2004: 29, original emphasis)

Derrida is of course right that there is no such thing as “an essence of the literary”. However, the formalists acknowledge that the distinction between poetic and practical uses
of language is not rigid. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, for example, observe that
the speech of an

ordinary citizen in an ordinary day conveys many things, attitudes, feeling, and
interpretations, that fall outside of these [practical] restrictions. These things, though they
fill a large part of the speech of that ordinary citizen, are never stated very clearly or
precisely by him. The specialization of speech which we find in poetry aims at clarity and
precision of statement in these matters.

(Brooks and Warren 1967: 5)

Similarly, Roman Jakobson recognises that newspaper articles, casual conversations,
advertisements, etc, “often use words in and for themselves, not merely as a referential
device” (Jakobson 1978: 6). Although both the New Critics and the Russian Formalists
occasionally draw too sharp a distinction between poetic and practical modes of discourse –
exaggerating the specificity of literary language – where their efforts are more strenuous
than intellectually credible, one has to bear in mind the historical circumstances during
which such distinctions were formulated. This neat distinction is largely a result of their
shared desire to isolate the object of literary studies in an attempt to ensure the discipline’s
legitimacy. Focusing primarily on the intrinsic properties of the text, these two schools of thought attempted to liberate the literary work from modes of scholarship that viewed it solely as a means through which to access the author’s psyche or for its significance as a social or historical artifact. As René Wellek reminds us in his essay “The New Criticism: Pro and Contra” (1978), before the advent of intrinsic forms of criticism, in a way that is perhaps inconceivable to students of literature today, literary studies focused almost entirely on “philological and historical” modes of scholarship, paying very little attention to the intrinsic properties of the text (1978: 614).

It is evident that the distinction between poetic and prosaic uses of language is not fixed; it shifts, and, as such, ultimately precludes us from identifying literature solely on this basis. Nonetheless, this concept retains a measure of tenability, for, as Eagleton remarks, if someone whispers to you, “Thou still unravished bride of quietness” (1985: 2), you are immediately aware that you are “in the presence of the literary” (2). The self-conscious nature of the language usage – the “disproportion between the signifiers and the signifieds” (2) – distinguishes this utterance from more practical linguistic constructions, such as ‘would you like a coffee?’. Although literariness is not an enduringly valid property that can be located within all literary texts, the formalists’ initial demarcation of literary language, and their description of the figures of speech that characterise this language, remain a valuable perspective from which to approach the text. In my undergraduate years, we were taught to focus on an explication of the specifically literary techniques authors employ to give expression to their ideas, rather than solely examining the ideas expressed within a particular work. In effect, we were initiated into a formalist theoretical paradigm.

It would be disingenuous not to state in this introduction that my study is informed by similar biases as those levelled at Russian Formalism and New Criticism, since I have selected to look at an author whose writing undeniably lends itself to formalist analysis. One of the reasons for this is Woolf’s status as a modernist writer. This study does not examine modernism as such, nor does it attempt to engage with the complex debates concerning its feasibility as a term or its main characteristics. Yet I am aware that, as Cuddy-Keane

observes in her study *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (2004), the “further we are from the first constructions of modernism, the more we realize that the early myths about its identity elided and obscured many of its crucial elements” (2004: 146). Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane consider the difficulties involved in defining modernism in their influential study *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (1991). Despite these difficulties, they do maintain that any “working definition of [modernism will] have to see in it a quality of abstraction and highly conscious artifice, taking us behind familiar reality, breaking away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form” (Bradbury & McFarlane 1991: 24). This definition of modernism, especially the notion that it takes us “behind familiar reality, [and] break[s] away from familiar functions of language and conventions of form”, certainly touches on aspects of Woolf’s writing and points to comparisons that can be made with formalist principles.

Woolf’s modernist convictions are expressed in essays such as “Modern Fiction”, which I briefly attend to in my second chapter. In this essay, she champions narrative experimentation and urges writers to abandon the narrative modes of their forerunners when they are no longer able to give expression to the pluralism of the modern world (Woolf 1968: 189). Apart from her modernist sentiments, which in and of themselves suggest affinities with some formalist principles, Woolf was exposed to formalist ideas through her close friendship with the painter Roger Fry. His theory of art, outlined in the collection of essays *Vision and Design* (1937), bears significant resemblances to the Russian Formalists’ principles, particularly to Shklovsky’s concept of defamiliarization. I examine Fry’s theories briefly in chapter two, as his ideas exerted a marked influence on Woolf (Banfield 2000: 293).

Many of the key theoretical principles propounded by the New Critics and the Russian Formalists are more applicable to poetry than prose; this is an aspect of their theorizing that I comment on in my first chapter. The concept of defamiliarization, popularized by the Russian Formalists, is, however, equally applicable to poetry and prose. This concept is generally associated with Russian Formalism, yet in my first chapter, I demonstrate that variations of this concept often surface in the writings of the New Critics as well. They similarly claim that figures of speech that characterise literary language allow for the renewal of vision in ways that literal, denotative prose perhaps does not (Brooks 1947b: 30).
Drawing on the concept of defamiliarization, I offer a close reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* in my second chapter. My close reading illustrates that it is the form and language usage in this novel that prompt us to reconsider our conventional understanding of concepts such as time and madness. I also inspect the character of Septimus Warren Smith and propose that, in many ways, he can be read as an embodiment of the process of defamiliarization. Although Septimus presents symptoms of ‘madness’, I argue that this madness does not vitiate his understanding of the world; instead, it serves as a knife that severs him from habitual modes of perception and allows him to pierce a reality that is untainted by norms and convention.

The last and most significant factor that makes Virginia Woolf’s writing particularly suitable for my purposes is her perennial fascination with the nature of language and her exploration of its limits and potential. In her fiction as well as her critical writings, she continuously directs our attention to the multifarious character of our linguistic medium. Her essay “Craftsmanship”, for example, criticises a purely utilitarian view of language. Here, she observes that we are “so often fooled in this way by words, they have so often proved that they hate being useful, that it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities” (Woolf 1942: 127). Her writing draws attention to the medium of expression in uncommon ways and compels us not to see it merely as an instrument for communication; instead, she urges us to consider anew that the language we use serves not only to give expression to our understanding of the world, but determines and sustains that understanding. Edward Bishop, one of the critics I attend to in my third chapter, describes Woolf’s attitude to language in the following way:

> There is a delight but also dissatisfaction in her playing with words. She is determined to make discourse visible, not simply by the high degree of imagery in her prose but by constantly challenging the reader’s notion of language, forcing him or her to think of it as something palpable, but also protean, something that has not only integrity but independence, something at times capricious, even untrustworthy, perhaps perverse.

(Bishop 1991: 77)

Bishop’s description of Woolf’s language places her within formalist territory. His claim that there “is a delight but also dissatisfaction in her playing with words” suggests at once her desire to move beyond the confines of the linguistic medium, to ensnare a meaning that
eludes precise description, but also her awareness that one can only attempt this through language. In *Mrs Dalloway*, a minor, unnamed character broods on his weariness of this “knocking of words together” (Woolf 2000: 31), a phrase indicating the inefficacy of words, the struggle to wring a precise meaning out of them that is just beyond language. Woolf’s meditation upon these linguistic paradoxes is a central concern discussed in my third chapter. Her “arching toward the far side of language” (Bishop 1991: 16) is what characterises Woolf’s linguistic project for Bishop, and what makes Bishop’s study particularly relevant to my own.

My discussion of Bishop’s work on Woolf forms part of the larger project of my third chapter in which I examine critical studies of Woolf and compare the arguments posited and approaches adopted in these studies to the principles advocated by the Russian Formalists and New Critics. I focus primarily on the arguments posited in two critical studies: Edward Bishop’s *Virginia Woolf* (1991) and Oddvar Holmesland’s *Form as Compensation for Life: Fictive Patterns in Virginia Woolf’s Novels* (1998). These studies have been selected because they centre on questions of language and form and, as such, a number of interesting parallels can be drawn between their ideas and the tenets of formalism. Through an analysis of these critics’ discussions, I illustrate that the principle of estranged form continues to inform our critical thought about Woolf’s works.

One of the most important points that emerges from my reading of literary critics of Woolf is that her unconventional form and her emphasis on the medium of expression itself complicate the reader’s engagement with her works and elicit active reading practices. The critical engagement that estranged forms necessitate on the part of the reader is demonstrated in the recent criticisms of Woolf’s works that I examine in this study. The critics to which I attend contend that the role language plays in mediating our understanding of reality often surfaces as a theme in her fiction. In her novels, Woolf displays an awareness that the linguistic medium both creates and conveys meaning, and, significantly, she uses defamiliarizing narrative strategies to implicate the reader in her exploration of the multifaceted nature of language. My own analysis of *Mrs Dalloway* demonstrates that the concept of defamiliarization remains a valuable theoretical vantage point from which to approach the text; similarly, the critics I analyse focus on the various narrative techniques Woolf employs to dislodge our habitual opinions and perceptions. One
of Woolf’s broader aims is to create a space for the reader to resist and challenge the text (Hite 2010: 267), yet it is the form of her writing, and often the process of defamiliarization that prompt readers to question and grapple with the text. Through an analysis of these critics’ works, I suggest that, despite the advent of post-structuralism, pluralism of methods and other developments within the realm of literary studies, literariness is, in many ways, a valid aspect of literary studies.
Chapter 1
The Formalist Search for Literariness

The Russian Formalists and the New Critics share a number of principles, the most significant of which is their belief that literary criticism should concern itself solely with the literary work as such; the literary work should not be seen as a means to unravel the author’s psyche, nor should it be approached for what it may reveal about the social circumstances during its production. Instead, the critic should view the work as an autonomous object; it should be seen as “a mural or wall painting, something with a palpability of its own which arrests the eye and merits study” (Rivkin & Ryan 2004: 3). Another significant similarity, which stems from the conception of the literary work as autonomous, is the delineation of literary language as a special form of language that functions independently of the rules that govern practical discourse and thus warrants study; the explication of how literary language functions is considered the principle question criticism should address. The Russian Formalists view poetic language predominantly as a transgression of ordinary language, and this transgression reawakens the reader’s awareness to the ways in which language works. Fredric Jameson says, for the Russian Formalists, poetic language as a form of “defamiliarization serves as a way of distinguishing literature, the purely literary system, from whatever other verbal modes there are. It thus serves as the enabling act which permits literary theory to come into being in the first place” (Jameson 1972: 52).

The movement of Russian Formalism originated in Moscow and St. Petersburg in the 1920s (Abrams 1999: 102). Led by Victor Shklovsky, and including other prominent members such as Boris Eichenbaum and Roman Jakobson, the group’s theorizing was unified by their shared desire to account for what is it that distinguishes literary works from other forms of writing. The members worked together for a short, prolific time, but as a result of pressure from the Soviets the group was forced to disband early in the 1930s. Yet some of their ideas were salvaged and further developed by the Prague Linguistic Circle, a group Roman Jakobson joined after the dissolution of the Formalists (Erlich 1973: 635). Although I focus largely on the tenets of the Russian Formalists in this chapter, I also explore the ways in
which members of the Prague Linguistic Circle (Roman Jakobson and Jan Mukařovský in particular) developed and recast the Russian Formalists’ notion of literariness.

The New Critics do not present as unified a movement as the Russian Formalists.¹ I. A. Richards is commonly regarded as a forerunner to the movement (Abrams 1999: 180). However, the American New Critics (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1949: 1388) later rejected his specific focus on the psychological effects caused by reading literary works. Nonetheless, Richards’s distinction between emotive and scientific uses of language and his insistence that an objective form of literary criticism is possible (Graff 1995: 134), and necessary, are still perceptible in the works of the later New Critics. The New Critical methodology was popularised by critics such as Cleanth Brooks, W.K. Wimsatt, Allen Tate and Mark Schorer and it remained the most influential form of criticism in America until the late 1960s (Abrams 1999: 180). For the New Critics, poetic language also presents a deviation from ordinary, prose language. This deviation is caused by the ambiguities, ironies and paradoxes that saturate most literary works. Proponents of New Criticism emphasise that poetic language is a connotative language, one which violates habitual verbal associations and consequently renews our apprehension of objects and situations. The effect of defamiliarization is thus also important to the New Critics, but where they differ from the Russian Formalists is in their belief that poetic language allows the author to gesture toward meanings that are inaccessible through ordinary, denotative language. The New Critics argue that “[i]ndependently of all practical purposes, [literature] can obliquely tell us something about the nature of reality. All of its meaning is linguistic, but not all that is pertinent to meaning can be explained by linguistic analysis” (Thompson 1971: 52). A part of the criticism advocated by New Critics is concerned with relating the ideas in literature “to what is permanent and essential about man” (38); this concern is absent from the writings of the Russian Formalists. In the following two sections I will explore the ways in which these two movements attempt to isolate those elements characteristic of poetic language

¹ Although I refer to the ‘New Critics’ as though they present a unified movement, I am aware that the various critics commonly referred to as New Critics at times espouse views and propound theories that conflict with one another. Rene Wellek argues in his essay “New Criticism: Pro and Contra” (1978) that the term New Criticism should perhaps be abandoned and each of these critics’ works judged on their own merit (Wellek 1978: 613). This dissertation does not allow for an in-depth discussion of each of these critics’ works. Instead, it focuses on key texts that deal explicitly with ways in which the literary work can be distinguished from other forms of writing.
that separate literature from other forms of writing. Both schools of criticism pay particular attention to poetry, especially the New Critics, but as this dissertation is an investigation into the possibilities of locating literariness in prose, I will only focus on those elements deemed literary that are also applicable to prose criticism.

Russian Formalism and Literariness

The term “Formalism” that is commonly used to refer to the Russian literary theorists that were active at the beginning of the twentieth century was first used by those opposed to the movement (Erlich 1975: 9) and is in a sense misleading: the term “Formalism” foregrounds the movement’s preoccupation with the formal elements of the literary work, but it also suggests an established and rigid methodology that does not necessarily reflect the principles of this revolutionary movement. Boris Eichenbaum, a prominent member of the Russian Formalists, addressed this misconception in his essay “The Theory of the Formal Method” (1926), in which he traces the development of their key premises. He explains that a clearly defined method was not of central concern to the movement: “[i]n principle the question for the Formalist is not how to study literature, but what the subject matter of literary study actually is” (Eichenbaum 1926a: 1062). He goes on to say that “the essence of our work consisted not in some kind of static ‘formal method’, but in a study of the specific peculiarities of verbal art – we were not advocates of a method, but students of an object” (1082). The scientific tone evident in these statements is significant for two reasons: stating that the Formalists were “students of an object” because they attend to the “specific peculiarities of verbal art” challenges the ways in which literature was being studied at the time. The Formalists opposed the tradition of Russian literary scholarship because they were against its eclectic view of the function of literature that allowed literary analysis to stray into the domains of psychology, sociology and politics. Pavel Medvedev and Mikhail Bakhtin have described the modes of literary scholarship the Formalists reacted against as “ideological journalism and religious-philosophical criticism” that “lacked scholarly

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2 In this chapter I refer to two translations of Eichenbaum’s “The Theory of the Formal Method”. The version I refer to most often was translated by Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Rein and forms part of their study Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays (1965). The second version was translated by I.R. Titunk and can be found in Eichenbaum’s Readings in Russian Poetics (1978), edited by Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomoroska.
substance and rigor” (Medvedev and Bakhtin 1978: 55). Russian literary criticism was also heavily influenced by Symbolist principles (Erlich 1973: 627) and as a result, the tradition that the Formalists inherited still sought transcendental truths in literature. The Formalists, by contrast, wanted to distance criticism from such mystical associations and rather advance rational, scientific theorizing that deals with the material existence of the literary text (Eagleton 1985: 3). Eichenbaum’s scientific tone thus serves a double purpose: it validates the Formalists’ endeavour to establish literary study as a distinct and legitimate discipline by simultaneously drawing attention to the perceived inadequacies of traditional scholarship. Eichenbaum’s statement that the primary aim of the Formalists was to critically reconsider “what the subject matter of literary study actually is” again underscores that the tradition that preceded them did not deal with those aspects that are unique to and constitutive of the literary work. Roman Jakobson raised similar objections to the forms of analysis that dominated Russian literary scholarship at the time. He famously said:

The object of the science of literature is not literature, but literariness – that is, that which makes a given work a work of literature. Until now literary historians have preferred to act like the policeman who, intending to arrest a certain person, would, at any opportunity, seize any and all persons who chanced into the apartment, as well as those who passed along the street. The literary historians used everything – anthropology, psychology, politics, philosophy. Instead of a science of literature, they created a conglomeration of homespun disciplines. They seemed to have forgotten that their essays strayed into related disciplines – the history of philosophy, the history of culture, of psychology, etc. – and that these could rightly use literary masterpieces only as defective, secondary documents.

(Jakobson in Eichenbaum 1926a: 1066)

To combat this form of eclectic criticism, the Formalists asserted that there are specifically literary elements present in literary works that make them distinguishable from other forms of writing and that these differences should be the focus of literary study. As Eichenbuam says, “[t]he basis of our position was and is that the object of literary science, as such, must be the study of those specifics which distinguish it from any other material” (1926a: 1065). The initial premise on which subsequent Formalist theorizing depends is the conception of literature as a distinct form of language usage that serves a primarily aesthetic function and for this reason does not conform to the rules that govern practical language. This poetic language draws attention to the literary work as a constructed verbal artifact by transgressing the norms of ordinary language, thereby encouraging the reader to consider
the ways in which language functions in the work. The new form of literary criticism advocated by the Formalists, as Fredric Jameson states in *The Prison-House of Language* (1972), “is therefore based on the opposition between habituation and perception, between mechanical and thoughtless performance and a sudden awareness of the very textures and surfaces of the world and of language” (Jameson 1972: 50).

One of the first and most important steps toward articulating the differences between practical language and poetic language can be traced to Leo Jakubinsky’s essay “On the Sounds of Poetic Language” (1916). Jakubinsky examined the differences between poetic and practical language and suggested that:

> The phenomenon of language must be classified from the point of view of the speaker’s particular purpose as he forms his own linguistic pattern. If the pattern is formed for the purely practical purpose of communication, then we are dealing with a system of practical language (the language of thought) in which the linguistic pattern (sounds, morphological features, etc.) have no independent value and are merely a means of communication. But other linguistic systems, systems in which the practical purpose is in the background (although perhaps not entirely hidden) are conceivable; they exist, and their linguistic patterns acquire independent value.

(Jakubinsky in Eichenbaum 1926a: 1066)

Eichenbaum states that this distinction Jakubinsky provided “served as the basic principle of the Formalists’ work on key problems of poetics” (1926a: 1066). This is significant, as Jakubinsky’s essay clearly states that the primary distinction between practical and poetic language is the function for which it is intended, and that language “must be classified from the point of view of the speaker’s particular purpose”. The Formalists’ conception of poetic language is sometimes viewed outside of this context and is consequently criticised for suggesting that there exists an intrinsically literary language. It is an oversimplification of the initial phase of the Formalists to suggest they proposed that “[p]ractical language is used for acts of communication, while literary language has no practical function at all and simply makes us see differently” (Brooker et al 2005: 31).³ Jakubinsky did not suggest that poetic

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³ This example is taken from Brooker, Selden and Widdowson’s primer *A Reader to Contemporary Literary Theory* (2005). Although primers necessarily have to flatten out complex issues in order to provide a broad overview of a subject, this quotation misrepresents the initial phase of the Formalists and consequently reinforces the rigid view of Formalism that its slightly misleading name conveys.
language has no practical function. Rather, as N. W. Visser suggests in his essay “Russian Formalism”, the “referential and communicative functions of language are subordinated to an emphasis on verbal structures – on the mode of expression” (Visser 1982: 18).

Poetic language is thus distinguished primarily by its function. Practical language conforms to grammatical rules because its function is to convey information about the external world as transparently as possible. Poetic language, in contrast, serves an aesthetic function and does not principally refer to the external world, but rather draws attention to its own constructed nature; it “offer[s] the reader a special mode of experience by drawing attention to its own ‘formal’ features” (Abrams 1999: 103). Viktor Shklovsky elaborates on the distinctive quality of poetic language:

Poetic language is distinguished from prosaic language by the palpableness of its construction. The palpableness may be brought about by the acoustical aspect or the articulatory aspect or the semiological aspect. Sometimes what is palpable is not the structure of the words but the use of words in construction, their arrangement. One of the means of creating a palpable construction, the very fabric of which is experienced, is the poetic image, but it is only one of the means ... If scientific poetics is to be brought about, it must start with the factual assertion, founded on massive evidence, that there are such things as ‘poetic’ and ‘prosaic’ languages, each with their different laws, and it must proceed from an analysis of those differences.

(Shklovsky in Eichenbaum 1926b: 10)4

It is significant that Shklovsky repeatedly emphasises the “palpableness” of poetic language. The Formalists desired to distance poetics from the quasi-mystical doctrines of the symbolists, and the description of poetic language as “palpable” is symptomatic of this desire to establish the literary work as a concrete fact that can be fully explained through objective criticism. Adopting an ‘objective’ stance towards the text could perhaps enable literary studies to move closer to the realm of verifiable knowledge produced by disciplines in the natural sciences. Yet Shklovsky, it seems, does not interrogate the notion that this should indeed be the aim of literary studies. For this reason the Russian Formalists’

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4 This quotation is taken from I. R. Titunk’s translation of “The Theory of the Formal Method”. I quoted from this translation because Titunk repeatedly emphasises the “palpability” of the poetic construction. Lee T. Lemon and Marion Reis’s translation foregrounds the “perceptible structure” (Shklovsky in Eichenbaum 1926a: 1071) of the poetic work. In their translation, we read “poetic language may be felt. Sometimes one feels the verbal structure, the arrangement of words, rather than their texture” (1071).
objective approach to the text, at times comparable to that of the New Critics, has come under attack by critics such as Richard Palmer for being indicative of “the modern technological way of thinking” (Palmer 1969: 247) that reduces the literary work to a static object divorced from the reading subject.

According to the Formalists, poetic language is a form of language that does not assume a transparent guise in the pursuit of effective communication; instead it is made “palpable” or tangible because it transgresses the norms of ordinary language and draws attention to itself as constructed speech. Roman Jakobson says the aim of poetic language is to “orient the utterance towards eloquence” (Jakobson in Thompson 1971: 96). The emphasis in Formalist poetics is thus not on what is communicated in a literary work, but how the literary work distorts practical language in order to “compel our attention to its constructed nature” (Brooker et al. 2005: 32). This view of poetic language also informed the writings of members of the Prague Linguistic Circle. Jan Mukařovský, for example, agrees that poetic language “is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself. The question is then one of how this maximum of foregrounding is achieved in poetic language” (Mukařovský in Thompson 1971: 97). This question led the Formalists (in their early phase) to focus almost exclusively on literary devices that distort practical language and encourage readers to attend to the utterance for its own sake. Yet Ewa Thompson rightly points out in Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism: A Comparative Study (1971), that these “occasional assertions that the value of literature is contained in the utterance itself … certainly reduce literature to the interplay of language rules, and dismisses its cognitive aspect” (1971: 105). This is one of the major shortcomings of the initial phase of the Formalists and will be discussed later on in more detail.

The Formalists’ preoccupation with how poetic language is made “palpable” is of course more pronounced in the analysis of poetry than prose. Their investigations into the particularly literary language used in poetry led them to advance principles for the analysis of poetry that challenged the dominant trends in Russian literary scholarship at the time. In particular the view of poetry as “thought by means of imagery” (Eichenbaum 1926a: 1069), advocated by A. A. Potebnya, was rejected because this conception of poetry undermines
the importance of aspects such as sound, rhythm and syntax – aspects that the Formalists viewed as inextricably linked to the “palpableness” of poetic language. It is because of the emphasis Potebnya placed on the role of imagery that Shklovsky explicitly says “[o]ne of the means of creating a palpable construction, the very fabric of which is experienced, is the poetic image, but it is only one of the means”; it may also be “brought about by the acoustical aspect or the articulatory aspect or the semiological aspect” (Shklovsky in Eichenbaum 1926b: 10). Eichenbaum also renounced Potebnya’s views on the basis of their findings and says that “poetic language is not only a language of images, that sounds in verse are not at all merely elements of a superficial euphony, and that they do not play a mere ‘accompaniment’ to meaning, but rather that they have an independent significance” (1926a: 1068). The Formalists’ findings concerning the “independent value of poetic sound” (1068) are not, however, of primary significance to my study since this project is oriented towards exploring the possibilities of identifying literariness in prose. Regarding their analysis of poetry, the Formalists should, however, be commended for developing a “more rigorous notion of [the] thoroughgoing interdependence among the various levels of the poem: phonetic, phonemic, syntactic, lexical and semantic” (Visser 1982: 18).

Although the distinction between poetic and prosaic language provided the Formalists with a useful means to locate literariness, these initial observations on the differences between poetic and practical language wrongly suggest that the two are easily distinguishable. Jakubinsky’s claim (in Eichenbaum 1926a: 1066) that “[i]f the pattern is formed for the purely practical purpose of communication, then we are dealing with a system of practical language”, conveys the impression that practical language is always used “purely” for communication and does not take into account instances in which practical language may simultaneously serve an aesthetic function. Terry Eagleton points out that there are numerous uses of language that do not fall into the category of either poetic or purely practical that nevertheless draw attention to its linguistic construction; slang is an example of a type of discourse that violates the rules of ordinary language, yet it is not considered poetic for this reason (Eagleton 1985: 5). Similarly, when Jakubinsky defines poetic language he says that “the practical purpose is in the background (although perhaps not entirely hidden)”, again lessening and almost dismissing the practical function of literary works (1066). This account of poetic language does not, however, explain the process by which
some texts that were originally produced for practical communication come to be considered as literary. A definition of poetic language that is based on function may thus lead to ambiguity: the Formalists seem to propose that in order to achieve its aesthetic function, language in literary texts is used in new and unconventional ways. Yet if “language must be classified from the point of view of the speaker’s particular purpose as he forms his own linguistic pattern”, as Jakubinsky suggests, it could also be interpreted to mean that if a text intends to be literature, then it is, even if the language is indistinguishable from ordinary language.

At this early stage in the Formalist movement there was an attempt to draw a distinct line between poetic and practical language based on their differing uses. This neat division supported the aims of the Formalist school in two ways: first, the Formalists shared a desire to establish literary study as a scientific discipline with a specific object of study. A definite distinction between poetic and practical language would allow them to posit the former as one of the defining characteristics of literary works, thereby ensuring the scientific integrity of literary studies. If the demarcation between poetic and practical language is viewed as ever shifting, the definition of poetic language becomes less useful as a means to describe what makes a text ‘literary’. Second, this division also ensures the autonomy of the literary text. Jakubinsky’s distinction diminishes the importance of the communicative function of literary works; consequently, only those aspects that make the text ‘literary’ – linguistic considerations – are deemed relevant to literary study.

This narrow view of the specificity of poetic language was later modified by the Formalists. Roman Jakobson reassessed the initial premises on which the distinction between poetic and practical language was based and provided a more accurate view of the various functions a verbal message may simultaneously fulfil. He states:

Equating a poetic work with an aesthetic, or more precisely with a poetic, function, as far as we deal with verbal material, is characteristic of those epochs which proclaim self-sufficient, pure art, l’art pour l’art. In the early steps of the Formalist school, it was still possible to observe distinct traces of such an equation. However, this equation is unquestionably erroneous: a poetic work is not confined to aesthetic function alone, but has in addition many other functions. Actually, the intentions of a poetic work are often closely related to philosophy, social didactics, etc. Just as a poetic work is not exhausted by its aesthetic
function, similarly aesthetic function is not limited to the poetic work; an orator’s address, everyday conversation, newspaper articles, advertisements, a scientific treatise – all may employ aesthetic considerations, give expression to aesthetic function, and often use words in and for themselves, not merely as a referential device.

(Jakobson 1978: 6)

Jakobson’s re-evaluation of the aesthetic function led him to formulate the concept of the dominant: the structuring aspect of a literary work that transforms all the other elements. This concept will be discussed later. What is important to note here is that the Formalists reviewed the idea that the utterance itself should be the sole subject matter of literary study because this idea is derived from a self-sufficient view of art. Nevertheless, it is important to consider some of the influences, both acknowledged and unacknowledged, that led the Formalists (in their early phase) to view works of art as autonomous or self-sufficient. An understanding of these influences accounts for some of the contradictions and inconsistencies in the Formalists’ theorizing, especially concerning their slogan of the “literary work as the sum-total of forms” (Thompson 1971: 27).

In her book Russian Formalism and Anglo-American New Criticism: A Comparative Study (1971), Ewa Thompson traces the various theorists whose works helped shape the views of the two above-mentioned movements, illustrating that the ideas propounded by Immanuel Kant have exerted a considerable, if indirect, influence on both movements. Thompson shows that Andrej Belyj’s works in particular bear a close resemblance to some of Kant’s ideas. Although Belyj was a supporter of the Symbolist movement in Russia, a group to which the Formalists were wholly opposed, Shklovsky admired Belyj and acknowledged his influence on theoretical matters (1971: 27). Thompson says that the “Formalist militant declarations that art has nothing to do with the pragmatic transmission of ideas” (60) are a warped adaptation of what Kant asserts in Critique of Judgement concerning the pragmatic value of art. Thompson says:

[Kant] was the first to assert unambiguously that in works of art, one observes ‘purposiveness without purpose’, a somehow meaningful arrangement of elements which is, at the same time, useless from the viewpoint of practical life. The artistic object possessed of such purposiveness stimulates ‘disinterested contemplation’ – that which is not directed toward an immediate practical end.

(Thompson 1971: 60)
According to her, Kant’s ideas filtered down into the theories of the Formalists. It is however important to realise that Kant was not suggesting that works of art are without value; he was simply drawing a “distinction between pragmatic and non-pragmatic values” (60). He believed that “[t]hrough the purposive arrangement of elements in a work of art we learn about reality things that cannot be known in the language of logical concepts” and that “art discovers for us the natural beauty and fullness of the world” (60). Although the latter view of art resembles Shklovsky’s belief that art enables us to “recover the sensation of life” (Shklovsky 1916: 16), Shklovsky and the other Formalists do not recognise that literature may grant access to ideas that “cannot be known in the language of logical concepts”. What Thompson is drawing attention to is that, despite the positivistic tone of the Formalists’ writings, some of their theories spring from arguments based on an idealistic view of reality and art. This is especially apparent in the Formalists’ conception of the relationship between form and content, which Thompson claims was originally taken from the work of Andrej Belyj. Thompson explains:

Belyj observes that if reality is unknowable in its essence (and according to Kant, it is), then cognition is not a reflecting process but a creative reconstruction of the data of perception. Consequently, the artistic act is creative in that it does not reflect reality but creates concrete symbolic forms under which reality can be known. Reconstruction of the perception data in literature is thus both creative and cognitive. Once we give a certain form to our experience (and whenever it is expressed it is formalized ...), it cannot be separated from this form. Form cannot exist without content. The artist labours over form, not over content, and it is his success in regard to form that determines the richness of content in his work ... Thus the Formalists inherited from Belyj their meticulous devotion to the study of concrete linguistic forms appearing in a literary work. At the same time, they took from him the slogan ‘content equals the sum-total of forms’, which sprang from the idealistic view on the nature of reality and art, entailing the belief in the realities outside the empirical and rational world, cognized through intuition and symbols. 

(Thompson 1971: 63-5)

The Formalists took from Belyj’s work that which would support their aim with literary study: a view of art that foregrounds the formal construction of a literary work. However, the Formalists do not account for the idealistic premise on which Belyj’s work is founded. His claim that we do not really perceive reality in its entirety, but rather apprehend it through our ability to manufacture “concrete symbolic forms” privileges the art work’s cognitive aspect because it is only through art that we can grasp ideas which “cannot be
known through logical concepts”. This view led Belyj to declare that the meaning of all art is ultimately religious (Thompson 1971: 65). Thompson asserts that the Formalists’ view of the correlation between form and content is derived from Belyj’s theory, yet they do not acknowledge that this conception of form is founded on a belief in “realities outside the empirical and rational world, cognized through intuition and symbols” (65). As Thompson notes, “[t]he capacity of language to convey meanings which cannot be reduced either to emotions or to rational concepts … some of the New Critics call the representational function of language”; however, the “lack of a clear recognition of this function in the Russian Formalist school was closely related to the limitations and confusions of some of its members and sympathizers” (69).

Thompson examines the similarities between the Formalists and Belyj’s conception of form and declares that the Formalists’ view is unquestionably derived from Belyj’s theory. However, when Boris Eichenbaum explains how they came to view form as inseparable from content he does not acknowledge any influence from Belyj. Instead, he explains that their investigations into the formal properties that make up the “palpablleness” of poetic language led them to consider form and content as more inextricably linked than had previously been assumed. Eichenbaum says that when the Formalists “abandoned Potebnya’s point of view, [they] also freed themselves from the traditional correlation of ‘form and content’ and from the traditional idea of form as an envelope, a vessel into which one pours a liquid (the content)” (Eichenbaum 1926a: 1069). This “new notion of form required no companion idea, no correlative” (1069) because they conceive of form as content. The Formalists challenged the Symbolist principle that “some sort of ‘content’ is to shine through the ‘form’”, and were also opposed to what Eichenbaum calls “aestheticism”, which he describes as the “preference for certain elements of form consciously isolated from ‘content’” (1069-1070). Instead, they proposed that a thorough investigation into the formal aspects of a work will concurrently deal with the ‘content’ of a work. This view is comparable to Belyj’s claim that “[t]he artist labours over form, not over content, and it is his success in regard to form that determines the richness of content in his work” (Thompson 1971: 63).

It is important to note that what exactly constitutes “form” is rarely stated explicitly. Belyj
does not clearly define what he means by “concrete forms”, yet he “emphasises that to equate ‘form’ and ‘technical device’ is inadequate” (Thompson 1971: 64). What Belyj does suggest is that “the concept of form is precisely what waits for definition” (64). Similarly, Eichenbaum says the Formalists “had to find more specific formulations of the principle of perceptible form so that they could make possible the analysis of form itself – the analysis of form understood as content. [They] had to show that the perception of form results from special artistic techniques which force the reader to experience form” (Eichenbaum 1926: 1070). These techniques that “force the reader to experience form” are what Shklovsky attends to in his well-known essay “Art as Technique” (1916). The process of “defamiliarization” that Shklovsky elucidates in this essay is arguably one of the most fruitful concepts the Formalists employed in their endeavour to locate literariness.

In “Art as Technique” Shklovsky argues that because we encounter certain objects regularly and perform certain acts repeatedly throughout our day to day lives, our process of perception becomes habitual or automatic. Thus, we do not perceive objects in their entirety, but rather identify them by their parts. As a result, we are able to recognise objects instantly or perform acts unconsciously while exerting the least amount of energy. Shklovsky explains that “[t]he process of ‘algebrization’ [or substituting a part for the whole], the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort” (1916: 15). The consequence of this is that we may become so accustomed to our habitual perceptions that we are unable to perceive objects as if for the first time. The function of art, according to Shklovsky, is to undo this automatized perception:

The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important.

(Shklovsky 1916: 16, original italics)

Shklovsky asserts that our habitual process of perception is suspended when we attend to works of art. The various techniques employed in a literary work serve the function of resisting habitual perception. This is done through “the ‘making-strange’ of familiar acts and objects by taking them out of their ordinary contexts or by describing them as if they were
seen for the first time; the ‘roughened’ texture of speech sounds in verse; the ‘retardation’ of awaited outcomes in narrative and the ‘laying-bare’ of devices of construction in poems and narratives” (Visser 1982: 17). These devices that cause defamiliarization or ostranenie thus serve the aesthetic function of altering our commonplace process of perception.

This altered perception is, according to Shklovsky, the aim of art. As he says, “Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important” (Shklovsky 1916: 16). Shklovsky’s definition of defamiliarization disregards the cognitive aspect of art: the literary work does not give the reader a more comprehensive understanding of the contemplated object; instead, the act of contemplation or the perception of the object is considered “an aesthetic end in itself” (16). Thompson says defamiliarization “deforms objects, defacilitates perception and, as the final result, makes us see these objects better” (1971: 68). Although Thompson accurately describes the process of defamiliarization her assertion that the result of defamiliarization is that we “see … objects better” misrepresents Shklovsky’s argument. He suggests that the purpose of defamiliarization is to allow us to “see” objects, but this renewed perception does not necessarily mean that we “see … objects better”. Shklovsky says the purpose of defamiliarization is to create “a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it” (1916: 19). Jameson agrees, stating that the “new concept of ostranenie is not intended to imply anything about the nature of the perceptions which have grown habitual, the perceptions renewed” (Jameson 1972: 51-2).

The process of defamiliarization is not only apparent in specific devices that present objects in strange or unexpected ways, but also in the more general way in which poetic language “foreground[s] its linguistic medium” (Abrams 1999: 103). The aesthetic function in poetic language, as previously discussed, “concentrates attention on the linguistic sign itself – hence it is exactly the opposite of a real orientation toward a goal which in language is the message” (Mukařovský 1976: 9). In Formalist poetics, the focus is on “the linguistic sign itself” and not on the extra-literary object to which the sign refers. Similarly, Shklovsky is interested in the process of perception that is the result of defamiliarization and not in the object that is perceived. The emphasis in poetic language on the utterance itself suggests that what literature does is to draw attention to how our perception of reality is constructed through language. It is for this reason that poetic language is suitable for the purpose of defamiliarization; when language is made “palpable” and difficult it forces the reader to
attend to the way in which reality is conceived of through language. According to Mukařovský this is the practical function of poetic language, not to communicate something about the external world, but to encourage the reader to consider the way in which reality is apprehended. Mukařovský says:

The fact that poetic discourse has expression itself as its aim does not deprive poetic language of practical import. Precisely because of its aesthetic ‘self-orientation’ poetic language is more suited than other functional languages for constantly reviving man’s attitude toward language and the relation of language to reality, for constantly revealing in new ways the internal composition of the linguistic sign and for showing new possibilities of its use.

(Mukařovský 1976: 11)

To return to the concept of defamiliarization: we see that this concept led Shklovsky to formulate one of his most useful distinctions in the endeavour to locate literariness in prose, namely the distinction between fabula and sjuzet. The term fabula, or story, refers to the “raw material awaiting the organizing hand of the writer” (Brooker et al 2005: 34). Sjuzet, or plot, denotes the formal construction of the narrative, and includes “[d]igressions, typographical games, displacement of parts of the book (preface, dedication, etc.) and extended descriptions” (34). Put another way, fabula and sjuzet specify “the difference between the pre-aesthetic or non-aesthetic material that goes into a narrative – the story matter – and the literary working-up of that material as it is subjected to the processes of selection and arrangement” (Visser 1982: 20). According to the Formalists, only the elements that make up the ‘plot’ of a narrative can be considered literary. Eichenbaum observes, “[p]lot construction became the natural subject for Formalist study, since plot constitutes the specific peculiarity of narrative art” (1926a: 1072).

The formal aspects of a narrative that constitute the ‘plot’ are analogous to the “palpable” texture the Formalists attend to in poetic language; the distinction between fabula and sjuzet once again highlights the Formalists’ preoccupation with how the literary work presents material and not what is presented. It is true that Shklovsky’s conception of ‘plot’ privileges narratives that specifically draw attention to their formal construction. In his discussion of Laurence Sterne’s novel Tristram Shandy, Shklovsky explores the ways in which
the novel continuously ‘bares its devices’. According to him, exposing its novelistic structure is “the most essentially literary thing a novel can do” (Brooker et al 2005: 34).

Defamiliarization is more noticeable in novels that expose the devices involved in plot construction. By disclosing its artifice the work violates our expectation that it will in some way resemble reality. In his book *Literature Against Itself* (1995), Gerald Graff describes a type of defamiliarization that seems similar to the Russian Formalists’ position regarding this concept. He says:

> Defamiliarization may mean exploding *all* perceptual categories, including those inevitably left intact by the most uncompromising realism. This formalist strategy attempts to defamiliarize not in order to expose some truer reality behind the veil of customary perception but in order to dislodge from us the expectation that we can ever locate such a reality at all.

_(Graff 1995: 73)_

The type of defamiliarization described here works by a kind of negative knowledge. Familiar ideas or beliefs are exposed as strange and unnatural to the reader, yet, apart from the sudden awareness of how conventional and constructed our beliefs and ideas are, the reader does not necessarily gain any positive knowledge, that is, a more mature perspective on the defamiliarized idea. It is precisely this aspect of Russian formalism that Medvedev and Bakhtin have denounced as “nihilistic [in] tone” (Medvedev and Bakhtin 1978: 60). Medvedev and Bakhtin say that because of their formulation of the concept of defamiliarization, the “formalists do not so much find something new in the word as expose and do away with the old” (60). Shklovsky’s original definition, “far from emphasizing the enrichment of the word with new and positive constructive meaning, simply emphasizes the negation of the old meaning” (60).

Russian Formalism’s departure from literary criticism that attends to any type of ‘meaning’ in the work is revealed again in the formulation of the concept of ‘motivation’. The Formalists are interested in those aspects of the text that are not fully ‘motivated’, or are inessential to the unfolding of the ‘story’, as these aspects underscore the constructed nature of the work. For Shklovsky the extra-literary ‘motivation’ that compels the ‘story’ “is merely a pretext for the renewal of vision in any way possible” (Jameson 1972: 57).
Consequently, in Formalist criticism, the “priorities are reversed; everything – personality, social consciousness, philosophy – exists to permit the coming into being of the literary work itself” (58). The Russian Formalists grant that the text may give expression to these concerns, but maintain that it is not the task of the literary critic to attend to them (Renfrew 2006: 242).

In discussing ‘motivation’ the Formalists distinguish between ‘free’ motifs and ‘bound’ motifs. ‘Bound’ motifs are necessary for furthering the ‘story’, whereas ‘free’ motifs are not indispensable to the ‘story’. The Formalists naturally attend to ‘free’ motifs, because these motifs’ incongruence with the rest of the narrative draws attention to the artist’s project of selection and arrangement. As a result these ‘free’ motifs destabilize the notion that the ‘story’ content propels the narrative and support Shklovsky’s thesis that the motivation “exists to permit the coming into being of the literary work itself” (Jameson 1972: 58). Most readers will disregard or pay little attention to those aspects of the work that are not essential to the unfolding of the narrative, but according to the Formalists these aspects are “potentially the focus of art” (Brooker et al 2005: 35). The features the Formalists focus on in prose fiction thus anticipate subsequent literary movements in several ways: by “attending to those features of texts which resist the relentless process of naturalization” (36) the Formalists can be viewed as the precursors to both structuralist and poststructuralist thought. Similarly, the Formalist conception of ‘plot’ as a form of defamiliarization “prevents us from regarding the incidents as typical and familiar. Instead, we are made constantly aware how artifice constructs or forges (makes/counterfeits) the ‘reality’ presented to us. In its display of poiesis (‘poet’ = ‘maker’) rather than mimesis (‘copying’ = realism), [Russian Formalism] looks forward ... to postmodernist self-reflexivity” (35).

I now turn to a discussion of the shift in Russian Formalism towards accounting for literary evolution. In “Art as Technique” Shklovsky asserted that the “purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (1916: 16) thus equating defamiliarization with the aesthetic function. For this reason N. W. Visser says “[i]t is in devices of ‘defamiliarization’ that Shklovsky locates the literariness of literary texts” (1982: 17). This is an accurate description of the initial phase of the Formalists, during which
the primary aim was to identify and catalogue devices that cause defamiliarization. However, the concept of defamiliarization necessarily entails constant renewal: poetic language’s “prevailing aesthetic character also leads it to changeability, for the aesthetic effectiveness of any device vanishes after a certain time because of automatization, i.e. vulgarization and generalization” (Mukařovský 1976: 17). This recognition forced the Formalists to acknowledge that aesthetic effect is not an inherent property of particular devices, but can be obtained and lost: “no single property characterizes poetic language permanently and generally. Poetic language is permanently characterized only by its function; however, function is not a property but a _mode of utilizing_ the properties of a given phenomenon” (Mukařovský 1976: 9). The later phase of Formalist theorizing was still concerned with the function of defamiliarization in art, but turned towards accounting for the evolution of literary devices that naturally occurs when a given device is absorbed into the canon and becomes automatized. Eichenbaum explains the consequence of this insight for Formalist poetics:

> [T]he original attempt of the Formalists to take a particular structural device and to establish its identity in diverse materials became an attempt to differentiate, to understand, the _function_ of a device in each given case. This notion of functional significance was gradually pushed toward the foreground and the original idea of the device pushed into the background.

(Eichenbaum 1926a: 1083)

When Eichenbaum speaks of the “attempt to differentiate, to understand, the _function_ of a device in each given case” he is referring to the dynamic relationship between new literary devices and the established or automatized devices that give rise to newer ones. The shift in Formalist theorizing, from viewing the text in isolation to investigating literary evolution, did not necessitate an examination of the socio-historical factors outside of the text that may have influenced its production. The exclusion of external factors from the analysis of literary texts had been one of the central tenets of Russian Formalism since its conception, and the study of the evolution of literary forms was carried out in the same vein. Eichenbaum suggests “the central problem of the history of literature is the problem of evolution without personality – the study of literature as a _self-formed social phenomenon_” (Eichenbaum 1926a: 1086, original emphasis). Russian Formalism conceives of literary
evolution as an internal adaptation of devices that once served a defamiliarizing function, but have become absorbed into the literary tradition and consequently no longer present a deviation, but rather the norm. Shklovsky explains that

The work of art arises from a background of other works and through association with them. The form of a work of art is defined by its relation to other works of art, to forms existing prior to it ... Not only parody, but also any kind of work of art is created parallel to and opposed to some kind of form. The purpose of the new form is not to express new content, but to change an old form which has lost its aesthetic quality.

(Shklovsky in Eichenbaum 1926a: 1074, original emphasis)

The Formalists, led by Shklovsky, originally conceived of the literary work as made up of various unrelated devices. However, the investigation into literary history caused a re-evaluation of this view and as a result the work was no longer viewed in isolation, but was seen as part of a structured system. The influence of Russian Formalist principles on the Prague Linguistic Circle can clearly be seen in this regard. Roman Jakobson’s concept of the “dominant”, formulated when he worked alongside the Prague linguists, attempts to explain the laws that govern this system. In his essay “The Dominant” (1978), Jakobson explains that the literary work is a

structured system, a regularly ordered hierarchical set of artistic devices. Poetic evolution is a shift in this hierarchy. This hierarchy of artistic devices changes within the framework of a given poetic genre; the change, moreover, affects the hierarchy of poetic genres, and, simultaneously, the distribution of artistic devices among the individual genres. Genres which were originally secondary paths, subsidiary variants, now come to the fore, whereas canonical genres are pushed toward the rear.

(Jakobson 1978: 8)

To understand why “originally secondary paths” present themselves to usurp the position of more “canonical genres” it is helpful to examine Mukařovský’s concept of ‘foregrounding’, which is derived from Jakobson’s notion of the ‘dominant’ (Coetzee 1982: 46). Mukařovský views the text as shaped by “the dynamic and reciprocally defining opposition of background and foreground in the literary work” (46). The ‘background’ to a literary text refers to any form of language usage that has been assimilated into the poetic diction and no longer serves a defamiliarizing function. The poetic utterance is ‘foregrounded’ as a deviatory use of language against this norm. J.M. Coetzee explores the background-
foreground opposition in his essay “Linguistics and Literature”, which is primarily concerned with Jakobson’s structuralist writings.

Coetzee contends that

Since the device that is foregrounded ... can itself, if repeated often enough, become a norm and thus a new background, we see that the background-foreground opposition is a dynamic one. Furthermore, it has an historical dimension: what Wordsworth calls the speech of common men, for example, is a diction foregrounded against the canon of late eighteenth century poetic diction; as it establishes itself, however, it turns into a background of canonic poetic diction itself.

(Coetzee 1982: 47)

The concept of ‘foregrounding’ is a more sophisticated reformulation of the Formalists’ earlier work on poetic language because it accounts for the literary work as part of a system that is continually changing and adapting itself. Viewed from this perspective, Shklovsky’s claim that Sterne’s novel represents the epitome of literariness can no longer be viewed as an enduringly valid judgement: Sterne’s devices, which were shown to be very effective at defamiliarization, may become automatized. It is significant that Coetzee notes the historical dimension involved in literary evolution: the realisation that the value attached to devices is in a perpetual state of flux caused Jakobson to declare “evaluation and interpreting a given literary phenomenon is a futile occupation. Only the description is valid; all value judgments are subjective, a matter of taste and historical moment” (Jakobson in Thompson 1976: 94).

The Russian Formalists’ theorizing underwent many transformations in the attempt to account for what constitutes ‘literariness’. Their initial premise that literary language violates the norms of practical discourse in order to de-automatize language is one of their most enduring tenets. Their preliminary investigation into the specific ‘form’ that facilitates artistic perception resulted in concrete analyses that traced various devices and catalogued their effects in single texts. However, the examination of isolated devices could only stimulate critical enquiry for a limited period, and the Formalists soon drew wider conclusions from their studies into the defamiliarizing effects of devices. The shift from the rather vague term ‘form’ to the concrete analysis of devices reached its conclusion when the Formalists adopted a more fluid view of the ways in which texts influence and evolve
because of each other. The culmination of their research into literary history was a realisation that “literariness’ [is] a function of the differential relations between one sort of discourse and another; it [is] not an eternally given property” (Eagleton 1985: 5).

New Criticism: The Literary Object

New Criticism, at its inception, faced many of the same challenges as the Russian Formalist school. The proponents of New Criticism sought to free literary analysis from concerns that they deemed extrinsic to the text, namely questions about the author that turn literary criticism into a field of biographical study, and questions regarding the political, sociological and historical significance of literary works. They wanted to set up literary criticism as a discipline that could challenge the then pervasive belief that only the natural sciences, which furnish the world with verifiable facts, could rightly be considered arbiters of knowledge. The method of close reading espoused by New Criticism refuted various widely held ideas about literature:

The method of close textual analysis was a response on one side to those who dismissed literature as a frivolity and on the other side to those who defended it in terms which rendered it frivolous. Close textual analysis, producing evidence of the richness and complexity of literary works, simultaneously answered the impressionist, who viewed the work as a mere occasion for pleasurable excitement, the message-hunter or political propagandist, who reduced the work to mere uplifting propositions, and the positivist, who denied any significance to the work at all. And close analysis of meaning could also demonstrate to the historians and biographers that a literary work was more than a datum in the history of ideas or the life of the author.

(Graff 1995: 141)

The original impetus for their close textual analysis of texts was to protect the literary work from external considerations and to show through their rigorous analyses that literature is able to provide a form of knowledge that cannot adequately be conveyed through logical discourse. In light of this it is ironic that subsequent to the widespread success of the New Critical approach, the main proponents of this movement have been criticized for promoting a form of analysis which is indicative of the modern “technological approach to the world, an approach which looks only for such knowledge of an object as will give mastery and

33
control over it” (Palmer 1969: 226). Similarly the ‘objective’ analysis promoted by the New Critics has been described as “the revenge of the intellect upon art” (Sontag 1967: 7) and as a form of intrinsic criticism that “seeks an absolute basis in scientific empiricism” (Coe 1995: 130). Although these criticisms are arguably valid, what the quotation from Gerald Graff illustrates is that the literary criticism advocated by the New Critics had to defy various factions within the literary community simultaneously. As a result, their theories, especially the propositions regarding the ‘objective’ nature of their method, are at times inconsistent and contradictory. In his study Literature Against Itself (1995), Graff examines the various criticisms that have been leveled at the New Critics and argues persuasively that those who have attacked this theoretical movement on the grounds of its aspirations toward empiricism fail to recognise that their “methodology of ‘close reading’ was an attempt not to imitate science but to refute its devaluation of literature” (Graff 1995: 133). In this section I will examine how some of the main exponents of New Criticism, including Cleanth Brooks, William Wimsatt and Mark Schorer, conceive of the literary object, and how their main hypotheses correspond to those proposed by the Russian Formalists. I will also consider the influence of I.A. Richards’s ideas on the doctrines of the New Critics. Through an examination of these critics’ works it becomes clear that Graff is right to suggest that the New Critics stand “squarely in the romantic tradition of the defence of the humanities as an antidote to science and positivism” (133).

One of the central tenets that New Criticism shares with Russian Formalism is the view that criticism should concern itself with the literary work as such; both schools of thought regard the literary work as a self-sufficient, autonomous whole. John Crowe Ransom said the fundamental law of criticism is that it “shall be objective, shall cite the nature of the object” (Ransom in Abrams 1999: 181). This need to explain “the nature of the [literary] object” (reminiscent of Roman Jakobson’s declaration that the business of the critic is literariness, not literature) reveals that the New Critics felt the modes of analysis that preceded their work did not adequately deal with what it is that makes the literary work literary. Viewing the text as an autonomous whole allowed the New Critics to gain a position from which it was possible to dismiss a whole range of questions about the causes and effects of the work that had previously been viewed as essential to the explication of a text. However, it also entailed severing the text from references to ‘reality’. This position was fully articulated by
I.A. Richards, who proposed that the literary work does not pretend to offer ‘truths’ in the scientific sense of the word, but is rather made up of various ‘pseudo-statements’. Richards explains that a “pseudo-statement is a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organising our impulses and attitudes ... a statement, on the other hand, is justified by its truth, i.e., its correspondence, in a highly technical sense, with the fact to which it points” (Richards 1926: 23).

In order to understand the validity of pseudo-statements it is necessary to examine Richards’s conception of the numerous functions language has to fulfil simultaneously in literature. Richards distinguishes between four functions of language: Sense, Feeling, Tone and Intention. Sense refers to the content of speech, or in the case of poetry to the logical content that can be extracted through paraphrase. Feeling signifies the speaker’s attitude toward this content. Tone is related to the speaker’s “attitude to his listener” (Richards 2001a: 185) and Intention refers to the conscious or unconscious “effect [the speaker] is trying to promote” (185). These four functions influence each other and at times one or other function will become more dominant. In poetry, it is often the Feeling, and at times the Tone, that predominates, which may result in the Sense being distorted or suppressed. For Richards, when this happens [the intrusion of Feeling or another function on the Sense] the statements which appear in the poetry are there for the sake of their effects upon feelings, not for their own sake. Hence to challenge their truth or to question whether they deserve serious attention as statements claiming truth, is to mistake their function. The point is that many, if not most, of the statements in poetry are there as a means to the manipulation and expression of feelings and attitudes, not as contributions to any body of doctrine of any type whatever.

(Richards 2001a: 189-90)

Richards states that in poetry Sense is often secondary to Feeling and that the distortion of Sense is justified if the poem manages to adjust the reader’s attitude in such a way that it achieves an “equilibrium of opposed impulses” (Richards 2001b: 235). In this lies the value of poetry: poetry does not serve a cognitive function, instead it serves as a means for readers to come to terms with complex experiences, because, according to Richards, “subtle or recondite experiences are for most men incommunicable and indescribable” (Richards
Poetry evokes various, often conflicting, attitudes in readers and if the poem is successful it will be able to reconcile these attitudes and instill in the reader an “intricately wrought composure” (27). The other criterion that ensures that the poem is a valuable experience is that it must “satisfy an appetency without involving the frustration of some equal or more important appetency” (Richards 2001b:43). The more appetencies a poem is able to satisfy (or the more attitudes the poem is able to induce in the reader) the more valuable the poetic experience is.

Richards can be seen as a precursor to New Criticism for any number of reasons, and his insistence that the evaluation of the worth of a work is the domain of the critic is evident in the theorizing of subsequent New Critics. However, the American New Critics distanced themselves from Richards’s psychological approach to the text that focuses on the emotive response of readers. Richards’s claim that an objective assessment of the work can be based on this principle was later challenged on the grounds that such criticism can only result in “impressionism and relativism” and that it stems from a fundamental “confusion between the poem and its results” (Wimsatt & Beardsley 1949: 1388). Nonetheless, Richards’s proposal that statements in literature cannot be said to be either true or false, but can only be judged by whether they are harmoniously reconciled and made to form a whole, is mirrored in the American New Critics’ defence of the autonomy of the literary work and in their emphasis on the ‘organic whole’ that successful poems form. Graff says the New Critics successfully neutralised the truth-claims contained in literature by arguing “that ideas and philosophies in literary works are present not as assertions to be believed but as pretexts that permit the structural or emotional aspects of the text to unfold” (Graff 1995: 152). This position closely resembles Richards’s notion of pseudo-statements (or the emotive use of language).

Although Richards illuminated the diverse functions language performs in literary works and distinguished between emotive and scientific uses of language, his insights into ‘literary’, or poetic language cannot rival those offered by the American New Critics. Nevertheless, the importance of the distinction between emotive and scientific uses of language is still perceptible in the formulations of the later New Critics, as can be seen in Cleanth Brooks’s essay “The Language of Paradox” (1947). In this essay Brooks suggests that literary language
is not governed by logic, because the insights poetry provides are ultimately paradoxical and
metaphoric. Brooks explains that our

prejudices force us to regard paradox as intellectual rather than emotional, clever rather
than profound, rational rather than divinely irrational. Yet there is a sense in which paradox
is the language appropriate and inevitable to poetry. It is the scientist whose truth requires a
language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can
be approached only in terms of paradox.

(Brooks 1947b: 28)

It is interesting that Brooks wants to sever the form of paradox that he is proposing from
“intellectual”, “clever” and “rational” associations. It seems that Brooks values poetry that is
“emotional”, “profound” and “divinely irrational”, and that these terms characterise “the
truth which the poet utters”. The subtle suggestion that poetry should be “emotional”,
“profound” and “divinely irrational” echoes the Romantic poets’ views on poetry; for this
reason it is significant that Brooks supports his discussion with evidence from the poetry of
William Wordsworth. The belief held by many Romantic poets that poetry provides a special
form of cognition that is “divinely irrational” is conspicuous in many of Brooks’s analyses. It
is stated explicitly in one of the articles of faith Brooks subscribes to, which contends that
“the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed those of logic”
(Brooks 1951: 22).

Brooks shows that Wordsworth’s poetry is effective because he presents familiar sights in
unexpected ways. He also quotes sections from the preface to Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads*
that are in agreement with the view of the paradoxical nature of poetry that he is
proposing.5 Wordsworth says he wanted to “choose incidents and situations from common
life”, but that these “ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual aspect”
(Wordsworth in Brooks 1947b: 30). Coleridge’s take on his friend’s enterprise is even more
revealing: he says Wordsworth’s goal “was to propose to himself as object, to give the
charm of novelty to things of every day, and to excite a feeling analogous to the

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5 Brooks is, however, careful to point out that Wordsworth may have been unconscious of the paradoxes
presented in his poetry; the strength of Brooks’s argument is not gained through reference to the author’s
intention, but rather through rigorous analysis of his work. It seems Brooks refers to Wordsworth and
Coleridge merely because their statements are in complete concurrence with what he is proposing.
supernatural, by awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us” (Coleridge in Brooks 1947b: 30). This conception of literary language as paradoxical bears a close resemblance to Shklovsky’s notion of defamiliarization; indeed, even the phrases Coleridge employs, such as “awakening the mind’s attention from the lethargy of custom”, remind one of the phrases Shklovsky uses to express his understanding of defamiliarization. Brooks says that the paradoxes involved in placing the “tarnished familiar world in a new light” (30) are not only characteristic of Romantic poetry, but of poetry in general; these “paradoxes spring from the very nature of the poet’s language: it is a language in which the connotations play as great a part as the denotations” (Brooks 1947b: 31). It is clear that, for Brooks at least, the Russian Formalist view that defamiliarization is an inherent function of literature is true.

Richards pointed out, as did the Russian Formalists, that literary language does not primarily serve a practical function (furthering Sense) and is for this reason freed from the rules that govern practical discourse. When Brooks states that in literary language “the connotations play as great a part as the denotations” he is in agreement with this view; the connotative power of words adds complexity and ambiguity to literature, but can only hinder the efficacy of communication that fulfils a practical function. Brooks says “[t]he tendency of science is necessarily to stabilize terms, to freeze them into strict denotations; the poet’s tendency is by contrast disruptive. The terms are continually modifying each other, and thus violating their dictionary meanings” (Brooks 1947b: 31). Boris Eichenbaum offers a very similar observation:

[A]s words get into verse they are, as it were, taken out of ordinary speech. They are surrounded by a new aura of meaning and perceived not against the background of speech in general but against the background of poetic speech ... [T]he formation of collateral meanings, which disrupts ordinary verbal associations, is the chief peculiarity of the semantics of poetry.

(Eichenbaum 1926: 1081)

According to Richards, this ability that the poet has - of “disrupt[ing] ordinary verbal associations” in such a way that a word is absorbed into a new context and takes on new meanings - can sometimes be an indication of the poet’s skill: “[t]o triumph over the resistances of words may sometimes be considered the measure of the poet’s power”
Brooks, Eichenbaum and Richards point to the important function literature fulfils of “constantly reviving man’s attitude toward language” (Mukařovský 1967: 11). The author’s ability to rescue a word, or idea, from our accustomed use of it and to present it to us in such a way that our habitual perception of it is shattered and unexpected meanings are generated is, as Eichenbaum says, “the chief peculiarity of the semantics of poetry” (Eichenbaum 1926a: 1081). Shklovsky says this act of defamiliarization occurs when the author “snatches a notion from the semantic plane at which it is usually found, and with the aid of a word (trope) he transfers it to a new semantic plane. We are struck by the novelty resulting from placing the object in a new ambience. A new word fits the object like a new dress” (Shklovsky 1923b: 81).

It is because of the various connotations that literary language evokes and the consequent ambiguities that saturate most literary works, and especially poetry, that the New Critics are opposed to paraphrasing. In his essay “The Heresy of Paraphrase” (1947) Cleanth Brooks suggests that paraphrases can be used as “pointers and as shorthand references”, but must never be mistaken for the “real core of meaning which constitutes the essence of the poem” (Brooks 1947a: 1356). A paraphrase is an attempt to account in logical terms for what the poem ‘says’. Yet such an approach to poetry does not recognise that the poet uses analogies, metaphors and paradoxical language precisely because what is expressed can only be hinted at in an approximate way. Brooks explains that “metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes; necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions” (1947b: 32). To paraphrase is also to mistake the purpose of poetry: it stems from the view that a single, homogenous ‘meaning’ can be extracted from a poem; it takes the poem’s “meanderings as negative” (Brooks 1947a: 1362). This view of poetry fails to see that the “apparent irrelevancies which metrical pattern and metaphor introduce do become relevant when we realise that they function in a good poem to modify, qualify, and develop the total attitude which we are to take in coming to terms with the total situation” (1362). The attempt to produce a logical paraphrase that adequately ‘explains’ the poem is thus a futile attempt; in trying to convey what the poem expresses the paraphrase will have to imitate the means through which the ideas are expressed – consequently a true paraphrase will only be able to render the ‘content’ of the poem by adopting analogies and metaphors similar to those found in the
The difficulties involved in paraphrasing are a testament to the inextricably linked nature of form and content in literature. When Brooks says that a paraphrase cannot encompass the “core of meaning” or “essence” of a poem he is referring to this tightly woven relationship between form and content. It is interesting that the New Critics experienced the same difficulties as the Formalists in trying to pin down exactly what is meant by the term “form”. Brooks argues that

[Though it is in terms of structure that we must describe poetry, the term ‘structure’ is certainly not altogether satisfactory as a term. One means by it something far more internal than the metrical pattern, say, or than the sequence of images. The structure meant is certainly not ‘form’ in the conventional sense in which we think of form as a kind of envelope which ‘contains’ the ‘content’. The structure obviously is everywhere conditioned by the nature of the material which goes into the poem. The nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material.]

(Brooks 1947a: 1355)

In a similar vein Eichenbaum says that one of the main problems the Formalists faced was trying to find an appropriate description of “form”; they “had to find more specific formulations of the principle of perceptible form so that they could make possible the analysis of form itself – the analysis of form understood as content” (Eichenbaum 1926a: 1070). It is also significant that both Brooks and Eichenbaum employ the same metaphor in trying to redefine form: Brooks wants to move away from the conception of “form as a kind of envelope which ‘contains’ the ‘content’” and Eichenbaum rejects the “traditional idea of form as an envelope, a vessel into which one pours a liquid (the content)” (1069). In seems that in trying to define this crucial concept that is so peculiar to literary language both critics are unable to gesture towards the appropriate meaning without using metaphor.

I have suggested that the Russian Formalists’ understanding of the inseparability of form and content is derived from the work of Andrej Belyj, who believed that “the synthesis of the known and the means of knowing is always there” (Thompson 1971: 57). To underscore how similar the Russian Formalists and New Critics’ conception of the relationship between form and content is, it is helpful to compare the ideas of Belyj with the ideas expressed by W.M. Urban. Brooks quotes Urban in support of his argument against paraphrasing (which
necessarily involves the separation of content from form). In *Language and Reality* (1939) Urban says:

> The general principle of the inseparability of intuition and expression holds with special force for the aesthetic intuition. Here it means that form and content, or content and medium, are inseparable. The artist does not first intuit his object and then find the appropriate medium. It is rather in and through his medium that he intuits the object ... To pass from the intuitible to the nonintuitible is to negate the function and meaning of the symbol ... [For it] is precisely because the more universal and ideal relations cannot be adequately expressed directly that they are indirectly expressed by means of the more intuitible.

(Urban in Brooks 1947a: 13578)

Urban’s ideas on the ways in which we make sense of reality correspond almost exactly to those expressed by Belyj. Urban says the “artist does not first intuit his object and then find the appropriate medium. It is rather in and through his medium that he intuits the object” (my emphasis). This is roughly the same idea Belyj voices; he believes “cognition is not a reflecting process but a creative reconstruction of the data of perception. Consequently, the artistic act is creative in that it does not reflect reality but creates concrete symbolic forms under which reality can be known” (Thompson 1971: 63-5). Belyj’s belief that “reality is unknowable in its essence” is also apparent in Urban’s theorizing when he says that it is “precisely because the more universal and ideal relations cannot be adequately expressed directly that they are indirectly expressed by means of the more intuitible”. Both theorists thus insist that the form a concept assumes when it is expressed in language can never be changed without thereby changing the content. The content does not simply come into being on its own, but is discovered and given a particular shape through the form in which it is expressed.

The shift in the Russian Formalists’ theorizing from the rather vague term “form” to the more specific applications of “technique” is also evident in the work of the New Critics. Mark Schorer, in one of the few essays produced by a New Critic that deals explicitly with fiction, suggests that

> Modern criticism, through its exacting scrutiny of literary texts, has demonstrated with finality that in art beauty and truth are indivisible and one. The Keatsian overtones of these terms are mitigated and an old dilemma solved if for beauty we substitute form, and for truth, content. We may, without risk of loss, narrow them even more, and speak of
technique and subject matter. Modern criticism has shown us that to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience; and that it is only when we speak of achieved content, the form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics. The difference between content, or experience, and achieved content, or art, is technique.

(Schorer 1948: 67)

This “achieved” content that Schorer speaks of closely resembles Brooks’s proposal that the “nature of the material sets the problem to be solved, and the solution is the ordering of the material” (Brooks 1947a: 1355). Schorer and Brooks emphasise that without technique the material the writer deals with remains what Schorer describes as a “lump of experience” (1948:69). This description of the content as a “lump of experience” conjures up a useful analogy: for the purposes of criticism, the ideas the writer works with can be compared to the sculptor’s clay or stone. The material the artist uses is not in itself aesthetically pleasing; it is only the skill of the artist, the techniques the writer makes use of, that are able to mould the raw material into a work of art. The quality of the material used may influence the final product, but it is the craftsmanship that defines the creation as a work of art. This “achieved content” also bears a remarkable similarity to Shklovsky’s distinction between fabula and sjuzet; where fabula refers to the raw, unprocessed material from which the author’s ideas sprout and sjuzet refers to the specifically literary form these ideas assume once the author has refined them using literary techniques. Schorer’s and Brooks’s propositions resonate with the principle the Formalists derived from Belyj that “[t]he artist labours over form, not over content, and it is his success in regard to form that determines the richness of content in his work” (Thompson 1971: 63).

In his discussion of the techniques used in fiction Schorer also suggests, as Brooks did in his account of the paradoxical nature of literary language, that the transformation language undergoes when it is subjected to literary techniques enables it to present familiar situations or objects in such a way that our habitual perception is abandoned so that a new vision results. Schorer says: “Technique is really what T.S. Eliot means by ‘convention’ – any selection, structure, or distortion, any form or rhythm imposed upon the world of action; by means of which – it should be added – our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed” (Schorer 1948: 69). Similarly, Richards also notes:
Any familiar activity, when set in different conditions so that the impulses which make it up have to adjust themselves to fresh streams of impulses due to the new conditions is likely to take on increased richness and fullness in consciousness. This general fact is of great importance for the arts, particularly for poetry, painting and sculpture, the representative or mimetic arts. *For in these a totally new setting for what may be familiar elements is essentially involved.*

(Richards 2001b: 100-1, my emphasis)

Within the theoretical framework of the New Criticism several major theorists discussed the idea that art serves the purpose of renewing our “apprehension of the world” (Schorer 1948: 69). However, this concept was not as fully formulated as the notion of defamiliarization in the work of Shklovsky. For the New Critics the effect of defamiliarization is not an end in itself. The paradoxes characteristic of literary language may cause defamiliarization, but the New Critics insist that these paradoxes are resolved within ‘successful’ poems that form an ‘organic whole’. Brooks explains that

The characteristic unity of a poem ... lies in the unification of attitudes into a hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude. In the unified poem, the poet has ‘come to terms’ with his experience. The poem does not merely eventuate in a logical conclusion. The conclusion of the poem is the working out of the various tensions – set up by whatever means – by propositions, metaphors, symbols. The unity is achieved by a dramatic process, not a logical; it represents an equilibrium of forces, not a formula.

(Brooks 1947a: 1361)

The Russian Formalists often examined those aspects of the literary work that are not fully ‘motivated’ and as a result underscore the constructed nature of the work. The New Critics, by contrast, view these disruptive elements within the text as ultimately part of a “hierarchy subordinated to a total and governing attitude”. This preoccupation with the unity a poem achieves, or fails to achieve, is also one of the reasons the New Critics predominantly focus on poetry. Brooks says: “[T]he primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity – the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole” (Brooks 1951: 22). However, examining the various aspects of a literary work and considering the ways in which each aspect can be viewed as “building up [the] whole” are approaches that are, arguably, less applicable to longer narratives than to poetry.
In his essay, “The Structure of the Concrete Universal” (1954), W.K. Wimsatt suggests that the unity that is characteristic of great works of literature is an effect of the author’s ability to merge the particular with the universal. This union, which Wimsatt terms the ‘concrete universal’, is the means by which an abstract, intangible concept is given a specific form; through this union the reader is led to recognise the ‘essential’ in the particular. Wimsatt says:

[A] work of literary art is in some peculiar sense a very individual thing or a very universal thing or both ... Whether or not one believes in universals, one may see the persistence in literary criticism of a theory that poetry presents the concrete and the universal, or the individual and the universal, or an object which in a mysterious and special way is both highly general and highly particular.

(Wimsatt 1954: 40 - 41)

Wimsatt says that, historically, literary critics have oscillated between the view that literary greatness inheres either in the work’s capacity to express what is unique and particular or in its portrayal of what is universal. He explains that “[n]ot all these theories of the concrete universal lay equal stress on the two sides of the paradox, and it seems indicative of the vitality of the theory and of the truth implicit in it that the two sides have been capable of exaggeration into antithetical schools and theories of poetry” (42). The suggestion that there is some implicit truth in the view that literature depicts both what is universal and particular reveals that for Wimsatt the concrete universal is a defining characteristic of literary works. However, to isolate the two views from each other, and to give credence either to the theory of particularity or to the theory of universality leads, in the case of the former, to “the idiosyncratic and the unintelligible and to the psychology of the author”; in the latter we then find “a standard of material objectivity, the average tulip, the average human form, some sort of average” (43).

Wimsatt states that if criticism is to become more objective the critic must analyse the ways in which the general and the particular coalesce in poetry. He says: “Rhetorical analysis of poetry has always tended to separate from evaluation, technique from worth. The structure of poems as concrete and universal is the principle by which the critic can try to keep the two together” (48). In order to attend to the concrete universals found in literature Wimsatt says the critic must investigate “how a work of literature can be either more individual (unique) or more universal than other kinds of writing, or how it can combine the individual
and the universal more than other kinds” (44). In answer to this question, Wimsatt suggests that

[W]hat distinguishes poetry from scientific or logical discourse is a degree of irrelevant concreteness in descriptive details ... The irrelevance is a texture of concreteness which does not contribute anything to the argument but is somehow enjoyable or valuable for its own sake, the vehicle of a metaphor which one boards heedless of where it runs, whether crosstown or downtown – just for the ride ... The fact is that all concrete illustration has about it something of the irrelevant. An apple falling from a tree illustrates gravity, but apple and tree are irrelevant to the pure theory of gravity. It may be that what happens in a poem is that the apple and the tree are somehow made more than usually relevant.

(Wimsatt 1954: 44)

It has been noted that the New Critics’ emphasis on the objectivity of their approach is often undermined by the formulas they use to express their understanding of the literary work’s ontological status (Graff 1995: 142). Here again Wimsatt proclaims that a study of the concrete universals found in literature can amount to an objective form of criticism. Yet the terms Wimsatt uses to describe the union of the general and the particular in literature render this concept elusive and almost invest it with numinous associations: Wimsatt says the concrete universal operates “in some peculiar sense” (40) and in “a mysterious and special way” (41). And again, when Wimsatt explains the importance of irrelevant concrete descriptions in literature, he says it is “somehow made more than usually relevant” (44, my emphasis). The New Critics’ claim to objective analysis is similarly weakened by Cleanth Brooks’s assertion that “the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed those of logic” (Brooks 1951: 22, my emphasis).

I suggested in the beginning of this section that the New Criticism had to defy various factions within the literary community, and that the polemics the theorists who headed this movement were involved in led to some inconsistencies in their theorizing; as Graff points out “New Critical theory had adopted positions that cut the ground from under New Critical interpretive method” (1995: 143). The almost mystical descriptions of literary works that pervade the writings of Brooks and Wimsatt are in line with their defence of poetry and their view that poetry is “a carrier of meanings universal to man” (Thompson 1971: 51). Yet the quasi-religious function ascribed to literature, and especially to poetry, is not entirely compatible with the form of objective interpretation that the New Critics frequently profess to practise. This incompatibility is especially apparent in the terms by which the New Critics
defend literature against the view that literary works can be reduced to a few logical statements that contain the ‘meaning’ of the work. The New Critics challenge this view by emphasizing that, as Archibald MacLeish famously proposed, the “poem should not mean but be” (Wimsatt 1954: 47) and by insisting that poetry is “experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience” (Brooks 1947: 213).

Gerald Graff has observed that it is “odd that the New Critics should be denounced for their arid scientific empiricism, since this was one of the chief cultural ills which the New Critics themselves sought to combat” (1995: 133). Ewa Thompson suggests the New Critics empowered literary study by instilling in the public a sense that “poetry enables man to grasp things which scientific analysis can never hope to grasp but which are nevertheless cognitively valuable and important” (Thompson 1971: 38). Thompson observes that this preoccupation with the meanings or truths literature conveys that cannot be reduced to “emotional outcries [or] empirical facts [or] the results of using the transformation rules of a given language” (86) is an element that distinguishes the New Criticism from other types of formalism. It is also a concern that underscores the lasting influence of the ideas of the Romantic poets on the New Critics. Coleridge’s description of the creative imagination also stresses this point; he says it

reveals itself in the balance or reconcilement of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual, with the representative; the sense of novelty and freshness, with old and familiar objects; a more than usual state of emotion, with more than usual order.

(Coleridge in Brooks 1947b: 36)

In this description the seeds that come to fruition in the theorizing of the New Criticism are already apparent: the necessity of using paradoxes and seeming contradictions to give expression to new ideas; uniting the particular with the universal; depicting what is old and familiar in new and unexpected ways; and also the importance of balancing these elements in order to achieve unity.
Chapter 2

Defamiliarization in *Mrs Dalloway*

Defamiliarization and the Aesthetic Vision of Roger Fry

The formalists proposed that the effect of defamiliarization, or of inducing a renewed perception in the reader, is a defining function of art. Defamiliarization as a function of art is not, of course, an insight that originated with Viktor Shklovsky and the Russian Formalists; M.H. Abrams points out that “Samual Taylor Coleridge had long before described the ‘prime merit’ of a literary genius to be the representation of ‘familiar objects’ so as to evoke ‘freshness of sensation’” (Abrams 1999: 103). The belief that art is intimately concerned with temporarily dislodging our ordinary modes of perception also underpins the aesthetic theories of the painter Roger Fry. Fry, a close friend of Virginia Woolf and a member of the Bloomsbury Group, was in part responsible for bringing about the first Post-Impressionist exhibition in England at the Grafton Gallery in 1910 (Uhlmann 2010: 62).

As a painter, Fry was deeply aware that the first Impressionist exhibition in 1874 heralded a fundamental shift in the visual arts, which would culminate in the various artistic movements now broadly referred to as Modern art. Fry’s collection of essays entitled *Vision and Design* (1937) can be seen as an attempt to educate the public on how to appreciate these new forms of art that dramatically depart from the realist modes of representation that had dominated Western art from medieval times. Of the Impressionists Fry says that they were the first emphatically to uphold “the complete detachment of the artistic vision from the values imposed on vision by everyday life” (1937: 18). Impressionist paintings are not concerned with precisely reproducing details that lend the painting greater verisimilitude, but rather attempt to capture the essence of a subject by portraying the overall impression of a scene. The images they produced, by capturing the ways in which light reflects off surfaces and combining this with a sense of movement created by using complementary colours, were not, as Fry says, restrained by the “values imposed on vision by everyday life”. With the realist tradition there had always been an implicit “assumption of a direct and decisive connection between life and art” (17), but the Impressionists’ vision of reality - rendered through the play of light and intertwined with a newfound emphasis on
colour - challenged the view that fidelity to reality is the true measure of art. Fry says that the

effects thus explored were completely unfamiliar to the ordinary man, whose vision is
limited to the mere recognition of objects with a view to the uses of everyday life. He was
forced, in looking at [the Impressionists’] pictures, to accept as artistic representation
something very remote from all his previous expectations, and thereby he also acquired in
time a new tolerance in his judgements on works of art, a tolerance which was destined to
bear a still further strain in succeeding developments.

(Fry 1937: 18)

In our day to day lives our vision is “limited”, because we do not see objects in their
entirety, but merely recognise them, thereby exerting the least amount of perceptive
energy. Fry says our habitual means of perception become so specialised that we see “just
enough to recognise and identify each object or person; that done, they go into an entry in
our mental catalogue and are no more really seen” (29). The Impressionists’ paintings
served to awaken viewers’ aesthetic sensibilities, because in viewing these paintings they
were confronted with something “completely unfamiliar”. The strain these images place
upon the act of perception is suggested when Fry says viewers were “forced ... to accept as
artistic representation something very remote from all [their] previous expectations” (my
emphasis). Fry also conveys the impression that these viewers’ aesthetic judgements were
determined by their “previous expectations”, a factor that is significant for two reasons.
First, it appears art works are judged not on the basis of the strength of the formal
composition or any inherent property of the art work, but rather on the basis of whether it
conforms to the prevailing tradition that has been assimilated and thus serves as a
benchmark against which to compare other works of art. Second, if viewers have
expectations, if they look to art in order to perceive that with which they are already
familiar, the perceptual process of defamiliarization as a function of art is not fulfilled.

Fry’s assessment of the limited role vision plays in our everyday lives is very similar to
Shklovsky’s. Fry distinguishes between the selective means of perception that functions
when we are actively involved in situations, and the broader mode of perception that
operates when we observe art, for example, and which only comes into play when we are
“separated from actual life by the absence of responsive action” (26). This latter mode of
perception resembles the Kantian view that art stimulates “disinterested contemplation”,

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because in “works of art one observes ‘purposiveness without purpose’, a somehow meaningful arrangement of elements which is, at the same time, useless from the viewpoint of practical life” (Thompson 1971: 60). Fry says we can observe how this mode of perception functions if we look at

[A] mirror in which a street scene is reflected. If we look at the street itself we are almost sure to adjust ourselves in some way to its actual existence. We recognise an acquaintance, and wonder why he looks so dejected this morning, or become interested in a new fashion in hats – the moment we do that the spell is broken, we are reacting to life itself in however slight a degree, but, in the mirror, it is easier to abstract ourselves completely, and look upon the changing scene as a whole. It then, at once, takes on the visionary quality, and we become true spectators, not selecting what we will see, but seeing everything equally and thereby we come to notice a number of appearances and relations of appearances, which would have escaped our notice before, owing to that perpetual economising by selection of what impressions we will assimilate, which in life we perform by unconscious processes.

(Fry 1937: 25-6)

Fry asserts that our habitual mode of perception is limited “owing to that perpetual economising by selection of what impressions we will assimilate”. This sounds very similar to Shklovsky, who states that “[t]he process of ‘algebrization’, the over-automatization of an object, permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort” (1916:15). Interestingly both Fry and Shklovsky refer to the ‘economy’ of our customary perception, suggesting the thrift and sparingness with which our visual senses attend to our external environments. This ability is, of course, crucial to our survival in the world, allowing us to assimilate and respond to only those elements that can potentially impact on our beings. However, it does curtail our perceptual faculties, Fry says, because we do not only live in the ‘actual’ world – we lead ‘imaginary lives’ too. He contends, “Art, then, is an expression and a stimulus of this imaginary life” (26). It is only in situations where we are able to “abstract ourselves completely, and look upon the changing scene as a whole … not selecting what we see, but seeing everything equally” that we exercise this “visionary quality” latent in our perceptual faculties.

Even from such a brief look at Fry’s ideas it immediately becomes apparent that he is essentially a formalist. He views the art work as an autonomous entity and endorses “the re-establishment of purely aesthetic criteria in place of the criterion of conformity to appearance – the rediscovery of the principles of structural design and harmony” (19).
Moreover, he is also interested in the cultivation and extension of our perceptual faculties, which are stunted by the routine modes of perception that govern our daily lives. This is significant as the influence Fry’s ideas exerted on Virginia Woolf has often been noted. In addition, Fry shares a similar view to the Russian Formalists’ belief in the evolution of artistic forms: the art work is ‘self-contained’ and changes in form occur mainly because of its “own internal forces”, and not because it somehow mirrors a change in external reality. Fry observes:

> If we consider this special spiritual activity of art we find it no doubt open at times to influences from life, but in the main self-contained – we find the rhythmic sequences of change determined much more by its own internal forces – and by the readjustment within it, of its own elements – than by external forces. I admit, of course, that it is always conditioned more or less by economic changes, but these are rather conditions of its existence at all than directive influences. I also admit that under certain conditions the rhythms of life and art may coincide with great effect on both; but in the main the two rhythms are distinct, and as often as not play against each other.

*(Fry 1937: 18)*

His admission that “life and art may [under certain conditions] coincide with great effect on both” is a more compromising position than the Formalists’ position, but the notion that change in artistic forms is the result of “the readjustment within it, of its own elements” is very near the latter’s view of literary evolution. Yet, it is true that the description of art as a “special spiritual activity” reveals an almost mystical thread in Fry’s aesthetic theories that is much closer to the New Critics’ (at times) metaphysical claims concerning the function of art and, more particularly, literature.

Fry’s view of the nature of change in artistic forms and the Russian Formalists’ theory of literary evolution diverge however, since the Russian Formalists provide us with a far more complex understanding of the oppositional forces within texts that fuel transformations within literary traditions. Mukařovský’s work on the foregrounded elements within a text reveals a dynamic relationship between a text’s background, which refers to the diction and devices that have been assimilated by the reigning literary tradition and no longer serve as

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1See for example Ann Banfield’s *The Phantom Table* (2000), in which she asserts that the ideas Fry gained from studying the work of Paul Cezanne are also noticeable in Woolf’s works (Banfield 2000: 293). See also Oddvar Holmesland’s *Form as Compensation for Life* (1998); Holmesland suggests that “Fry’s view of art undoubtedly catches one important side of Woolf’s visual method” (Holmesland 1998: 33).
defamiliarizing elements, and the elements within the text that contravene the conventions of this background and are thus foregrounded. Mukařovský shows that literary devices only acquire the potential to render the familiar strange by transgressing established literary practices. It is this transgression that characterises literary evolution. Yury Tynyanov explains:

> When one speaks of “literary tradition” or “succession”... usually one implies a certain kind of direct line uniting the younger and older representatives of a known literary branch. Yet the matter is much more complicated. There is no continuing direct line; there is rather a departure, a pushing away from the known point – a struggle... Any literary succession is first of all a struggle, a destruction of old values and a reconstruction of old elements.

(Tynyanov in Eichenbaum 1926: 1084)

**Modernism and the Struggle to ‘Make it New’**

This “struggle” against established literary forms that Tynyanov speaks of aptly describes the shared feeling between writers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, who felt that the realist modes of representation employed by their predecessors were no longer viable as a means of expressing the pluralism of the modern world. The rejection of the mimetic tradition is observable in the literature and visual arts of the Modernist period, and, if it is possible to say so, in the musical developments of Igor Stravinsky and Arnold Schoenberg as well (Bradbury & McFarlane 1991: 29). Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, in their introduction to *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, assert it is a commonly held view that the artistic movements now associated with the term Modernism presented such a dramatic departure from the developments of previous traditions that it can be seen as one of “those overwhelming dislocations, those cataclysmic upheavals of culture, those fundamental convulsions of the creative spirit that seem to topple even the most solid and substantial of our beliefs and assumptions” (19).

In her essay “Modern Fiction” (1925), which has become known as “one of the most comprehensive and celebrated statements of the priorities of modernism” (Stevenson 1992: 59), Woolf discusses the limitations of the narrative techniques employed by the writers whom she terms “materialists” - writers who largely continue the realist tradition of their precursors - and as examples she cites her contemporaries Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy
and H.G. Wells. Woolf’s labelling of these writers as “materialists” conveys her disdain for their shared desire to create a semblance of reality within their narratives through the meticulous description of external appearances and events. She argues that it “is because they are concerned not with the spirit but with the body that they have disappointed us, and left us with the feeling that the sooner English fiction turns its back upon them, as politely as may be, and marches, if only into the desert, the better for its soul” (1968: 185-6). Woolf calls to modern writers to abandon the realist traditions embodied in the fiction of Bennett, Wells and Galsworthy, and to explore different, unfamiliar modes of narration, even if this takes them “into the desert”. The image of trekking through the desert is revealing, because it suggests that the road to finding narrative modes that come closer to giving expression to the “spirit” will most likely lead to estranged forms that will be difficult and challenging to readers.

Jane Goldman, in her essay on Woolf and Modernist Studies that forms part of the Palgrave Advances in Virginia Woolf Studies (2007), states that the passage from “Modern Fiction” in which Woolf invites the reader to “look within” and examine “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (1968: 189) is the most famous and most often quoted passage from Woolf criticism (Goldman 2007: 43). In this passage Woolf muses on the multifarious aspects of life that impress themselves upon our daily minds, and contends that “plot” in the “accepted style” does not attempt to capture the thoughts or impressions that are routinely considered “trivial”, but which in fact bring us closer to an expression of “life”.

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being ‘like this’. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the

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2Goldman also raises the interesting point that in Modernism 1890-1930 (1991), Bradbury and McFarlane offer the following synopsis of Woolf’s oeuvre in their ‘Brief Biography’ on the author: “Mrs Woolf’s can seem in some respects a domesticated Modernism, but it contains shrill undertones of disturbance and terror, dark insights undoubtedly related to her suicide in 1941” (639). Goldman unsparringingly comments that “[e]ncapsulated here is just about every major patriarchal preconception blocking many students’ and readers’ first access to Woolf’s work” (2007: 38). Yet, as Goldman points out, the introductory chapter to Modernism 1890-1930, entitled “The Name and Nature of Modernism”, contains many Woolfian allusions, both explicit and implicit. For example, in discussing the artist’s liberation from convention during Modernism, Bradbury and McFarlane state: “Now human consciousness and especially artistic consciousness could become more intuitive, more poetic; art could now fulfill itself. It was free to catch at the manifold – the atoms as they fall – and create significant harmony not in the universe but within itself” (1991: 25).
life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?

(Woolf 1968: 189)

Woolf’s invitation to the reader to “look within” immediately underscores one of the major concerns of modernist writers – placing greater emphasis on “the dark places of psychology” (192). This passage reveals Woolf’s distaste for the falsity of realist plots in the tradition of Bennett, Galsworthy and Wells: their narratives are based on the assumption that “life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than what is commonly thought small” (190). In contrast, Woolf wants to give expression to the “trivial”, the “evanescent” and not only the “fantastic” or those impressions that are “engraved with the sharpness of steel”.

As an example of an author who boldly attempted to portray “this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” Woolf goes on to discuss the works of James Joyce. Woolf refers to A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man and to Ulysses, which was at the time being published in serial form in the Little Review (190). Of the fragment of Ulysses she had read Woolf says: “there can be no question but that it is of the utmost sincerity and that the result, difficult or unpleasant as we may judge it, is undeniably important” (Woolf 1968: 190). Woolf’s remark that Joyce’s fiction may be “difficult or unpleasant” falls in line with her suggestion that attempting to give expression to life in its heterogeneity may result in “aberration or complexity”; and many readers of Ulysses would arguably agree that this extremely experimental and unfamiliar mode of narration indeed leads one wandering “into the desert”.

Woolf’s own experimentation with narrative form did not initially draw much praise from critics. For F.R. Leavis, Woolf’s novels were marked by their “extraordinary vacancy and pointlessness” (Leavis 1942: 295). Early readers were perplexed by the lack of a conventional plot in Woolf’s novels: reviewers described Jacob’s Room as “no more than the
material for a novel”; its “little flurries of prose poetry do not make art of this rag-bag of impressions” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 107-8). As Christine Froula points out, “readers mistook Woolf’s deliberate dismantling of the story for her having neglected ‘to put it together’, her analytic modernism for failed narrative” (Froula 1996: 284). What these remarks from critics and reviewers alike indicate is that the form of Woolf’s novels, their plotlessness, was completely foreign to readers, especially when viewed alongside the realist novels of Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy.

Yet it is not only the departure from conventional plot structure that renders Woolf’s novels estranging and in this section I will consider some of the aspects of Mrs Dalloway that have a defamiliarizing effect on readers. In particular, I will examine how Woolf’s portrayal of time in Mrs Dalloway encourages readers to reconsider the traditional conception of time as a continuous, direct line of progression. Woolf’s complex use of tonal cues in Mrs Dalloway also serves a defamiliarizing function. In her essay “Tonal Cues and Uncertain Values: Affect and Ethics in Mrs Dalloway” (2010) Molly Hite asserts that Mrs Dalloway is “one of the most experimental [novels] in terms of the values its narrator complicates or withholds” (2010: 250). Hite contends that tonal cues supplied by an authoritative narrator usually guide readers in their interpretive process, steering readers to an authorially sanctioned interpretation of events and characters. However, in Woolf’s novels the tonal cues are often contradictory or entirely absent, plunging the reader into a narrative world that is unstable, where meaning fluctuates and is indeterminate (251). Last, I will consider the figure of Septimus Warren Smith as an agent of defamiliarization in Mrs Dalloway.

Clock Time and the Social Order in Mrs Dalloway

The narrative of Mrs Dalloway unfolds on a June day in 1923 (Woolf 2000: 78). The date of course reminds us that a mere five years have elapsed since the Great War: a fact that is brought to our attention in the very first pages of the novel:

> For it was the middle of June. The War was over, except for someone like Mrs.Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven--over. It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace.

(Woolf 2000: 4-5)
When the narrative voice imparts this information to the reader we are following Clarissa Dalloway as she walks through London on her way to buy flowers for her party and indeed the narrative voice seems imbued with Clarissa’s sentiments when we read that “it was over; thank Heaven – over”. The emphasis on the word “over” in this paragraph would seem to firmly establish that the war is a matter of the past; yet the repeated use of the word “over” draws our attention to it and could, conversely, prompt the reader to consider how one can determine when the war is really “over”. Structurally the aside serves the same function in this paragraph: we are told that “the War was over”, this is the main clause and seems to provide the reader with the most important information. When the reader is told of Mrs Foxcroft’s sorrow and Lady Bexborough’s loss it forms a digression from the main point (that “the War was over”) and this is significant as it suggests that this information is of less importance, something which could be put in brackets, and which is subordinate to the main clause. Yet it is the content of the aside (the effects of the war) that remains most forcibly imprinted on the reader’s mind and the validity of the phrase that encloses the aside is in this way diminished.

The form of the novel, more generally, also complicates the idea that the past is removed from us. The characters in *Mrs Dalloway* do not only live in the present, but move seamlessly between the past and the present. In the section following the above quotation Clarissa muses that her being is not whole and unified but dispersed, and that some elements of her remain inextricably connected to the past: “she being part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was” (2000: 9). The independent life that memories at times seem to take on is a central concern of Woolf’s. In her posthumously published memoir “A Sketch of the Past” (1985) Woolf describes some of the most enduring memories of her childhood and asks “is it not possible – I often wonder – that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence?” (1985: 67).

This notion that the past is not an inaccessible realm, but inhabits a curious space that somehow coexists with the present, undermines the idea that the war can be said to be “over” when it is still actively experienced by some. In this way, the text causes us to reconsider our linear conceptions of time. We are urged to reconsider whether it is possible to contain the trauma of the war in a narrative that neatly informs us when the war began
and when it ended. Michael Whitworth, in his book *Authors in Context: Virginia Woolf* (2005), supports this claim. He says it is necessary to think of Woolf’s novels as “doubly interrogative: asking questions, and then asking further questions about the terms of the question” (Whitworth 2005: 133). “Mrs Dalloway [for example], may be taken as asking the question ‘Is the war over?’ , and then asking ‘What exactly do you mean by “over”??’” (133, original emphasis).

In his discussion of Woolf’s treatment of time, Whitworth says it is unclear to what extent Woolf was familiar with the ideas of the French philosopher Henri Bergson, but his ideas nonetheless illuminate Woolf’s dual treatment of time in *Mrs Dalloway*.³ According to Whitworth “Bergson argued that clock time falsifies the real nature of time, and that we need to distinguish between clock time (or temps) and ‘psychological time’ (or duree) (2005: 120). The latter refers to the characters’ individual and varying perceptions of time and the former to the regular passing of hours, indicated in *Mrs Dalloway* by the regulatory presence of Big Ben. Bergson’s distinction between clock time and psychological time reminds us that our chronological conception of time – one moment running into the next, the past being irrevocably behind us - is not the only way in which time is experienced, and, to a degree “falsifies the real nature of time”. The contrast between the characters’ personal experiences of time and the linear progression of clock time, as Whitworth notes, “is not purely a philosophical one, because it has political implications” (120). In *Mrs Dalloway*, as I will show, the view of time as a linear progression, indicated by statements such as the war being over, is complicit in maintaining the social and political order.

If we look at the above example again, in which we are first told that “it was the middle of June [and] [t]he War was over” (Woolf 2000: 4), it is interesting to note that, after the digression about Lady Bexborough and Mrs Foxcroft, not only is the war’s finality reaffirmed, that it “was over; thank Heaven – over”, but this narrative thread ends by repeating that “It was June” (5). The emphasis on it being June, the desire to precisely situate the time in terms of the calendar year, is a form of ‘spatializing’ time. Whitworth states that when we “speak of something happening ‘at’ a certain time, we are imagining

³According to Whitworth, Woolf claimed she had “never read Bergson” and Leonard Woolf also rejects the claim that Bergson’s ideas exerted any influence on Woolf’s work (Whitworth 2005: 122). However, as Whitworth shows, Bergson’s ideas were extremely popular at the beginning of the twentieth century, and were said to be a discovery shared “by every thinking man in Europe in the pre-war period” (122).
times as if they were places. We are ‘spatializing’ time” (Whitworth 2005: 112). This understanding of time is embodied by clocks, which divide days into cycles of twelve discrete segments (112). One could say that in the paragraph quoted above there are two competing understandings of time: the two statements that enclose the digression (the war being over and it being June) are based on clock time and operate within the dominant political discourse that conceives of time as a chronological progression. Contrarily, the digression gives expression to psychological experiences of time and serves to undermine the discourse of linearity operative in the enclosing sentences. There is almost a sense in which the narrative spills over during the digression, transgressing the bounds of the discourse associated with clock time, and by repeating that it is June and the war is over the narrative is trying to rein in the unruly elements that will not corroborate this normative line of thinking. Seen in this light it is significant that the paragraph closes with “It was June. The King and Queen were at the Palace” (Woolf 2000: 5): the immediate reference to these symbols of political authority underscores what is at stake in insisting that the war is “over”.

It has often been noted that in Mrs Dalloway it is at times almost impossible to distinguish between the voice of the narrator and the characters.4 The passage discussed above shows how difficult it can be to separate the narrative voice from Clarissa’s own thoughts. Yet the remark about Mrs Foxcroft who was “at the Embassy last night eating her heart out” (4) and the reference to Lady Bexborough, whom we later learn Clarissa greatly admires, suggest to the reader that these are incidents Clarissa has certain knowledge of and that we are being presented with Clarissa’s thoughts. From this passage it can thus be gleaned that Clarissa has, to a certain extent, assimilated the political discourse of the war. An example from a few pages on in the novel demonstrates this point more forcefully: Clarissa is staring into the window of a bookshop and reflects that “This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing. Think, for example, of the woman she admired most, Lady Bexborough, opening the bazaar” (Woolf 2000: 10).

Clarissa muses that the woman she admires most is Lady Bexborough, who opened the bazaar with a note in her hand telling her of her son’s death. Clearly Clarissa is of the opinion that it is admirable to be forbearing and stoical when confronted with the tragedies

4See for example Gloria Jones’s essay “Free Indirect Style in Mrs Dalloway”. Postscript 14 (1997).
of the war. Yet when one steps back to consider the progression (which Clarissa seems to think is natural) from the hyperbolic image of “a well of tears”, to “courage and endurance”, and finally to a “perfectly upright and stoical bearing” this sequence seems far from natural and in fact has a ring of propaganda to it. This is especially true when one considers that the First World War is widely regarded as a senseless war and that Europe alone suffered thirty-seven million casualties (Froula 1996: 280). Yet, if the reader is unwilling to step back and interrogate the premises of Clarissa’s thinking, if we too view the progression from “a well of tears” to a “perfectly upright and stoical bearing” as natural, the passage fails in its attempt to highlight the ways in which Clarissa’s thought processes are influenced by, and bear traces of, political discourse.

Septimus Warren Smith’s experience in the war has not, of course, instilled in him a more “stoical bearing”. Initially Septimus “congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably” (Woolf 2000: 95) after the death of his best friend, Evans, in the war. Indeed, when one considers that someone who is stoical is “characterised by indifference to pleasure or pain” (OED, (2011/10/15)) Septimus’s attitude immediately after the war seems to epitomise stoicism: “The war had taught him. It was sublime. He had gone through the whole show, friendship, European War, death, had won promotion, was still under thirty and was bound to survive. He was right there. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference” (Woolf 2000: 95). In this passage, Septimus treats all these categories (his friendship with Evans, Evans’s death, his experiences in the war and the recognition received for his service) with the same indifference. This apathetic tone extends even to his awareness that he will survive the war. This impassivity, we learn, is what the “war had taught him”.

However, soon after the Armistice the cognisance of his stolidness overwhelms Septimus and he is stricken by the fear that he is no longer able to feel. Septimus’s anxiety over this loss of feeling is conveyed to us through the manic repetition of the phrase “he could not feel” (95). This phrase is repeated six times over two pages and this repetition strips the phrase of its familiar meaning and serves instead to make it strange. Septimus attempts to account for this numbness, which does not seem to have anything to do with his logical faculties, for: “He could reason; he could read ... he could add up his bill; his brain was perfect; it must be the fault of the world then – that he could not feel” (96). Septimus’s
disillusionment with the discourse of war is revealed to us when he reflects, “it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning” (97). Following this realisation he can no longer fall in line with the political discourse that stipulates that war initially causes sadness, but ultimately should lead to “a perfectly upright and stoical bearing” (10). It is his inability to submit to this progressive line of reasoning that leads him to search for a different means of making sense of the world and his experiences.

I have attempted to show that the discourse of war, which advocates stoicism and privileges clock time above psychological time, seeps into the ways in which the characters understand their world. Clarissa’s thoughts betray the degree to which she has assimilated this discourse; Septimus, on the other hand, has moved far beyond this normative means of thinking. In Mrs Dalloway, the maintenance of the social order is intimately connected with the progression of clock time. The presence of Big Ben not only serves as a linking device that allows for the shifting of narrative points of view, but looking at the force the striking clock exerts on the general public - and indeed on specific characters - one becomes aware of the extent to which Big Ben serves as a mechanism that regulates societal behaviour.

The first description of Big Ben is provided by Clarissa as she steps out to buy flowers. She feels certain that the people of London experience “a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense … before Big Ben strikes. There! Out it boomed. First a warning, musical; then the hour, irrevocable. The leaden circles dissolved in the air” (Woolf 2000:4). As Whitworth notes, when it is first mentioned, Big Ben appears “an almost benign presence, and certainly a revered one” (2005: 120). Yet as the novel progresses, and the refrain “[t]he leaden circles dissolved in the air” is repeated, the chiming of the clock takes on more menacing connotations. The repeated image of the “leaden circles [dispersing] in the air” conveys the far-reaching influence of the clock; it recalls the rippling effect created when a pebble is skimmed on water – evoking its diffusive power. Interestingly, the reverberating sound of Big Ben is likened to “leaden circles” that “dissolve[ed] in the air” - suggesting a force that is at once weighty, yet also ephemeral. This phrase is repeated four times in the novel: we read it again when Peter Walsh leaves Clarissa after their first meeting and she calls after him to “Remember [her] party” (52); when Rezia and Septimus arrive for their meeting with Sir William Bradshaw (103); and finally after Clarissa has heard of Septimus’s death and the chiming clock reminds her that “[s]he must go back. She must
“assemble” (204). This last instance illustrates the power the clock exerts over Clarissa. Her meditation on the significance of Septimus’s death is a form of psychological time or duree: she is momentarily removed from her surroundings and experiences time in a subjective way. However, when the clock strikes she is immediately recalled to the present - her party and her role as hostess.

Earlier in the novel, as Clarissa contemplates the old lady who lives across from her, we see another instance of the regulating power Big Ben exercises over the citizens of London.

Big Ben struck the half-hour. How extraordinary it was, strange, yes touching to see the old lady (they had been neighbours ever so many years) move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string. Gigantic as it was, it had something to do with her. Down, down, into the midst of ordinary things the finger fell making the moment solemn. She was forced, so Clarissa imagined, by that sound to move, to go – but where?

(Woolf 2000: 139)

In this passage Big Ben is imbued with an almost religious authority. The reference to “the finger [falling]” recalls at once the movement of Big Ben’s hands – our understanding that when the moving hand reaches a certain (yet arbitrarily designated) point on the dial it has consequences for the ways in which we structure our lives. But this image also evokes the habitual personification of deities as entities who are removed from earthly concerns, but can easily descend “[d]own, down, into the midst of ordinary things”, and reach out to prompt individuals to act, fulfilling their roles as actors in a play that is beyond their control. This is further reinforced by the puppetry imagery: we read that the old lady moves “as if she were attached to that sound, that string” - it seems she is unable to refuse the promptings of the clock. The presence of the personified clock is described as “gigantic” and “it ha[s] something to do with” the old lady, but the precise nature of this “something” is not revealed. Clarissa imagines her neighbour is “forced” “to move, to go – but where?”.

In Mrs Dalloway there is, as Whitworth says, “an association between Big Ben and centralized authority” (2005:120). Yet there is another clock, whose presence is not as announced or authoritative as Big Ben, but that is nonetheless complicit in upholding and enforcing the social order. When St. Margaret strikes, two minutes after Big Ben, Clarissa is still thinking of her old neighbour and we see how the striking of this clock redirects her thought pattern.
Love – but here the other clock, the clock which always struck two minutes after Big Ben, came shuffling in with its lap full of odds and ends, which it dumped down as if Big Ben were all very well with his majesty laying down the law, so solemn, so just, but she must remember all sorts of little things besides – Mrs Marsham, Ellie Henderson, glasses for ices – all sorts of little things came flooding and lapping and dancing in on the wake of that solemn stroke which lay flat like a bar of gold on the sea. Mrs Marsham, Ellie Henderson, glasses for ices. She must telephone now at once.

(Woolf 2000: 140)

This clock again prompts Clarissa to abandon her reverie and concern herself with practical concerns for her party – “Mrs Marsham, Ellie Henderson [and] glasses for ices”. But what is most significant about the passage is the gendering of the two clocks St. Margaret and Big Ben. Big Ben, as the name would suggest, is endowed with attributes patriarchal discourse traditionally aligns with males: the clock is described as “his majesty laying down the law” – unequivocally linking Big Ben to political authority; it is described as “just” and its “solemn stroke” lies “flat like a bar of gold on the sea” - suggesting its stability and resoluteness. This is in direct contrast to St. Margaret, who assumes traditionally female traits and is concerned with lesser affairs. That St. Margaret is less authoritative than Big Ben is immediately conveyed as she is said to come “shuffling in”. The “little things” she is concerned with come “flooding and lapping and dancing in”, conveying a sense of disorder (flooding) and frivolity (lapping and dancing) that would not be proper to the “solemn” Big Ben. Of course, given that it strikes two minutes after Big Ben, St. Margaret is always seen as secondary to the patriarchal clock. When St. Margaret’s chiming is spoken of earlier in the novel her voice is described in more timid terms than Big Ben’s: “being the voice of the hostess, [she] is reluctant to inflict [her] individuality” (54). It is significant that these two clocks that are complicit in upholding the social order are endowed with attributes that reinforce normative gender roles.

It becomes clear that Big Ben, the embodiment of clock time, impinges on the lives of the characters in various ways, intruding on their subjective experiences of time, and recalling them to their societal duties and the “little matters” of everyday life. However, this association between clock time and the power of the social order, which controls and regulates society, is most explicitly stated after Rezia and Septimus’s interview with Sir William Bradshaw. Here, the linear progression of clock time is described as “[s]hredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbl[e] at the June day,
counsel submission, uphold authority, and point out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion” (112). This passage appears immediately after the narrative voice’s caustic portrayals of Sir William’s twin goddesses: Proportion and Conversion. Sir William, we are told, “not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion” (109). As a psychiatrist who ensures the country’s prosperity, Sir William is authorised to sequester those who do not share “his sense of proportion”, and as readers we realise that Sir William’s sense of proportion is firmly founded on the values enshrined within the ruling class’s political discourse. This is clearly seen, for example, when some of Sir William’s less tractable patients dare to ask whether, “[i]n short, this living or not living is an affair of [their] own?”(111). Sir William assures them that they are mistaken. To support his case he invokes the social duties all patriotic citizens are obliged to fulfil: “family affection; honour; courage; and a brilliant career” (111); and if these duties fail to convert them to Sir William’s position, he knows he can rely on the police to ensure, for “the good of society”, that “these unsocial impulses, bred more than anything by the lack of good blood, [are] held in control” (111). Thus, when the clocks of Harley Street are said to point “out in chorus the supreme advantages of a sense of proportion”, clock time is explicitly linked to the insidious means through which the public order is maintained. The clocks, like Sir William Bradshaw, “counsel[ ] submission and uphold authority”. Interestingly, Whitworth notes that “Woolf chose for her authoritarian doctor a surname that was synonymous with timekeeping: in the early twentieth century, a ‘Bradshaw’ was a railway timetable” (2005: 120).

Earlier I suggested that it is in the interest of the social order to privilege clock time above psychological time (the quality and duration of time as dependent on the individual’s subjective experience of it). The discourse of war, which emphatically asserts that the war “is over … Thank Heaven over” (Woolf 2000: 5), can be seen as an example of the means through which the social system disregards the claims of psychological time. In Mrs Dalloway we see that those who cannot adjust to this prescribed view of the world – those for example who cannot neatly pack the past away – are pronounced as, and treated for, lacking a sense of proportion. A perfect exemplar of one who has a proper sense of proportion (it would seem) is Richard Dalloway. When Richard has lunch with Lady Bruton
and the obsequious Hugh Whitbread they briefly discuss the return of Clarissa’s ex-suitor, Peter Walsh. This topic causes Richard to reminisce about Peter’s love for Clarissa, and her rejection of him. As Richard makes his way home after lunch he is seized by the desire to tell Clarissa that he loves her; for he reflects “Why not [tell Clarissa he loves her]? Really it was a miracle thinking of the war, and thousands of poor chaps, with all their lives before them, shovelled together, already half forgotten; it was a miracle” (126). This casual reference to the uncounted victims of the war shows that for Richard the war is over and “already half-forgotten”. For Richard Dalloway the war does not transgress the bounds of its classification as a finite event.

Significantly, the metaphors and imagery Woolf uses to describe the workings of clock time upon the citizens of London are similar to the figures of speech she uses to portray the effects of symbols of authority on ordinary civilian life. In Mrs Dalloway, the unceasing “shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing” (112) of time into discrete segments creates a steady rhythm that is a constant undercurrent to the citizens’ lives. This regulating rhythm is also perceptible in the marching boys Peter Walsh observes as he walks through London.

A patter like the patter of leaves in a wood came from behind, and with it a rustling, regular thudding sound, which as it overtook him drummed his thoughts, strict in step, up Whitehall, without his doing. Boys in uniform, carrying guns, marched with their eyes ahead of them, marched, their arms stiff, and on their faces an expression like the letters of a legend written round the base of a statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England.

(Woolf 2000:55)

Military processions follow a regulated pace so that keeping in step with the time is literally what is keeping these boys in line. The steady beat of the marching procession is almost hypnotizing and Peter feels his thoughts “drummed ... in step ... without his doing”. The word “drummed” here draws our attention to the regular and regulated pressure that is exerted on Peter’s, and certainly the boys’, thoughts. The uniformity of the boys marching “with their eyes ahead of them” and “their arms stiff” illustrates that these boys’ thoughts have been moulded and shaped – “drummed” – into a certain pattern. The pressure Peter feels to fall in line is comparable to the force Big Ben exerts over Clarissa’s neighbour, which makes her move “as if she were attached to that sound” (139). These two scenes are also similar in that the description of these boys leaves one feeling that they are blindly obeying
some will that is beyond their comprehension. Moreover, the fact that they are still referred to as “boys”, despite their military uniforms and guns, highlights their susceptibility to the state’s control. These boys seem to have fallen under the sway of Sir William’s goddess Conversion, who “bestows her blessing on those who, looking upward, catch submissively from her eyes the light of their own” (110). The ‘virtues’ etched onto these boys’ faces – “duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” – are also similar to the societal obligations Sir William reminds his recalcitrant patients of (“family affection; honour; courage; and a brilliant career” (111)); ominously, all of these words are underwritten by an ideological subtext: subservience to the state.

The imagery related to clock time is again associatively linked to the description of symbols of political authority when Clarissa is out shopping for flowers. A car drives down the road in which she is shopping and it becomes apparent that a member of the royal family or a figure of the state is seated within. No one can ascertain the identity of this figure “of the greatest importance” (15):  

Yet rumours were at once in circulation from the middle of Bond Street to Oxford Street on one side, to Atkinson’s scent shop on the other, passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud, swift, veil-like upon hills, falling indeed with something of a cloud’s sudden sobriety and stillness upon faces which a second before had been utterly disorderly. But now mystery had brushed them with her wing; they had heard the voice of authority.  

(Woolf 2000:15)

It is noteworthy that Woolf uses cloud imagery to describe the effects of both clock time and political power. The force this figure exerts upon the populace is likened to the shadow cast by a “cloud, swift, veil-like upon hills”. This simile is telling for various reasons: it suggests that this power is above, and also removed from, the station of the general public; its presence is described as “veil-like”, indicating its expansiveness; and, most significantly, it suggests a power (and this is also conveyed by the imagery accompanying clock time) that causes observable effects, but which is itself intangible. Although no direct command is issued by this figure, in fact we do not learn who it is, the mere passing of the vehicle that transports this body is enough to immediately call to attention the citizens, who, “seconds before had been utterly disorderly”. This effect is comparable to the influence Big Ben exerts on the characters, prompting them to move and to act. Everyone in the crowd that steadily gathers around the car, including Clarissa, is said to stand a little straighter (20) now
that they are in the presence of this symbol of English Civilization. Indeed, Clarissa imagines “so she would stand at the top of her stairs” (19) that night at her party. Yet the reasons for this effect are only referred to obliquely; the narrative voice only suggests that “the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound” (19).

A minor character who also demonstrates a revealing reaction to the passing of this car is Mr Bowley. Mr Bowley, we are told, “was sealed with wax over the deeper sources of life but could be unsealed suddenly, inappropriately, sentimentally, by this sort of thing – poor women waiting to see the Queen go past – poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War – tut-tut – actually had tears in his eyes” (21). In this passage, one wonders why Mr Bowley’s reaction, with the poor mothers, widows and children gathering close around him, is described as “inappropriate” and “sentimental”. It is unclear whether this passage should be taken as expressing the narrative voice’s opinion. These value judgements could perhaps be a tactical manoeuvre by Woolf to remind us as readers that the narrative voice’s description of Mr Bowley is not neutral and transparent, but is informed by a certain point of view – that having tears in your eyes is not a ‘proper reaction’, is too far removed from the dominant discourse advocating stoicism. That the narrative voice is espousing a politically motivated stance in this passage is further reinforced by the reference to the War, which is immediately undercut by an impatient “tut-tut”; there is almost a sense in which the war should not be discussed, or dwelt on at length, since it is said to be “over; thank Heaven over” (5). On the other hand, the narrative voice describes Mr Bowley as being “sealed with wax over the deeper sources of life”. Yet this incident melts his waxen seal, and one is left wondering whether this is not something to be encouraged. An interpretation of this passage is thus complicated by the ambiguous cues provided by the narrative voice.

This instance of tonal uncertainty is not singular; in fact Hite contends it is this indefinite, vacillating quality of the narrative voice that has engendered such varied critical responses to *Mrs Dalloway* (Hite 2010: 251). Hite claims that although Woolf uses “potentially authoritative third-person narrators” in most of her novels, she “tends to forgo strategies

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5This sentiment is conveyed throughout the novel: later Clarissa’s daughter, Elizabeth, admiringly says of Miss Kilman that “she talked too about the war” (Woolf 2000: 143), implying that this is not a topic that is often discussed.
that would validate an attitude or an opinion” (253). In the above section there are various examples that bear out Hite’s claim. Consider, for instance, how the syntax of the following paragraph qualifies and undermines the narrative voice’s seemingly simple assertion about the war:

The War was over, except for someone like Mrs. Foxcroft at the Embassy last night eating her heart out because that nice boy was killed and now the old Manor House must go to a cousin; or Lady Bexborough who opened a bazaar, they said, with the telegram in her hand, John, her favourite, killed; but it was over; thank Heaven—over.

(Woolf 2000: 4-5)

This paragraph begins by asserting that the war is over, yet in many ways, the rest of the paragraph seems to say quite the opposite. Does the “except” actually introduce exceptions, or does it in fact introduce so many exceptions as to disprove the ostensible claim of the sentence? There are no explicit tonal cues that lead readers to an “authorially sanctioned” (Hite 2010: 251) interpretation of this paragraph.

Unequivocal tonal cues are also conspicuously absent from the paragraph in which we are told of the “well of tears” shed by all who lived through the First World War: “Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing. Think, for example, of the woman she admired most, Lady Bexborough, opening the bazaar” (Woolf 2000: 10). Earlier, I suggested that because of the reference to Lady Bexborough we can assume that these are Clarissa’s sentiments and that this passage illustrates the extent to which Clarissa has assimilated the dominant political discourse. Yet it is extremely difficult to disentangle the narrative voice from what we can assume are Clarissa’s thoughts in this passage. However, whether we attribute these thoughts to Clarissa or the narrator, I would suggest that the gap between a “well of tears” and “a perfectly upright and stoical bearing” is so vast that it should prompt the reader to consider whether the one in fact leads to the other.

Both these passages require the reader to step back and interrogate the statements made, whether we take these to be the direct thoughts of a character or the observations of the narrator. The difficulty here lies in the fact that the text does not signal to us in any overt way (partly because of the inconclusive tonal cues) that a certain passage should be taken as ironic or incongruous, for example. The reader must often heed the form or syntactical
structure in which an idea is expressed to notice the inherent contradictions it contains. Neither of these passages is untrue: the first states that the war is over and the second that incredible hardships at times foster an unexpected resilience in people. Yet they are not wholly true, although they are expressed as general truths, and in various ways the narrative as a whole causes us to question the validity of such statements. The simple declaration that “The war [is] over” (Woolf 2000: 4) is undermined, first within the very passage it is expressed, but also more generally through Woolf’s treatment of time throughout the novel. As I have attempted to show, in Mrs Dalloway the primacy granted clock time, or temps, over psychological time, or duree, is consistently challenged. Moreover, the portrayal of Septimus in the narrative, examined below, makes it painfully clear that a “perfectly upright and stoical bearing” is an attitude more easily espoused by Clarissa, the upper middle class wife of a Tory minister, than a war veteran.

Michael Whitworth’s description of Woolf’s novels as “doubly-interrogative” is especially significant here. By this, Whitworth means that the novels are concerned with “asking questions, and then asking further questions about the terms of the question” (Whitworth 2005: 133). It is this quality of the text that serves a more radical purpose of defamiliarization: we are confronted with characters’ ways of seeing the world and the assumptions implicit in their conceptualisations and led to interrogate these assumptions, and by extension, our own ways on thinking about the world. Consequently, when we read that the war is over, we are forced to ask “What exactly do you mean by ‘over’?” (Whitworth 2005: 133). As Hite says, this form of “[t]onal undecidability defamiliarizes, not only for aesthetic purposes—‘to make a stone stony,’ in the famous words of Viktor Shklovsky—but to open up spaces for ethical questioning without necessarily guiding readers to a definitive conclusion” (2010: 251).

This form of narration demands an active reader who is willing to question the statements of the seemingly authoritative narrator. If we allow ourselves to be passively guided by the narrator, as is common in fiction, we will miss the subtle ironies and complexities of the text. The form of free indirect discourse employed in Mrs Dalloway “insists that point of view is always someone’s point of view” (Hite 2010: 253, original emphasis). Withholding authoritative tonal cues certainly places the onus on the reader to grapple with the text, but it also opens up the text to readers and allows us to resist and challenge the text.
Septimus Warren Smith – Defamiliarizing Reality

The scene with the passing car that contains a figure of state is significant for another reason: it is here that we are first introduced to Septimus Smith and his reaction to the passing car stands in marked contrast to that of the gathering crowd. The car causes the bustling street to come to a standstill, and we read about “Septimus Warren Smith, who found himself unable to pass” (Woolf 2000: 15). Structurally it seems significant that when we first encounter Septimus he finds his way barred by the symbol of the social order. This encounter seems to foreshadow Septimus’s inability throughout the narrative to reconcile himself to the discourse and policies of the social system; an impasse that ultimately leads to his death. Septimus is thus immediately juxtaposed with one of the primary symbols of the social order.

It is unclear whether Septimus’s insanity is a result of the deferred effects of shell-shock or if his experience in the war triggered some latent mental illness. Yet it is clear that although Septimus presents symptoms of ‘madness’, this madness does not vitiate his understanding of the world; rather, it serves as a knife that cuts Septimus loose from habitual modes of perception and allows him to pierce a reality that is untainted by convention. In an early draft of Mrs Dalloway Woolf noted her intention to give expression to “Sanity & insanity. Mrs. D. seeing the truth. SS seeing the insane truth” (Hours Ms. 412).

Septimus’s disillusionment with the war leaves him feeling that if one views the world from within the normative paradigm “it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning” (Woolf 2000: 97). As Septimus sinks further into his ‘madness’ his perception of the world is untethered from conventional means of signification. In light of his new conception of the world, his greatest crime is previously submitting to the discourse that champions stoicism. We see that Septimus’s ‘madness’ is fuelled by his belief that he has committed a crime. Throughout the narrative sections that deal with Septimus he is haunted by the memory of when “he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed; that was worst” (Woolf 2000: 99). When one considers his ‘discoveries’, “first, that trees are

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6Elaine Showalter, in an introductory essay to the Penguin edition of Mrs Dalloway (2000), claims that “shell-shock cannot account for all of Septimus’s symptoms” (Showalter 1991: xl). She says he “is far more acutely disturbed than shell-shock patients” and suggests that his symptoms point to possible schizophrenia (1999: xl).
alive; next, there is no crime; next, love, universal love” (74) they seem an attempt to place himself within a world where everything is equal and integrated into a perfect pattern. Lying on his sofa he imagines himself “very high, on the back of the world” (74). He hears a “motor horn down in the street”, and recognises it as such, but the sound is transmuted into “music” which “canon[s] from rock to rock” and rises “in smooth columns” as it becomes an anthem “twined round now by a shepherd boy’s piping” (75). Although Septimus perceives these sounds as an “exquisite plaint” (75) he is simultaneously aware that in reality it is only “an old man playing a penny whistle by the public house”. In Septimus’s ‘mad’ perception of the world stimuli are not minimally experienced, as Shklovsky and Fry maintain we customarily perceive the world. When Septimus interprets the physical world it is “with effort, with agony” (74), and for this reason his visions are so effective as a defamiliarizing device. Moreover, Septimus’s capacity as an agent of defamiliarization is signalled to us by the repeated portrayal of himself as one who has died, lost his habitual vision, and been brought back to life: “I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead, and yet am now alive” (75). Similarly, Rezia continually draws our attention to the uncanny nature of this new Septimus. Reflecting on the change that has come over her husband, Rezia thinks “he [is] not Septimus now” (25), and later again she refers to him as “Septimus, who wasn’t Septimus any longer” (71).

In an early scene in the novel in which an aeroplane writes smoke letters across the London sky – advertising toffee – we see how Septimus loosens his understanding from the culturally accrued meanings attached to signs and generates new, unfettered signifieds. As the aeroplane writes across the sky a nursemaid spells the letters:

"K . . . R . . ." said the nursemaid, and Septimus heard her say "Kay Arr" close to his ear, deeply, softly, like a mellow organ, but with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliciously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke. A marvellous discovery indeed--that the human voice in certain atmospheric conditions (for one must be scientific, above all scientific) can quicken trees into life! Happily Rezia put her hand with a tremendous weight on his knee so that he was weighted down, transfixed, or the excitement of the elm trees rising and falling, rising and falling with all their leaves alight and the colour thinning and thickening from blue to the green of a hollow wave, like plumes on horses' heads, feathers on ladies', so proudly they rose and fell, so superbly, would have sent him mad. But he would not go mad. He would shut his eyes; he would see no more.
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. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds. A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion.

(Woolf 2000: 24)

Septimus does not think of the letters “K” or “R” as the woman is spelling; instead he becomes entranced by the utterance of the sounds “Kay Arr” and the quality of her voice. The conventional significance of these signs, as components of the alphabet, is discarded and this may be read as a metaphor for the larger scale on which Septimus loosens signifiers from their conventional signifieds. The untethering of letters – the building blocks of our linguistic systems – from their place along the traditional chain of signification is indicative of how far removed Septimus is from the normative meaning making system. Yet Septimus is aware that he is straying outside the bounds of normative discourse: his ‘discovery’ that “the human voice ... can quicken trees into life” is immediately checked by the thought that “one must be scientific, above all scientific”. This need to provide scientific explanations for his ‘discoveries’ is expressed at various points in the novel (74, 76, 158). Septimus’s desire to communicate the secrets he has discovered to the rest of mankind is tempered by his realisation that in our societies one has to appeal to institutions or institutional discourses for validation; in this case he appeals to science to ratify his observations.

The woman’s voice sends waves of sound to Septimus’s brain and this oscillating rhythm is something Septimus also perceives at work in the trees. Following this realisation Septimus observes in his surroundings an interconnectedness that he had not previously noted; everything he observes seems part of one integrated system, and he is himself a part of the exquisite pattern: “when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement... A child cried. Rightly far away a horn sounded. All taken together meant the birth of a new religion”. The rich imagery and colour use in this passage are characteristic of the passages devoted to Septimus. Septimus’s visions are usually transcribed by the narrative voice in an overtly lyrical manner and the dominance of the poetic function in these sections would seem to confer more validity on Septimus’s perceptions. There is a profuse use of similes in these passages: the nursemaid’s voice is gentle, “like a mellow organ”, but also rough “like a
grasshopper’s”; the changing colours of the trees are “like plumes on horses’ heads, [or] feathers on ladies”. The steady rhythm lends a lyrical quality to these two passages and is a result of the numerous uses of alliteration and repetition. The repetition of “rising and falling” in both paragraphs binds the two and creates a partially sustained rhythm when it is echoed by the “thinning and thickening” of the colour of the leaves. This rhythmic quality is further increased by the various examples of alliteration: the voice is said to speak “deeply, softly”, yet with a “roughness” that “rasp[s]” and sends waves “running up” Septimus’s spine.

In this passage the readers’ senses are keenly involved, as we are bombarded with a number of images and colours: the mutable shades of the leaves on the elm trees are likened to the swiftness with which “blue” changes “to the green of a hollow wave”. In the second paragraph we read of “sparrows fluttering, rising and falling in jagged fountains”, vividly recalling the shape of the birds’ wings and suggesting the movements with which they swerve through the sky that is painted “white and blue, barred with black branches”. Septimus is seated under the trees looking up at the clouded sky through the framing device of the “black branches”; we share Septimus’s impressions of these sights – the sky, which is inexpressible, yet an omnipresent feature of our humdrum lives, is not reduced to a single syllable word, indeed it is not named, rather it is described only in terms of colours, evoking an image similar to the renderings of Impressionist painters: it is “white and blue, barred with black branches”. All hierarchies are removed from Septimus’s vision of the world: he is equal to, and part of, the trees, the sparrows and the sky; the presence of sounds is not privileged above the absence of sounds and everything forms part of a harmonious, preordained design.

Interestingly, later, when Septimus is trying to supply a “scientific reason” (Woolf 2000: 74), to explain why he is able to see into the future and understand these “deep, profound truths”, he reasons: “Scientifically speaking, the flesh was melted off the world. His body was macerated until only the nerve fibres were left. It was spread like a veil upon a rock” (74). Flesh in Mrs Dalloway, especially in connection with Miss Kilman (140), comes to refer to material and worldly concerns (as opposed to the spiritual). If Septimus’s estranging

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7Woolf’s impressionist style has often been commented on. See Majumdar and McLaurin (1975: 15) for a full discussion.
perceptions are the result of his flesh being “melted off” it conveys the idea that he is not restrained, or burdened with conventional, worldly meanings – he peers beneath the surface. Septimus believes his “body [is] macerated until only the nerve fibres [are] left” – the nerves are the body’s perceptive organ that deals with all sensory stimuli; if this part of Septimus is continually exposed it accounts for his enormous powers of defamiliarization.

As Septimus is musing over this newly discovered thread of connectivity, the narrative voice shifts to Rezia’s perception of Septimus’s behaviour and we see her experience is the antithesis of Septimus’s. While Septimus conceives of a “new religion”, Rezia is experiencing the exact opposite: her loneliness and isolation contrast starkly with Septimus’s moment of epiphany. Although Septimus’s perception is treated as an equally valid, perhaps more visionary interpretation of the world, the text abruptly undercuts his vision by showing how far removed this is from Rezia’s experience of reality. Septimus reflects:

All taken together meant the birth of a new religion-- "Septimus!" said Rezia. He started violently. People must notice. "I am going to walk to the fountain and back," she said. For she could stand it no longer. Dr. Holmes might say there was nothing the matter. Far rather would she that he were dead! She could not sit beside him when he stared so and did not see her and made everything terrible; sky and tree, children playing, dragging carts, blowing whistles, falling down; all were terrible. And he would not kill himself; and she could tell no one.

(Woolf 2000: 25)

The rising and falling rhythm that pervades Woolf’s novels has often been commented on.Septimus frequently observes this fluctuating rhythm in his surroundings, and it informs his theory of connectivity. But this rhythm is also perceptible as the focalising point shifts to Rezia: the ecstasy Septimus’s vision causes in him is immediately sharply contrasted with Rezia’s understanding of his actions as “terrible”. Edward Bishop, in his study *Virginia Woolf* (1991), quoting J. Hillis Miller, notes that her “characters live according to an abrupt nervous rhythm, ’rising one moment to heights of ecstasy only to be dropped again in sudden terror or despondency’. Thus not only the overriding movement of the novel but the psychic rhythms of the characters which together constitute that movement are organised around rising and falling” (1991: 50). This oscillating rhythm mirrors the way in which the novel

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8David Lodge, in *Modes of Modern Writing* (1977), also discusses this rhythm and raises the interesting point that it “is not fortuitous that the presiding symbols of the two later novels – the lighthouse with its pulsing beam, and the waves breaking on the shore – have this same regular, oscillating rhythm, and are susceptible of bearing multiple and contradictory meanings” (1977: 180).
draws readers in to believe that they are about to share in some mystery as the characters approach illumination; yet this desire is never fulfilled, only gestured towards. As the characters’ reasoning falters so does ours, and we repeatedly find that enlightenment has eluded us. We are left feeling as Lily Briscoe does, toward the end of To the Lighthouse: that “The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark” (1960a: 249). The tension that pervades the novel, of not being able to determine whether some hidden pattern orders the world, and is perhaps glimpsed by Septimus or Clarissa, or if this ostensible pattern is merely the result of characters seeking some veiled unity, is sustained by this rhythmical circularity.9

“Biologically speaking, art is a blasphemy” (1937: 46), says Roger Fry, because we “were given our eyes to see things, not to look at them” (46). Here Fry is referring to the practical purposes for which we use our sight every day. In his essay “The Artist’s Vision” (1937), Fry once again distinguishes between the “practical vision” that allows us to automatically recognise and catalogue objects, and the “aesthetic vision”, which operates at times when we contemplate a scene in a detached manner, dismissing all thoughts as to practical value and instead focusing on the formal qualities that have drawn our interest. Yet in this essay Fry discusses another category of vision: the “creative vision” employed by the artist. The artist’s vision, Fry believes,

[I]s the furthest perversion of the gifts of nature of which man is guilty. It demands the most complete detachment from any of the meanings and implications of appearances. Almost any turn of the kaleidoscope of nature may set up in the artist this detached and impassioned vision … In such a creative vision the objects as such tend to disappear, to lose their separate unities, and to take their places as so many bits in the whole mosaic of vision.

(Fry 1937: 49-50)

Septimus has certainly abandoned the utilitarian “practical vision” in favour of a more aesthetic vision, but when one considers Fry’s definition of the artist’s vision it bears marked

9Oddvar Holmesland’s study of Woolf, Form as Compensation for Life: Fictive Patterns in Virginia Woolf’s Novels (1998), deals explicitly with this issue. In his discussion of Mrs Dalloway Holmesland states the “characters, as well as the narrator, look for visual representations of a deeper, unvisual unity. There are persistent attempts to make fluctuating figures cohere into a significant aesthetic pattern, an emblem of true form… [However] metaphors bestowed on reality to make it communicable may reflect little more than a structured assumption” (Holmesland 1998: 27). The equivocal quality these competing views of reality lend to Mrs Dalloway is, I will argue, a crucial strategy on Woolf’s part to encourage self-reflexive reading practices in her audience. The implications of this issue are fleshed out in my third chapter.
similarities to Septimus’s perception of scenes. Whether this was consciously done on Woolf’s part is uncertain; Nonetheless, Septimus does at times seem to embody Fry’s ideas concerning the “creative vision” of the artist. Fry speaks of the “complete detachment from any of the meanings and implications of appearances” and this detachment is evident in the scene discussed earlier: Septimus’s interpretation of the curling smoke letters in the sky is completely disconnected from the reality in which these letters serve as an advertisement for toffee. Similarly, Septimus discards the conventional significance of the sounds “Kay Arr” as letters in the alphabet, focusing only on the reverberations produced when they are uttered. This “impassioned vision” is also observable later in the novel when Septimus, still sitting in Regent’s Park, reflects:

To watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper; and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks— all of this, calm and reasonable as it was, made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now. Beauty was everywhere.

(Woolf 2000: 76)

Fry asserts that almost “any turn of the kaleidoscope of nature” may cause the artist to adopt this detached mode of perception. In this passage we see that “a leaf quivering in the rush of air” is enough stimuli to rouse Septimus’s aesthetic sensibilities. Septimus’s new, untethered vision is especially concerned with elevating the mundane out of its ordinary significance: everything taken together, “made out of ordinary things as it was, was the truth now; beauty, that was the truth now”. As with the description of the previous scene in Regent’s Park, there is again an abundant use of alliteration: the swallows Septimus observes “swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round” (my emphasis), adding to the rhythmical quality of the passage. The flies “rising and falling” again draw our attention to the oscillating rhythm Septimus perceives in his surroundings. Interestingly, when Septimus’s visions are narrated they are often synaesthetic experiences:

\[^{15}\text{In an essay entitled “Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury Aesthetics” (2010), Anthony Uhlmann suggests that certain scenes in To the Lighthouse, particularly sections concerning the artist Lily Briscoe, may be read as an endeavour on Woolf’s part to enter into dialogue with her Bloomsbury painter friends, especially Roger Fry. Although Septimus is not a painter, we know that he was an aspiring poet before the war, and this may account for his acute aesthetic sensibilities.}\]
it is not only Septimus’s sight that is awakened to the beauty in the ordinary, he hears sounds (often motor horns) that form part of the unity of the scene and he feels the rhythmic, wave-like motion in his own body. Describing the artist’s unique vision Fry says there is often a peculiar “rhythm that obsesses the artist and crystallises his vision” (50). The up and down rhythm Septimus sees in the trees, the movements of the sparrows and flies, and feels within himself, certainly has a mesmerizing effect on him and generates his vision of interconnectedness. The rhythmic quality Septimus perceives in the various aspects of his environment unites disparate objects and allows him to see a profound unity in “all of this”. This equalising view is fundamental to the artist’s vision, says Fry, and causes “objects as such to disappear, to lose their separate unities ... [and to become part of] the whole mosaic of vision” (Fry 1937: 49-50).

It is not only Septimus’s estranging vision of the world that has a defamiliarizing effect on readers. Molly Hite, in her essay “Tonal Cues and Uncertain Values: Affect and Ethics in Mrs Dalloway” (2010), shows that the narrative voice draws on the rhetoric of types to classify Septimus, but the conventions of characterisation are inverted, and the reader is prompted to inspect these formulations that are so glibly applied to Septimus. The narrator says:

To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so, too, his profile - his angular, big-nosed, intelligent, sensitive profile; but not his lips altogether, for they were loose; and his eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely; hazel, large; so that he was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other.

(Woolf 2000: 92)

Hite suggests that the narrative persona in this passage seems to be “authoritative, even authorial, if we take phrases like ‘as eyes tend to be’ to indicate a familiarity with types” (Hite 2010: 257). Yet, the “language of types seems off” (257). She questions what the description of Septimus’s hands and profile as “educated” really conveys. We may infer that Septimus is not a manual-labourer from his well-kept hands, but this still does not imply any higher education. As for his profile, “angular, big-nosed, even sensitive, yes: these are qualities ‘to look at’” (257), but it is still unclear in what way they could signal education. Septimus’s “loose” lips, Hite concedes, may convey a lack of control or “perhaps self-consciousness, which might be functions of some kinds of education” (258). “But what sort
of reading or instruction”, Hite asks, can “produce a recognizably altered, ‘educated’ profile or hands?” (258). Moreover, in the last sentence the “language of types” is turned on its head. Hite asserts that characterization according to the shape, colour and expression of a character’s eyes is one of the “most cherished conventions of physical characterisation in Western literature” (258). Yet in this passage we read that not only “Septimus’s eyes but all eyes ‘tend to be ... eyes merely’” (258). This defamiliarizing technique moves readers to recognise that “most of what is conventionally attributed to [the eyes] comes from the brows, skin, and muscles that are their setting” (258). This inverted characterisation forces readers to re-examine conventional modes of characterisation and also prompts readers to be wary of uncritically accepting the narrative voice’s pronouncements. Septimus’s uncanny nature is also revealed in this passage: he is familiar to the reader, “a clerk, but of the better sort”; yet there are aspects of him that cannot easily be reduced to a single classification; so that he is “on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other” (Woolf 2000: 92).

Hite notes that there is a correlation between the defamiliarizing vision of the world Septimus presents us with, and the “startling freshness” (Hite 2010: 262) with which Montaigne conveys impressions in his Essais (263). Hite quotes Carlo Ginzburg saying Montaigne’s crucial “discovery was that it is the naïve point of view that ‘leads us to the very core of the notion of estrangement. To understand less, to be naive, to be surprised— these can lead one to see more, to see something deeper, something closer to nature’” (Hite 2010: 262). This naivety is also apparent in Septimus, whose “class background, educational aspirations, trauma, and war experience combine to give him a Blakean innocence suggesting both inadequacy to cope with official reality and visionary intimations of a reality under or beyond the social norm” (265).

When Woolf was in the process of writing Mrs Dalloway she was simultaneously composing an essay on Montaigne for the Common Reader series (Hite 2010: 262). In this essay, entitled “Montaigne” (1968), Woolf considers how few writers have really succeeded in the “profound, mysterious, and overwhelming difficulty” (Woolf 1968: 84) of giving expression to their inner selves. “But this talking of oneself, following one’s own vagaries, giving the whole map, weight, colour, and circumference of the soul in its confusion, its variety, its imperfection – this art belonged to one man only: to Montaigne” (Woolf 1968: 84). Woolf says that sifting through the many “contradictions and qualifications” in Montaigne’s essays,
one is always aware of the writer’s ultimate goal: “he wishes only to communicate his soul. Communication is health; communication is truth; communication is happiness” (Woolf 1968: 93). If this mantra sounds familiar it is because it appears, almost unchanged, in Mrs Dalloway: Septimus mutters “Communication is health; communication is happiness, communication—” (Woolf 2000: 102) to a bewildered Rezia, who immediately sends for Dr Holmes. The repetition of this construction seems a clear indication that there was some link in Woolf’s mind between Montaigne and Septimus. Certainly, Septimus moves outside the norms and conventions of society; and Montaigne too – “convention and ceremony” Woolf calls his “great bugbears” (1968: 87). However, Montaigne, according to Woolf, is one of the few who have succeeded in his attempt to communicate, which is why his works are a source of “perennial fascination” (84). By contrast, Septimus’s attempts to communicate fail almost entirely: Septimus and Rezia find the cleaning girl reading the scraps of paper on which Septimus has scrawled his insights “in fits of laughter” (2000: 154), and Septimus’s death, which Clarissa interprets “as an attempt to communicate” (202) is seen by Dr Holmes as an act of cowardice (164). Yet one could say that there is a measure of redemption in Clarissa’s reaction to the news of the unknown soldier’s death. Unlooked for, a sudden clarity comes to Clarissa and she intuits: “A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate” (Woolf 2000: 202). Clarissa’s insight - that one’s soul is sullied by the seemingly small, everyday compromises conformity necessarily demands – is an idea Woolf explores in “Montaigne” as well: “Once conform, once do what other people do because they do it, and a lethargy steals over all the finer nerves and faculties of the soul. She becomes all outer show and inward emptiness; dull, callous, and indifferent” (1968: 88).

It is tragic and ironic that Rezia’s immediate response to Septimus’s need to communicate, for “communication is health; communication is happiness” (Woolf 2000: 102), is to call Dr Holmes. Throughout the text the representatives of the medical authority are shown to be the least likely to heed Septimus’s visionary intimations. Indeed, Hite notes that, in contrast to the rest of the text’s equivocality, the narrative voice provides “clear”, “direct” and “thoroughly negative” tonal cues when portraying the two medical men: Dr Holmes and Sir William Bradshaw (Hite 2010: 225). The two doctors may not grant Septimus’s perception of
reality any validity, but their callous treatment of him does incite readers critically to examine the authority traditionally conferred upon the medical fraternity. Whitworth also notes that the “contrast of sane and insane views of the world forces the reader to ask which is the more true, and how authority attempts to impose its view of the truth onto the world” (Whitworth 2005: 137). During Sir William’s consultation with Septimus we witness the complete collapse of communication as Dr Bradshaw’s view of reality, founded on a proper sense of proportion, is juxtaposed with Septimus’s views. Sir William asks:

“You served with great distinction in the War?” The Patient repeated the word ‘war’ interrogatively. He was attaching meanings to words of a symbolical kind. A serious symptom, to be noted on the card. ‘The War?’ the patient asked. The European War – that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder? Had he served with distinction? He really forgot. In the War itself he had failed.

(Woolf 2000: 105)

The emphasis on the word “war” illustrates the divergence between the dominant and normative discourse that defines the doctor’s reality, and that of Septimus, his patient. Sir William is concerned that Septimus is “attaching meanings to words of a symbolic kind”, this, he notes, is a “serious symptom”. Septimus is disentangling words from their conventional significance and ascribing new meanings to them. Sir William sees this linguistic free play as something dangerous and disruptive that must be rooted out; for it is Sir William’s duty to society to “mak[e] it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shar[e] his sense of proportion” (Woolf 2000: 109). Septimus’s only direct response to the doctor’s question is to uncomprehendingly mutter “The War?”, almost questioning the terms of the doctor’s question. As readers we see that Septimus now thinks of the war as “that little shindy of schoolboys with gunpowder”; the recognition he received for his service – being promoted - holds no value for Septimus as his understanding of the war has loosened itself from the dominant political discourse and he is fundamentally reinterpreting the meaning assigned to the war. In light of his new understanding of the world, Septimus is haunted by his failure in the war: his loss of feeling, not crying over Evans’s death – these are the only vestiges of the war that still possess any significance for Septimus.
When we consider Septimus’s estranging visions, which are imbued with a poetic lyricism, and contrast these with Sir William’s decrees about his patients who lack proportion, the authority of the medical profession is brought under scrutiny and is no longer seen as natural. Although Sir William looks down on Dr Holmes (he refers to him as “one of those general practitioners!” (Woolf 2000: 109)), his reaction when Septimus sneers at the mention of Dr Holmes (107) shows that they are nonetheless connected in the medical fraternity. Dr Holmes’s original diagnosis – that there was “nothing whatever seriously the matter with [Septimus] but [he] was a little out of sorts” (23) – is thus similar to Sir William’s indifference to his patients: both cannot conceive of Septimus’s perception of the world as a valid alternative. A look at Dr Bradshaw’s generalising attitude to his patients demonstrates this point. Sir William inflicts his help on the mentally unsound, knowing that:

Health we must have; and health is proportion; so that when a man comes into your room and says he is Christ (a common delusion), and has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself, you invoke proportion; order rest in bed; rest in solitude; silence and rest; rest without friends, without books, without messages; six months’ rest; until a man who went in weighing seven stone six comes out weighing twelve.

(Woolf 2000: 108)

We see that each description of his patients is followed by a statement that reduces them to a nondescript group suffering “a common delusion”. Sir William cannot conceive of Septimus’s unconventional perceptions as offering any truth or beauty: he “has a message, as they mostly have, and threatens, as they often do, to kill himself” (my emphasis). Dr Bradshaw prescribes the same treatment to all of these deluded individuals and as Whitworth notes, his “diagnosis does not explain the cause of the illness, but merely groups the symptoms under a convenient label. Bradshaw’s repeated reference to Septimus as a ‘case’ suggests that, unlike psychoanalytic practitioners, he will not be interested in listening to his patient as a person” (2005: 170).

Although we see Septimus as a “vatic spokesman for metaphysical questions about reality in the novel” (Hite 2010: 265), Septimus’s unchained perceptual faculties - that allow him to “attach symbolic meanings to words” (Woolf 2000: 105) and to see the world without recognising objects and thus reducing them to their function - can cause overwhelming and terrifying visions of the world. Speaking of Woolf’s use of language in Mrs Dalloway, Edward
Bishop observes: “From a point at which word and object seem to be linked in the
traditional form of signification, she departs, moving in a line that, with its own internal
logic, diverges further and further from the object, governed less by things than by
language’s own laws. This is free play that could become terrifying. It does for Septimus”
(1991: 59). Bishop quotes from Woolf’s essay “On Not Knowing Greek”, in which she speaks
of “metaphors that ‘rise up and stalk eyeless and majestic’” (59), indicating that “language
contains a power to transport in ways that we would not wish or choose” (59).

This linguistic “free play”, which Bishop warns can become terrifying, is linked to Septimus’s
inability, as he sinks further into his ‘madness’, to perceive the world in a way that is not
defamiliarizing. As the novel progresses, the habitual mode of perception – that faculty
Shklovsky and Fry speak of, which allows us to recognise objects instantly without really
seeing them – is completely abandoned. Septimus’s hypersensitivity to any sensory
phenomena at times threatens to overwhelm him. When Septimus hears of Mrs Peters
playing the gramophone, he begins “very cautiously, to open his eyes, to see whether a
gramophone was really there. But real things – real things were too exciting” (155).

Fry says our habitual mode of perception functions automatically, because from an early age
we will have “learned the meaning-for-life of appearances so well that we understand them,
as it were, in shorthand” (1937: 46). Although Fry is speaking of our practical vision that
allows us to instantly identify objects, it is also true of the ways in which we interpret words:
there is a dominant, conventional meaning that is uppermost in our thoughts in connection
with any word, suppressing other possible meanings, and it is this dominant, culturally
accrued meaning, unless we are thinking laterally, that we grasp at on first hearing or
reading a word. The interview with Sir William, and the interpretive divergence concerning
the word “war”, illustrate that Septimus has abandoned, or forgotten, the “shorthand”
meanings that Fry speaks of.

When we read the sections that deal with Septimus we are invited to “see” and interpret
the world as he does - to look beyond what is habitual or superficial. Septimus is moved to
tears by the “lovely” music that he hears, but Rezia thinks, “Really it was only a barrel organ
or some man crying in the street” (154). Yet as we have seen, in Septimus’s perception
nothing is reduced to “only” this; our ordinary view of life that would be content with saying
it is “only a barrel organ or some man crying”, is rendered foreign through Septimus’s vision of the world. However, Bishop warns that there is a danger in untethering meanings: “It is as if in the act of playing with words one may fiddle with the delicate connection that ties them to things, and once that is loosed be borne away by language” (Bishop 1991: 59). Elaine Showalter is aware of this danger, indeed she calls Septimus “dangerous” – because he has threatened to kill himself, but more importantly because he implores Rezia to join him. Showalter concludes that although the doctors are “tactless, snobbish, patronizing and obtuse”, they are “probably right in recommending rest and seclusion for Septimus” (Showalter 1991: xlii). Yet I would not argue that we need to side with Septimus or with the doctors: in Woolf’s fictions there are no easy polarities or positions that are invariably correct. We are not asked to adopt Septimus’s mode of perception, which can become terrible, but to momentarily abandon our customary ways of perceiving the world and to consider the validity of Septimus’s visions in a way the two doctors never could.
Chapter 3
Critics on Woolf: Questions of Form, Language and Defamiliarization

In this chapter I examine literary criticism pertaining to Woolf, paying specific attention to discussions of *Mrs Dalloway*, to see what these critics highlight and deem noteworthy in her works. Throughout my discussion I compare these critics’ findings with the principles advanced by the formalists to discover in what ways they intersect and illumine each other. In particular, this chapter addresses the principle of form, the notion of defamiliarization and the reader’s necessary role in constructing the meaning of a text.

Both the Russian Formalists and the New Critics propose that defamiliarization is a defining function of literature and art in general. Shklovsky famously said that art exists “to make the stone stony” (Shklovsky 1916: 16). Cleanth Brooks similarly praises the presence of paradoxical ideas in poetry because through these the “tarnished familiar world [is placed] in a new light” (Brooks 1947b: 30). Likewise, Mark Schorer says that it is only through the artist’s project of selection and arrangement, the specific formal devices used in works, that “our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed” (Schorer 1948: 69). For the Russian Formalists the concept of defamiliarization is intimately linked with making forms difficult, “laying bare” devices and drawing attention to the work’s construction, i.e. the various ways in which the work redirects the reader’s attention to the workings of language. The New Critics, for their part, focus on incidences of irony, ambiguity and paradox found in the work, and whether the tensions created by these paradoxes and ambiguities are harmoniously reconciled to form a coherent whole or what Brooks calls a “governing attitude” (Brooks 1947a: 1361).

Although the concept of defamiliarization may seem simple enough, involving the renewal of perceptions that have become stale and automatized, the effects ascribed to this process reveal different understandings of literature’s relation to reality. Shklovsky’s formulation of the concept of defamiliarization makes this point clear; as he argues, art “creates a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it” (1916: 19, original emphasis). According to this view, if the literary work presents a familiar concept in an estranged way – Shklovsky discusses flogging and private property as examples (17) – the new light in which
we see this concept is not of principal importance: the alteration of perception is viewed as an end in itself. As a consequence of their unusual emphasis on deviations of form within the work the Russian Formalists, and Shklovsky in particular, have been accused of suffering from a “fear of meaning” (Medvedev and Bakhtin 1978: 105). Arguably, Jan Mukařovský most successfully resolved the dilemma of granting the work a cognitive function, while maintaining that it is predominantly non-referential. He contends that because poetic discourse is oriented towards itself and not towards external reality, it is able to coax readers into considering the ways in which reality is apprehended through language. The work, according to Mukařovský, does not reveal any ‘truths’ about the extra-literary world; rather it engages the reader in a process that compels us to reconsider the ways in which our understanding of the world is necessarily dependent on the linguistic form it assumes. When I examine the effects of defamiliarization from the Russian Formalists’ point of view, I refer to this extended description of the function of defamiliarization.

The New Critics, although at times wavering and inconsistent in their position regarding literature’s relation to reality, do not deny that readers gain an invaluable mode of “experiential knowledge” (Brooks and Warren 1967: xiii) through their engagement with literary works. Indeed, the very first sentence of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s *Understanding Poetry* (1967) informs us that “Poetry gives us knowledge” (xiii). When Mark Schorer writes that through literature “our apprehension of the world of action is enriched or renewed” (Schorer 1948: 69), it is clear that the form of defamiliarization described here is not only linguistically motivated, but also grants literary works the capacity to uncover ‘truths’ that are perhaps obscured by our humdrum, prosaic understandings of life.

I begin my discussion by briefly inspecting reviews that Woolf’s early works received upon publication. These reviews are read in light of this study’s investigation of formalism, but they are also compared with more recent criticism of Woolf’s oeuvre. Although a few reviewers immediately proclaimed Woolf’s genius (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975:1), the majority of reviewers expressed a sense of bewilderment when confronted with her unconventional style of narration. It is not within the scope of this thesis to consider the complex history of the reception of Woolf’s works. However, these early reviews reveal some of the prejudices that dominated perceptions of Woolf until the late 1950s, when her texts received renewed attention because of the work of feminist scholars and critics such
as Erich Auerbach and David Daiches (Snaith 2007: 5). These prejudices centre on Woolf’s “perceived insularity” (3) and the supposed divorce between her texts and the ‘real’ world (4). Of little importance to the purposes of this chapter is whether these reviewers praised or denigrated Woolf’s works; what is significant is that critics on both sides of the divide highlight a perceptible change in form in their appraisals of her work.

In light of the vast amount of scholarly material on Woolf, I have decided to focus on the works of two Woolf critics who deal explicitly with issues of language and form. The first is Edward Bishop, whose study *Virginia Woolf* (1991) explores the pervasiveness of questions of language in Woolf’s fictions as well as her essays, letters and diary entries. What is of particular relevance to my study is his interest in how Woolf uses language to “disturb the reader’s unquestioned assumptions, implicating him or her in Woolf’s exploration of the complex relation between language, phenomenal reality and thought” (1991: 67). The second study to which I refer extensively is Oddvar Holmesland’s *Form as Compensation for Life: Fictive Patterns in Virginia Woolf’s Novels* (1998). Holmesland notes that many critics have approached Woolf as a “writer trying to reveal an essential unity behind the amorphous phenomenal world” (1998: x). His approach, however, is to interrogate the unifying metaphors and patterns found in Woolf’s works and to suggest that these reveal more about the processes through which we bestow meaning than anything about an underlying order to the world. Both Bishop and Holmesland thus see questions of language’s referential capacity as central to Woolf’s concerns as a writer.

The critics under discussion here focus on the effects on the reader’s activity of engaging with estranged forms. As such, a number of interesting parallels can be drawn between their work and the ideas of the formalists. There is, however, an emphasis on the role of the reader present in most of these critics’ works that seems outside the ambit of formalist theorizing. Both the New Critics and the Russian Formalists have been accused of turning the text into an object, divorced from the reading subject (Tompkins 1980: ix). Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren attempted to address this charge in their revised introduction to *Understanding Poetry*, where they acknowledge that, “Poems are read by human beings, which means that the reader, unlike a robot, must be able to recognise the dramatic implications of form” (1967: xiv). They go on to state that in “earlier editions of this book we assumed, perhaps too confidently, that these provisos were clearly implicit in
our thinking” (xiv). The implicit assumption that readers “must be able to recognise the
dramatic implications of form” also seems latent in Russian Formalist theorizing, for their
emphasis on the experiential value of grappling with difficult forms and their focus on the
perceptual change stimulated by instances of defamiliarization cannot be understood as
somehow divorced from the reader’s activity.

Lastly I examine Molly Hite’s essay “Tonal Cues and Uncertain Values: Affect and Ethics in
Mrs Dalloway” (2010). Hite is concerned with Woolf’s use of equivocal tonal cues in Mrs
Dalloway and argues that these serve a defamiliarizing function within the text. The
importance of active reading practices surfaces again in her discussion and emerges as a
theme that links the various critics’ readings of Woolf. I have focused on the role of the
reader because it coincides with my own close reading of instances of defamiliarization in
Mrs Dalloway. I have found that the principle of form in this novel demands an active reader
and that Woolf’s use of defamiliarizing narrative techniques encourages the reader to
engage critically with her text.

Reviewers’ responses to Woolf’s early novels

Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin’s Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage (1975), offers
the reader an in-depth look at the reception of Virginia Woolf’s works when they were first
published. This collection of reviews and longer critical commentaries “help[s] us to
recapture the sense of strangeness which many readers felt when faced with Virginia
Woolf’s experimental work for the first time” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 15). The
editors have included only articles published before Woolf’s death in 1941 (1975: 3); as
such, the book is a valuable source for those interested in the initial reception of Woolf’s
work, offering us moreover, a glimpse into the changing landscape of Woolf criticism. For
Majumdar and McLaurin themselves, Woolf’s writing was “with one or two exceptions,
continuously experimental” (2).

Woolf’s first novel, The Voyage Out (1915), received mixed responses from reviewers and
critics alike, with one reviewer calling it “a wild swan among good gray geese” (1975: 51),
and another claiming that, “partly because of its form”, it “is hardly a work of art” (60).
Although Woolf’s distaste for plot in the conventional sense is already apparent in her first
work (50), she was less experimental in other aspects: Majumdar and McLaurin observe that, even though “she was beginning to look at people from unusual angles … she had not [yet] turned her back entirely on the conventional mode of creating character” (8).

It was only with the publication of her third novel, *Jacob’s Room* (1922), that Woolf felt she was on the track of a new mode of narration that would allow her to convey the “incessant shower of innumerable atoms … as they fall” (Woolf 1968: 189). After its completion, she noted excitedly in her diary “I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice” (Woolf 1986: 186). It is clear from her description of the modern novel, expressed in “Modern Fiction”, that she viewed the rupture with traditional modes of narration as necessary if the novelist is to “convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” that defined modern consciousness for her (Woolf 1968: 191). Yet it was only in *Jacob’s Room* that Woolf felt she had found “a new form for a new novel” (Woolf in Bishop 1991: 38). *Jacob’s Room* inaugurates a period of intense experimentation with narrative form. Reviewers’ reactions allow us to see just how estranging this new method of construction was.

Reviews of *Jacob’s Room* often highlight Woolf’s ability to capture a fleeting impression or scene and praise her “instinct for nuances of character” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 105) and the beauty of her “lyrical passages” (106). However, her dismantling of plot in the traditional sense baffled most readers. One reviewer says: “Most deftly does she catch and convey the impression of a scene, an incident, a passing figure, or a relationship, but no true novel can be built out of a mere accumulation of these notebook entries” (99). Another maintains, “No one could question Mrs Woolf’s great abilities as a writer…But all this seems to us no more than the material for a novel, and Mrs Woolf has done hardly anything to put it together. *Jacob’s Room* has no narrative, no design, above all, no perspective” (107). W. L. Courtney, the English philosopher and journalist, admired Woolf’s “keen discernment of those small, unessential things which go to the making of life” (1975: 105). Yet he was doubtful of its general appeal, admitting that the “old craving for a plot still remains in our unregenerate breasts” (103). Christine Froula demonstrates in her essay “War, Civilization, and the Conscience of Modernity: Views from *Jacob’s Room*” that “early readers mistook Woolf’s deliberate dismantling of the story for her having neglected ‘to put it together’, her analytic modernism for failed narrative” (Froula 1996: 284).
Mrs Dalloway (1925), Woolf’s next novel, was more commercially successful than any of her other works had been (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 18). Woolf wrote in her diary, “More of Dalloway has been sold this month than of Jacob in a year” (18). E. M. Forster thought Mrs Dalloway “perhaps her masterpiece, but difficult” (174). Another novelist, Richard Hughes, favourably compared Woolf’s understanding of form with that of Cezanne, claiming Woolf has “a finer sense of form than any but the oldest living English novelist” (159). Yet others were less pleased with her formal innovations, deploring its “distracting method” (166); and many criticised the “lack of action and the commonplace nature of the characters” (18).

Arnold Bennett’s review of Mrs Dalloway encompasses a number of criticisms levelled at Woolf’s work. When Mrs Dalloway was published, Woolf and Bennett’s infamous dispute over modern modes of characterisation had already begun.\(^1\) Bennett’s review of Mrs Dalloway again highlights those aspects upon which they differ. He says of Woolf’s novels:

> The people in them do not sufficiently live, and hence they cannot claim our sympathy or even our hatred: they leave us indifferent. Logical construction is absent; concentration on the theme (if any) is absent; the interest is dissipated; material is wantonly or clumsily wasted, instead of being employed economically as in the great masterpieces. Problems are neither clearly stated nor clearly solved.

(Bennett in Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 190)

The above quotation reveals the three aspects of Woolf’s writing Bennett was most critical of: her character drawing leaves him “indifferent” to her creations; her plot bears no “trace of construction, or ordered movement towards a climax” (190); and last, no proper resolutions are offered to the reader – “[p]roblems are neither clearly stated nor clearly solved”. This last defect seems to have frustrated Bennett the most; indeed, he claims he “could not finish [the novel]”, because he “failed to discern [its] moral basis” (189). The charge that Woolf fails to “clearly state” or “solve” problems is one that is often laid at her

\(^1\) In his article “Is the Novel Decaying?” (1923), Arnold Bennett proclaimed that nothing matters in the estimation of a novel as much as “the convinciness of the characters” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 112). In this article, Bennett praised Woolf’s “originality” and her “exquisite” writing in Jacob’s Room, yet he found the characters lacking, claiming they “do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness” (113). Bennett, moreover, sees this flaw “as characteristic of the new novelists” (113), whom he later terms the “new school” (190) – many of whom are today considered modernist writers. Woolf replied to Bennett in the now famous essay “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown” (though Woolf’s first draft of this essay is quite different from the version that is often anthologised). For an insightful and entertaining essay on the various exchanges between Woolf and Bennett, see Samuel Hynes’s essay “The Whole Contention between Mr Bennett and Mrs Woolf” (1967).
door. Gerald Gould similarly declared in his review of Woolf’s work that “to leave the simple-minded reader guessing at connexions which might just as well be made clear for him, is a positive injury to art” (Majumdar and Mclaurin 1975: 106). Yet this chapter deals in part with Woolf’s refusal to grant the reader unqualified conclusions; and this, I will argue, is a deliberate strategy on her part to draw the reader into a dialogic engagement with the text.

Woolf’s critics – Locating forms of defamiliarization

Arnold Bennett may have found fault with Woolf’s experimental new mode of character drawing, yet it was also the grounds on which Woolf’s work was admired. Bernard Blackstone, in his study *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* (1949),\(^2\) expresses his appreciation of Woolf’s mode of characterisation:

> They are not single ideas, but organisations of intuitions, sensations, and emotions, projected into a semi-dramatic medium; and at the same time they are real human beings. In the novel, that is, we apprehend them as living persons. There is no philosophy jutting out of the frame. But in retrospect we apprehend them as persons plus an aura of consciousness in which we ourselves find it possible to participate...Virginia Woolf produces in her readers an astonishing extension of sensibility. We are given some new windows into reality. We are treated to new sensations, new perceptions of truth. We are, in fact, educated into heightened and broadened perception. And thus, miraculously, we are freed from certain of our limitations.

(Blackstone 1949: 11)

Blackstone’s description of Woolf’s characterisation bears a significant resemblance to Shklovsky’s formulation of the process of defamiliarization. Blackstone repeatedly emphasises the renewed perception that results from Woolf’s techniques of characterisation - the “astonishing extension of sensibility” - and this observation corresponds with Shklovsky’s claim that the “process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky 1916: 16). Similarly Shklovsky states that to produce the effect of defamiliarization forms have to be made “difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (16). Blackstone suggests this is exactly what Woolf does

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\(^2\) Blackstone’s study has been commended for being one of the few early commentaries on Woolf to dispel the popular image of her as an insular aesthete. Blackstone dismissed the "charge that Virginia Woolf’s art was the product of an aerial remoteness from the human norm" and argued instead "she is consistently a product of her environment, an environment which she knew to be sheltered and privileged" (Snaith 2007: 4).
because through her works “[w]e are, in fact, educated into heightened and broadened perceptions of truth”. If Woolf’s works educate us, this implies that her novels make certain demands upon the reader; that the novels are challenging because the forms have purposefully been made “difficult”. Once readers are forced to attend to unfamiliar forms and to break with habitual modes of interpretation, they “are freed from certain... limitations”.

Oddvar Holmesland more explicitly links Woolf’s aesthetic method with the concept of defamiliarization in his study Form as Compensation for Life: Fictive Patterns in Virginia Woolf’s Novels (1998). In his chapter on Mrs Dalloway, he examines the similarities between Woolf’s visual method and that of her friend, Roger Fry, noting their shared emphasis on detached vision.³ Holmesland says:

Fry’s framed scenes... are for looking at creatively rather than seeing; looking abstracts them into universals. Woolf similarly invites the reader to imaginatively “look upon the changing scene as a whole... not selecting what we will see, but seeing everything equally”. Fry’s view of art undoubtedly catches one important side of Woolf’s visual method. It is an approach that complements plunging participation, and one that regards life in the context of a lasting form. Through artistic detachment, scenes are expected to reveal a truer vision than normal seeing can afford.

(Holmesland 1998: 33)

The emphasis on looking rather than seeing recalls Shklovsky’s claim that the “purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known” (Shklovsky 1916: 16, my emphasis). Woolf’s invitation to the reader, to “look upon the changing scene as a whole... not selecting what we will see, but seeing everything equally”, similarly privileges the process of perception over mechanical recognition. Holmesland also says that the intended effect of this aesthetic method is that “scenes are expected to reveal a truer vision than normal seeing can afford”. Both Holmesland and Blackstone thus draw attention to the defamiliarized perception that Woolf’s use of unconventional narrative techniques engenders in the reader. Another significant similarity in Blackstone’s and Holmesland’s comments is that both refer to the role of the reader. This is especially

³ I have compared the aesthetic theories of Roger Fry with the ideas espoused by the Russian Formalists. In particular, I looked at the correlation between Fry’s idea of the “artistic vision”, which operates when we contemplate objects without any considerations for practical purposes, and Shklovsky’s theorizing concerning the broadened mode of perception that is the result of defamiliarization. Both Fry and Shklovsky believe that this expansive mode of perception should be developed and that it is the purpose of art to stimulate this form of perception.
noteworthy when one considers that Blackstone’s *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* was published in 1949 and Holmesland’s work on Woolf was published in 1998. Almost half a century separates the work of these two critics – half a century during which the advent of Theory irrevocably changed the ways in which we view texts. Yet despite this divide both critics note the important role Woolf’s fictions assign to the act and process of reading. Blackstone’s claim that readers are “educated into heightened and broadened perception” is akin to Holmesland’s assertion that Woolf’s method requires “plunging participation” from the reader; “plunging participation” implies a willingness to sever ties with conventional interpretive strategies and openness to engage with the works.

The interpretive act seen as part of the narrative’s meaning

The *Palgrave Advances to Virginia Woolf Studies* (2007) is a collection of essays by the foremost Woolf scholars, each dealing with a different theoretical approach in relation to Woolf’s writing. Each essay presents the historical development of a particular critical approach (biographical, feminist, poststructuralist, historical, postcolonial, etc.) and offers a useful survey of the most important contributions made to Woolf scholarship in each field. In her contribution to this volume, Melba Cuddy-Keane traces the ways in which narratological approaches to Woolf’s work have changed over the last seventy years. Cuddy-Keane posits that Eric Auerbach’s inclusion of a chapter on Woolf in his seminal study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) inaugurated a major shift in Woolf criticism. In his essay, “The Brown Stocking”, Auerbach examines Woolf’s complex use of perspectival shifts in *To the Lighthouse*. This essay, Cuddy-Keane asserts, “provided a narratological frame for analyzing the modernist novel and speculated on what, as cultural meaning, the new trends implied” (Cuddy-Keane 2007: 19). The questions raised in Auerbach’s study illumined new paths Woolf criticism might explore, but also helped dispel the “charges of insignificance and aloofness from the ‘real’ world” (20) that had often been levelled at Woolf’s works. Cuddy-Keane explains that “[a] content-based criticism, missing the traditional signifiers of decisive events, and encountering details from women’s experience and upper-middle class lives, concluded that her works had limited appeal” (20). Following Auerbach, critics discovered new ways of reading Woolf; most significantly, critics realised that
the principle of form in [Woolf’s] novels is qualitatively different from that in traditional narratives and that this substantive difference has implications for the reader’s activity. Paying increasing attention to the complex way Woolf’s narratives work, criticism began to foreground the interpretive act itself as part of the narrative’s meaning.

(Cuddy-Keane 2007: 22, original emphasis)

I have already shown that defamiliarization is present on various levels of Woolf’s work and that it was her intention to contravene the “accepted style” of writing (Woolf 1925: 149-50). However, I would argue that the general manner in which the Russian Formalists saw defamiliarization at work in the way in which poetic language “foreground[s] its linguistic medium” (Abrams 1999: 103) is also a principle that informs Woolf’s work. In my first chapter, I discussed the distinction the Formalists drew between poetic and practical language and their insistence that poetic language “is not used in the services of communication, but in order to place in the foreground the act of expression, the act of speech itself” (Mukařovský in Thompson 1971: 97). This emphasis in poetic language on the utterance itself suggests that what literature does is to draw attention to how our perception of reality is constructed through language. The function of poetic language, according to the Formalists, is not principally to communicate something about the external world, but to encourage the reader to consider the linguistic processes that shape our apprehension of reality. Mukařovský says:

The fact that poetic discourse has expression itself as its aim does not deprive poetic language of practical import. Precisely because of its aesthetic ‘self-orientation’ poetic language is more suited than other functional languages for constantly reviving man’s attitude toward language and the relation of language to reality, for constantly revealing in new ways the internal composition of the linguistic sign and for showing new possibilities of its use.

(Mukařovský 1976: 11)

According to this view, works in which the poetic function is dominant – highly literary works – engage the reader in exploring processes of signification; the reader does not passively absorb messages contained in the text. This active engagement with the text is reflected in Cuddy-Keane’s assertion that because of the substantive difference in form between Woolf’s narratives and traditional narratives, the role of the reader is also adjusted. Cuddy-Keane highlights the correlation between a change in form, the impact engaging with estranged forms has on the reader’s activity, and the ensuing shift in criticism.
toward viewing the “interpretive act itself as part of the narrative’s meaning” (Cuddy-Keane 2007:22). Cuddy-Keane says that whereas traditional criticism focuses on content more than form and extracts certain ‘ideas’ from the text, Woolf’s texts do not allow for an easy separation of form and content, but rather prompt us to consider in what ways meaning is dependent on the form it assumes. As Cuddy-Keane explains, “[r]ather than inhering in textual passages, meaning becomes situated in dialectical and dialogic processes; the critical subject shifts from ideational content to the relational dynamics of active thought” (2007: 30). This shift in criticism mirrors Mukařovský’s proposal that literature does not primarily refer to the external world, but rather redirects our attention to the ways in which our interpretive strategies for making sense of literature correspond with the ways in which we make sense of reality.

Before turning to how Woolf critics have dealt with viewing the “interpretive act itself as part of the narrative’s meaning”, it may be helpful to consider what Woolf’s non-fiction reveals about her views of language’s referential capacity. In his study *Virginia Woolf* (1991), Edward Bishop looks at Woolf’s posthumously published memoir “A Sketch of the Past” (1940), and examines how Woolf’s method of making sense of experience is also translated into her writing process. In this memoir, Woolf discusses “moments of being” or incidents of heightened perception during everyday life that seem to reveal a truer form of reality than is ordinarily discernible. She says:

> It is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from the enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances and I make it real by putting it into words. It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole... [It gives me] a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get in writing when I seem to be discovering what belongs to what... From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that we are parts of the work of art.

(Woolf 1985: 14-5)

This quotation highlights an unresolved tension between viewing reality as possessing some hidden pattern that can be accessed through language and viewing language as the producer of this ostensible pattern and the only means of imposing order on reality. Although Woolf seems inclined toward the notion that there is an underlying order to reality
when she speaks of a “hidden pattern” that connects all humans, this idea is undermined by her repeated references to the power of words to produce order where before experience was amorphous. As Bishop points out, it is significant that “the experience becomes ‘real’ and ‘whole’, where before it was inchoate, only when she puts it into words...Words for Woolf do not simply translate a given perception into a conceptual form: they serve to bring fully into being, and to sustain, the perception” (1991: 14, my emphasis). The emphasis Woolf places on her own agency in “discovering what belongs to what” and putting “the severed parts together” also challenges the idea of a world that possesses meaning and order independent of human mediation. This tension pervades almost every line of the quotation; when Woolf says “it is or will become a revelation of some order” it is again unclear whether this “order” exists independently or is the result of Woolf’s linguistic processing of reality. There is also a third possibility latent in this quotation: perhaps language does not only produce or make meaning, and neither is it a simple mechanism to reveal truth; it could also be read to suggest that defamiliarized language, or special instances of linguistic construction, allow us occasionally to uncover meaning that evades exact description or definition. Significantly, Woolf explores and meditates upon these paradoxes without resolving them. Both Michael Whitworth and David Lodge agree that the paradoxes and incongruities that accompany our understanding of reality are a central concern of Woolf’s. Whitworth says one of the key questions she engages with, in both her essays and fiction, is “whether reality exists independently of human perceptions” (Whitworth 2005: 109); similarly, Lodge claims that “[e]ssentially her writing does not so much imitate experience as question it” (Lodge 1977: 177).

In his discussion of this memoir, Bishop also draws attention to the contradictions in Woolf’s analogies. He says one “can go a long way toward reconciling these disparities, but her figures resist such efforts. In both her fiction and her discursive prose they remain deliberately irrational and untranslatable” (15). Bishop’s description of these contradictions in Woolf’s writing as “deliberately irrational and untranslatable” suggests that Woolf is not trying to reconcile these ideas, but rather to present the interplay between them, thereby initiating the reader into an interpretive process that does not necessitate resolutions, but rather encourages intellectual engagement. The form of Woolf’s writing mirrors Cleanth Brooks’s proposal that literary language should not be approached with the intent of
extracting a single, uniform meaning from a text, because such an approach mistakes the function of literary language and takes the text’s “meanderings as negative” (Brooks 1947a: 1362). Woolf’s deliberate use of contradictions and paradoxes illustrates Brooks’s claim that “paradox is the language appropriate and inevitable” (Brooks 1947b: 28) to literary thought.

The critical practices endorsed by the New Critics and the Russian Formalists have been described as rigid and static, reducing the complex interaction between reader and text to a narrow interest in literary devices. Yet in their shared emphasis on the importance of experiencing form and their warnings against the hazards of paraphrase, the formalists also inescapably foreground the process of engaging with a text, rather than simply extricating snippets of meaning from it. Gerald Graff raises this point in his book Literature Against Itself (1995), in which he examines some of the criticisms that have been levelled at the New Critics. He argues:

> The emphasis on impersonality and on seeing the literary work as an “object” represented only one impulse in the New Criticism. Balancing this impulse was a contrary tendency to see the work as a dynamic “process”, a “dramatic action”, an “experience” – these action words are just as important in New Critical writing as words that imply a static view of literature like “structure” and “verbal construct”. (Graff 1995: 138-9)

Brooks and Warren’s description of the form of knowledge gained through reading a literary work illustrates Graff’s point. They term this form of knowledge “experiential knowledge”, because it “involves a process ... in that it embodies the human effort to arrive – through conflict – at meaning” (Brooks and Warren 1967: xiii). The figures of speech that characterise poetic language work by means of suggestion, evoking meanings and relations that escape our attempts at exact definition. The reader has to engage actively with these poetic figures, to work through the implications of metaphors and paradoxes for example, to “arrive – through conflict – at meaning”. The understanding the reader gains depends on experiencing the form of a work. Brooks and Warren remind us that the “knowledge that poetry yields is available only if we submit ourselves to the massive, and subtle, impact of the poem as a whole” (Brooks and Warren 1967: xiii). To paraphrase a work of literature is

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thus an attempt to make literal what is expressed in figurative terms precisely because the meaning that is gestured toward can only be approached in an approximate way. As Brooks says, “the formal relations in a work of literature may include, but certainly exceed those of logic” (Brooks 1951: 22).

The Russian Formalists also insist that content should not be privileged over – and separated from – the form of a work; the content is conditioned by, and dependent on, the form it assumes. The emphasis on seeing the work as “an experience” and a “dynamic process” that Graff highlights in New Critical writing finds its parallel in Shklovsky’s description of the function of art. He says, the “technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged” (Shklovsky 1916: 16, my emphasis). The Russian Formalists do not suggest that through the approximate figures used in poetic discourse the work of art can gesture towards relations that are beyond our rational understanding of the world. The importance of making forms difficult lies in the effects of defamiliarization that are thus stimulated. The Russian Formalists maintain that literature does not principally communicate anything about the external world, but chiefly serves to “reviv[e] man’s attitude toward language and the relation of language to reality” (Mukařovský 1976: 11). The cognitive functions that these two schools of thought ascribe to literature thus differ, but both endorse the experience of reading or the process of engaging with a text over simply extricating a particular meaning from it.

Woolf’s texts, both her fiction and her discursive prose, encourage an active engagement with form and resist paraphrasing. Bishop says that when Woolf “explains the significance of these moments [of being] she does so figuratively; she confirms that the experience has value but hesitates to assign meaning” (Bishop 1991: 15). What Bishop draws attention to is that Woolf does not attempt to pin down the significance of her experiences through exact definition; the experience is taken to be valuable, but the import is suggested in a figurative and approximate way. Brooks’s observation that it “is the scientist whose truth requires a language purged of every trace of paradox; apparently the truth which the poet utters can be approached only in terms of paradox”, seems especially pertinent to Woolf’s works (Brooks 1947b: 28). Bishop also compares the process through which Woolf makes sense of these “moments of being” to the interpretive process her fictions stimulate in her readers:
Ideally, the process of reading, like that of ‘making whole’, renders intelligible without logically explaining. The insight she records is non-rational, and something one is given and at the same time intuitively fashions... The work of art, then, must do more than describe; it must lead the reader to the point where he or she can apprehend the writer’s vision. This becomes Woolf’s major artistic concern: how to create this heightened awareness in the reader. Even when she presents her ‘philosophy’ she is less concerned to impart information or argue a position than she is to initiate a process.

(Bishop 1991: 16)

The process by which something is rendered “intelligible” without being “logically explain[ed]” again recalls the New Critics’ claim that literary language is paradoxical precisely because it gestures toward ideas that cannot be reduced to logical summations. By comparing the process of reading to the experience of “making whole” Bishop implicitly underscores the reader’s active engagement with the text, since Woolf repeatedly emphasises her own agency when she discusses the experience of putting “the severed parts together” (Woolf 1985: 14-5). Bishop’s suggestion that the text must “lead the reader to the point where he or she can apprehend the writer’s vision” also places meaning in a relative light; the reader is not offered clear-cut truths, but embarks on a journey toward apprehending the “writer’s vision”. Bishop equates the apprehension of the “writer’s vision” with a renewed perception or “heightened awareness” that is induced in the reader. The sense in which “vision” is used here is thus similar to the way in which Shklovsky uses it when he says that the purpose of defamiliarization is to create “a vision of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it” (1916: 19). This emphasis on augmented perception is further reinforced by Bishop’s claim that Woolf “is less concerned to impart information or argue a position than she is to initiate a process” (1991: 16).

In Form as Compensation for Life (1998), Oddvar Holmesland explicitly deals with Woolf’s portrayal of the paradoxes that attend the processes through which we interpret and make sense of reality. He argues that this is Woolf’s major artistic preoccupation and that in “exploring processes of signification, her novels can be seen to investigate the possibilities of conveying truth” (1998: x). Holmesland proclaims To The Lighthouse, Mrs Dalloway and The Waves to be Woolf’s “highest achievement” because “these novels form a unit in their mature preoccupation with consciousness and perception” (x). He discusses the recurring metaphors and motifs in Mrs Dalloway that seemingly connect the characters and apparently point to an underlying pattern to reality. However,
One wonders if such patterns derive less from life itself than from minds projecting premises for structured vision into reality. From a postmodern perspective, this invites metacritical analysis of the manner in which the aesthetic product reflects fictionalizing epistemological processes. The premeditated quality tends to add hypothetical overtones to various visions and scenes. Instead of achieving harmony with pulsating life, there is a sense in which the perceivers attend to reality in terms of metaphoric transcription. A dialectic seems to point to a contradiction between symbolic synthesis and a level of un consummated artistic inquiry. These inquiries are constructed around multiple frames, fashioned by narrator and characters. In the framing process, there is an implicit questioning of whether consciousnesses come into contact with natural patterns, or only metaphors or signifiers that the mind conceives in response to the need for integration. There is, moreover, a possibility that the aesthetic patterning Woolf uses is conceived as a mere substitute for a reality that resists making itself known. Yet fiction may be difficult to distinguish from reality, because it reflects the way in which the mind translates needs and assumptions into metaphor. These incomplete perspectives, it is argued, tend to suspend symbolic closure in Mrs Dalloway.

(Holmesland 1998: xi)

Holmesland contends that a postmodern perspective encourages us to scrutinize “the manner in which the aesthetic product reflects fictionalizing epistemological processes”. Yet this attention to how literary works foreground their status as constructed artefacts is not only a postmodern concern but is also one of the primary interests of the Russian Formalists. The Russian Formalists insisted that by deviating from literary conventions that have become naturalised and seem to mirror reality, the literary work also brings into question the discourses through which our knowledge of reality is constituted and made to appear authentic. The characters in Mrs Dalloway attempt “to grasp an order that precedes the division of reality and language” (Holmesland 1998: 35). However, as Holmesland suggests, reality is assimilated into the consciousness through metaphor. When the characters inquire into the nature of reality, they are unable to do so without the creation of new metaphors that allow for a different understanding of reality. Holmesland suggests this relation of language to reality is exactly what Mrs Dalloway encourages the reader to consider: the characters do not fully “achiev[e] harmony with pulsating life”, the reader’s

5 While more current post-structuralist criticism attends to the ways in which representation functions and undermines itself, the Russian Formalists espoused a clear connection between the realms of content and form. Holmesland’s study is of relevance to mine because he is concerned with Woolf’s exploration of the dual “function of language as both producer and potential conveyor of meaning” (Holmesland 1998: 32). Woolf’s foregrounding of the multifaceted nature of language, I argue, illustrates Mukařovský’s claim that poetic discourse constantly draws our attention to the “internal composition of the linguistic sign” (Mukařovský 1976: 11).
attention is rather drawn to the way in which the characters “attend to reality in terms of metaphoric transcription”. In other words, attention is drawn to the role language plays in translating our perceptions of reality.

The disparity between “symbolic synthesis” and “unconsummated artistic inquiry” that Holmesland refers to seems similar to the tension discussed with regard to Woolf’s process of “making [experiences] whole” by “putting [them] into words” (Woolf 1985: 14-5). “[S]ymbolic synthesis” denotes the characters’ desire to transcend their disparate, subjective experiences by using language as a medium to access, and become harmonised with, life’s essential pattern. Yet this desire is continually undercut by “an implicit questioning of whether consciousnesses come into contact with natural patterns, or only metaphors or signifiers that the mind conceives in response to the need for reintegration”.

In Woolf’s discussion of “moments of being”, the underlying order she perceives “behind the cotton wool of daily life” (15) is also rendered tenuous as her choice of diction emphasises her own linguistic activity of imposing meaning.

In my own close reading of *Mrs Dalloway*, I have discussed a passage concerning the war veteran, Septimus Smith, which illustrates this desire to achieve “symbolic synthesis”. Sitting on a bench in Regent’s Park, Septimus observes the “elm trees rising and falling” and intuitively understands that this oscillating rhythm is “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” (Woolf 2000: 24). Septimus perceives this rhythm in the trees, his own body and the movement of the sparrows “fluttering, rising and falling in jagged fountains” (24); this rhythm, I have suggested, underpins his theory of connectivity. The reader shares in Septimus’s beautiful and strange perception of his surroundings; we are drawn in to believe that we are about to share in some profound illumination. The lyricism of this passage also confers a certain validity on his perceptions. Yet the promise of “achieving harmony with pulsating life” (Holmesland 1998: xi) is swiftly withdrawn, as the narrative voice shifts to allow us to see that Rezia, Septimus’s young wife, is feeling isolated and abandoned – her understanding of this moment is the exact antithesis of his. Septimus is musing on “the birth of a new religion” (2000: 24), but Rezia, unable to understand and share in her husband’s perception, is most concerned that people will notice his odd behaviour. In this scene, the shifting narrative perspective allows us to see that Septimus’s
moment of “symbolic synthesis” only pertains to himself; he may have “come into contact with natural patterns” (Holmesland 1998: xi), but the meaning created is not shared meaning.

In this passage, and in the novel as a whole, there is a critical distance that interrogates the possibility of using language for the purpose of reintegration with life’s ‘underlying pattern’ and this results in a “level of unconsummated artistic inquiry” (Holmesland 1998: xi). Holmesland points to the difficulty of determining whether language mediates our understanding of reality, or whether our understanding of reality is ultimately linguistically constructed. As Holmesland observes, in Woolf’s novels “[a]ttention is drawn to the contradictory function of language as both producer and potential conveyor of meaning” (32).

When Holmesland speaks of another possibility, “that the aesthetic patterning Woolf uses is conceived as a mere substitute for a reality that resists making itself known” (1998: xi), he seems to suggest that Woolf attempts to illumine, even for a moment, a veiled form of reality that ordinarily defies our means of interpretation. In his discussion of Woolf’s works, Edward Bishop alludes to a similar idea: he argues that Woolf’s novels present “a mode of discourse which compels the reader’s active participation, guiding us to the point where we can make our own intuitive leap, to apprehend a reality that will not submit to denotative prose” (Bishop 1991: 17). The New Critics argue that literary works at times allow us to peer beneath the surface of our habitual understanding of the world and so glimpse truths that are beyond our rational conceptions of reality. In support of his argument against paraphrase, Brooks quotes W. M. Urban as saying it is “precisely because the more universal and ideal relations cannot be adequately expressed directly that they are indirectly expressed by means of the more intuitible” (Urban in Brooks 1947a: 1357-8). The figurative and paradoxical nature of literary language allows it to give indirect expression to the “more universal and ideal relations”, which escape our attempts at direct and exact definition. It is especially interesting, when one considers that the New Critics cast poetic language in opposition to scientific (or practical) language, that both Holmesland and Bishop describe the relation between logical discourse and these ‘hidden realities’ using words that suggest aggression or hostility: Bishop states that this “reality will not submit to denotative prose” (my emphasis) and Holmesland contends that this “reality resists making itself
known” (my emphasis). In these critics’ works, there is a sense in which denotative, logical language and a logical understanding of reality are viewed as antagonistic and are associated with a need to force reality to yield to our understanding.

Bishop, who argues that the novels “compel[...] the reader’s active participation” (Bishop 1991: 17), again underscores the critical engagement that Woolf’s novels require from her readers. In the quotation from Holmesland it is implied that readers become conscious of the novel’s self-reflexivity and its interrogation of the extent to which discourses shape reality. He says “[o]ne wonders if such patterns [are] derive[d] less from life itself” and “there is a sense in which perceivers attend to reality in terms of metaphoric transcription” (1998: xi, my emphasis); the italicized phrases suggest that readers are aware of the possibility that the patterned reality with which the characters come into contact may simply reflect “the way in which the mind translates needs and assumptions into metaphor” (xi). Holmesland seems to suggest that there is an awareness on the reader’s part that the desire to be part of a world with an underlying order may give rise to metaphors that produce the illusion of an ordered reality. However, the tentative way in which Holmesland refers to the reader’s awareness of these epistemological paradoxes illustrates just how difficult it is to disentangle these different views in Woolf’s fictions. It may also be the author’s intention to present the interplay between these different, perhaps irreconcilable modes of understanding reality. As Holmesland observes, “Woolf seems to be highly aware of these... epistemological paradoxes that make the hypothetical difficult to distinguish from the real” (x).

The Russian Formalists insist that the dominant function of literature is not to communicate anything about the external world, but to place in the foreground “the linguistic sign itself”, thereby compelling the reader to attend to the role language plays in mediating/producing our understanding of reality. The ways in which Woolf’s novels “shift[...] the focus away from resultant visions to the role of symbol-making minds” (Holmesland 1998: 27) would, according to Formalist principles, be the justification for her work, and the reason her works can be considered highly literary. The New Critics’ principles, by contrast, emphasise the gesture Woolf’s novels make toward expressing ideas that cannot be reduced to logical concepts; the ways in which Woolf’s works guide us “to the point where we can make our
own intuitive leap, to apprehend a reality that will not submit to denotative prose” (Bishop 1991: 17).

Neither of these views is consistently supported in Woolf’s work: in Mrs Dalloway the portrayal of a world that has an essential order is continually undermined by the implication that the “patterns perceived derive less from a desire to represent life as it is than from an impulse to make structured visions of it” (Holmesland 1998: 4). The irresolvable tension that pervades Woolf’s discussion of “moments of being” and the process whereby experience is made whole “by putting it into words” (Woolf 1985:14) is also observable in her novels: it is difficult to determine whether the novels primarily explore processes of signification or whether they attempt to pry behind the veil of reality. As Holmesland points out, this “is a dialectic that goes on, one that not even the final scene of the respective novels can transcend” (1998: xii). Yet, by examining the role language plays in mediating our understanding of the world, Woolf’s works may be viewed as exploring “the possibilities of conveying truth” (x); this “ongoing process can, at the same time, be interpreted as a refusal to accept that truth may not be communicable” (xii). In Mrs Dalloway “symbolic closure” is thus suspended because the reader is engaged in a circular movement, back and forth between apprehending meaning, and considering the processes that attend our apprehension of meaning. Bishop concurs that

Woolf’s fictions are grounded in a world beyond the text, but they are meditations on the curious way in which that world exists only in the text. She does not resolve the issue but explores, dramatises, discusses, enacts the paradoxes of the relation in her work. Language moves out, from an initial connection with things, to pure pattern, to a connection with things once more, as the patterned artefact points beyond itself. Her endings are never conclusions, are always leaps into space rather than summations. The novels are gestures, in which we participate, toward a recovery/creation of presence, toward meaning inseparable from words and yet always just beyond language.

(Bishop 1991: 66)

Bishop indicates that Woolf’s texts motion toward realities outside of language when he says her “fictions are grounded in a world beyond the text” and gesture toward meaning that is “always just beyond language”. However, they are simultaneously “meditations on the curious way in which that world exists only in the text”; Woolf’s texts question and explore the relation between reality and language, prompting us to meditate upon the limitations and potential of language’s referential capacity. In this way, Woolf’s texts
continuously stir us to consider in what ways our interpretive strategies for making sense of literature reflect the ways in which we comprehend reality. Bishop also suggests that neither of these views is granted more authority than the other and consequently the act of meditating on these paradoxes becomes the plot of the novel. According to Bishop, Woolf does not “resolve the issue but explores, dramatises, discusses, enacts the paradoxes of the relation in her work”. Jane Lilienfeld, in her essay “‘Must Novels Be Like This?': Virginia Woolf as Narrative Theorist” (1996), supports this point: in Woolf’s works, she argues, “the narratorial presence, whether disembodied or embodied, whether a character in the narrative or not, seeks truth and knowledge in such a way as to foreground that quest as the plot” (Lilienfeld 1996: 125). It is significant that Lilienfeld should state that the quest for knowledge is foregrounded as the plot and not the acquisition of knowledge. This again shows that the paradoxes involved in the production and acquisition of knowledge through language is what the novels offer up for contemplation.

It is revealing to examine how often Bishop uses paradoxical ideas to describe Woolf’s works. For example, consider his suggestion that “Woolf’s fictions are grounded in a world beyond the text, but they are meditations on the curious way in which that world exists only in the text” (Bishop 1991: 66), and similarly the novels are described as gestures “toward meaning inseparable from words and yet always just beyond language”. I have already touched on the ambiguities in Woolf’s writings and suggested that her works can be read as an attempt to convey ideas that cannot be reduced to logical discourse; the way in which Bishop approaches Woolf’s works illustrates these concerns. Cleanth Brooks, in his article “The Heresy of Paraphrase” (1947), explains why it is inevitable that the critic will adopt metaphors, analogies and paradoxes when speaking about literary works. Brooks observes that in trying to produce a logical, literal paraphrase of what a literary work ‘means’ the writer of the paraphrase will find herself resorting to metaphors and paradoxes similar to those found in the literary work. The work is saturated with so many ambiguities and qualifications that it cannot simply be reduced to logical, denotative prose. Brooks is referring to the attempt to paraphrase poems, but his remarks are valid for Woolf’s works too. He writes: as the “proposition approaches adequacy, [the writer] will find, not only that it has increased greatly in length, but that it has begun to fill itself up with reservations and qualifications – and most significant of all – the formulator will find that he has himself
begun to fall back upon metaphors of his own” (Brooks 1947a: 1356-7). Bishop, in his discussion of Woolf’s use of irreconcilable contradictions, cannot but resort to paradoxes and metaphors of his own.

What is most significant about the way in which Bishop draws attention to the ambiguities and paradoxes in Woolf’s works is his emphasis on how these contradictions engage the participation of the reader. He describes the novels as “gestures, in which we participate, toward a recovery/creation of presence, toward meaning inseparable from words and yet always just beyond language” (Bishop 1991: 66). The “interpretive act itself [comes to be seen] as part of the narrative’s meaning” (Cuddy-Keane 2007:22) because the reader becomes enlisted as a partner in the project of exploring signifying processes. It is only once the reader considers the inherent difficulties involved in this process that s/he can join Woolf in attempting to “reco[v][r]/creat[e]” meaning. It is often the effects of techniques of defamiliarization that prompt readers to consider the complexities involved in signifying processes. As shown in the previous chapter, in Mrs Dalloway readers are confronted with the characters’ ways of seeing the world and the assumptions implicit in their conceptualisations. However, through defamiliarizing narrative techniques readers are encouraged to step back and interrogate these assumptions, and by extension, to reconsider their own ways of thinking about the world.

One of the ways in which Woolf’s novels sustain the reader’s critical engagement with the text is by denying the reader authoritative tonal cues that guide and determine affective responses to the text. In the previous chapter I briefly touched on Molly Hite’s essay “Tonal Cues and Uncertain Values: Affect and Ethics in Mrs Dalloway” (2010). In this essay, Hite argues that the radically different interpretations of Mrs Dalloway that have haunted Woolf criticism stem from Woolf’s deliberate use of ambivalent tonal cues in the novel. Cuddy-Keane says there has always been a “fundamental opposition” in Woolf criticism: “one critic celebrates integration, resolution, and closure in Woolf’s form, whereas [another] finds value in flux, indeterminacy and open-endedness” (2007: 18). Hite contends that this opposition is a consequence of Woolf’s characteristic use of tonal cues.

Hite is concerned with “experimental narratives with third-person narrators who deliberately make it difficult for readers to discern what evaluative stance they are
supposed to have toward characters, events, or descriptions” (2010: 250, original emphasis). She says that although Woolf uses “potentially authoritative third-person narrators in all her novels, she tends to forgo strategies that would validate an attitude or opinion” (253). The narrators in Woolf’s fiction often fail to provide readers with explicit tonal cues that steer readers in their interpretation of characters or scenes; if the narrator does impart tonal cues these are often contradictory or inconclusive (250). Her description of Woolf’s narrators as “potentially authoritative third-person narrators” is revealing. The qualifier “potentially authoritative” seems to indicate that at times the narrator guides the reader’s interpretation in a decisive way, as can be seen in the portrayal of the two doctors Sir William Bradshaw and Dr Holmes in *Mrs Dalloway*. Yet these instances are rare and the readers should be wary of relying wholly on the narrator’s guidance. Hite’s argument coincides with my analysis in the previous chapter, where I found that it is unwise to take the narrative voice’s statements at face value: the form in which a statement is expressed often undermines its contents. Yet, with such passages, there are seldom tonal cues that signal to the reader that the passage should be taken as ironic – the burden lies with the reader to interrogate the information imparted by the narrator.

To illustrate just how difficult it is to locate what Hite terms “authorially sanctioned feelings” (251) towards characters and scenes in Woolf’s fiction, Hite examines critics’ radically different assessments of Clarissa at the moment when she assimilates Septimus’s death. In this scene, Lady Bradshaw has just told Clarissa about a war veteran who has killed himself. Clarissa slips away from her party and in an empty room meditates upon the significance of this young man’s death, which she sees as an act of defiance against the men, such as Sir William Bradshaw, who would “forc[e] your soul” (Woolf 2000: 202). This is a climactic scene in the novel; it unites Clarissa and Septimus in a “metaphoric ‘embrace’ that never occurs on the metonymic level of action” (Hite 2010: 253). Before turning to Hite’s discussion, I provide a brief summary of this scene.

The reader shares in Clarissa’s series of emotions and reflections upon hearing of Septimus’s death. First, we are confronted with the physicality of Septimus’s death as Clarissa imagines it: “Up had flashed the ground; through him, blundering, bruising, went the rusty spikes. There he lay with a thud, thud, thud in his brain, and then a suffocation of blackness. So she saw it” (Woolf 2000: 202). Clarissa then reflects about the “thing ... that matter[s]” that
Septimus has “preserved” in death; the thing that is “defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter” (202). Clarissa imagines that if Septimus were possessed of the “passion” of “poets and thinkers”, Dr Bradshaw, in his “obscurely evil” way, would have “impressed him ... with his power” and made his life “intolerable” (202). She then confronts the “terror” and “overwhelming incapacity” she feels when thinking about the totality of life: “one’s parents giving it into one’s hands, this life, to be lived to the end, to be walked with serenely: there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear” (203). Yet she has “escaped”; she does not have to face the alternative of suicide, partly because of her ability to “revive” (203) in the company of others. As a consequence, she believes it is her “punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness, and she forced to stand here in her evening dress” (203). In the midst of these melancholy reflections, Clarissa suddenly feels “[o]dd, incredible; she had never been so happy” (203). She feels that she has recovered, “with a shock of delight”, something of her youth, which she “lost ... in the process of living” (203). In the end, her meditations upon Septimus’s death reaffirm the ideas about life and death that she has entertained all day. Earlier in the day she thought of herself as being “part of other people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself” (10). Now, after her thoughts about this unknown soldier’s death, she feels that “this country sky, this sky above Westminster” held “something of her own in it” (203).

Hite asks how one should feel about Clarissa at this critical point in the novel, because it is impossible not to respond affectively to this passage in some way (Hite 2010: 254). She says “different selections from the tonal cues strewn throughout the text” (254) have led to “incompatible readings” and different assessments of Clarissa’s character. As Hite points out, there is a definite implication of “callousness aligned with class privilege” (254) in this scene. Clarissa has meditated on thoughts concerning life and death throughout the day; at

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6 The description of Sir William Bradshaw as someone who “impress[es] ... with his power” (Woolf 2000: 202) is in line with his duty as a disciple of the Goddess of Conversion, who loves to “impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace” (109). This emphasis on the word “impress” conveys the desire to mould individuals into a homogenous and compliant whole. It is an image of coercion and has parallels with the scene in which Peter feels his thoughts “drummed ... strict in step” (55) as he observes a military procession.
her party she is able to imaginatively experience suicide without dying, “giving new piquancy to her aristocratic party” (254). Hite goes so far as to say, “In a Wildean displacement, it is as though she can let the lower orders do her dying for her” (254).

Yet such a reading diminishes the empathy Clarissa feels for Septimus and dismisses the varied ways in which Clarissa is portrayed in the novel. It is true that Clarissa lives a sheltered and privileged life: Hite notes that “Clarissa notoriously ‘could feel nothing for the Albanians, or was it the Armenians?’ during the Armenian genocide” (255), and her cruelty towards Miss Kilman reveals how comfortably removed her life is from the struggles of the lower classes (255). However, most of the novel emphasises Clarissa’s interiority; we are privy to her thinking processes and much of the novel concerns other characters’ thoughts about her. As Hite suggests, when characters are presented in such an intimate way readers are more likely to be sympathetic towards them. Moreover, the novel does not only reveal Clarissa’s shortcomings, but emphasises her “intense capacity for pleasure, a hedonia that suffuses the text and helps make possible its vivid celebrations of London streets and shops, skywriting and motorcars, youth, aging, and love” (254). Then again, a reading that posits Clarissa as a sympathetic protagonist and sees a positive development in her reaction to Septimus’s death runs the risk of making Septimus a “sacrificial victim of her midlife crisis” (255). Clarissa recovers her “sense of possibility” (269) because she is able to imaginatively experience and reflect upon Septimus’s death; yet her grief, one critic observes, “is not for Septimus but for herself” (255). The happiness Clarissa experiences after her meditations on Septimus’s death may cause readers to “resent and dislike” her (255), especially considering Woolf’s portrayal of Septimus as a sensitive, vulnerable man who is at the mercy of medical professionals who desire to “forc[e] your soul” (Woolf 2000: 202).

How can one reconcile these different assessments of Clarissa? It seems to have been Woolf’s purpose to complicate our readings of Clarissa in such a way as to preclude us from drawing any simple, unqualified conclusions about her character. There is of course such a thing as a “complex character”, which always prohibits neat and simple judgement. Yet, I would argue, with Hite, that this is certainly one of the most important scenes in the novel and Woolf’s handling of it seems to deliberately frustrate the reader’s desire to achieve any sort of “affective stasis” (Hite 2010: 266). This becomes even more apparent when we look at how this scene changed from earlier drafts to the published version. In an earlier draft,
the news of Septimus’s death causes a more material change in Clarissa: leaving the empty room she believes “[s]he must go back; she must breast her enemy; she, must take her rose, Never would she submit—never, never!” (*Hours Ms.* 399, strikeouts in original draft text). In the published version, we read “But she must go back. She must assemble. She must find Sally and Peter. And she came in from the little room” (Woolf 2000: 204). The sentiments expressed in the earlier draft dramatically alter the character of Clarissa. They change her from a “privileged, politically uninvolved society woman into a militant on behalf of the traumatized” (Hite 2010: 254). What is significant for my discussion is Hite’s observation that in the earlier draft “[a]mbiguity becomes polemical certainty” (255). In the initial stages of most of her works, Woolf often “began with such emphatic and value-laden pronouncements in the narrative voice and then revised to mute and complicate these statements, often filling them with conflicting tonal cues that could lead readers to radically different responses to a scene or character” (253). Woof, it is known, objected to the idea that art should be politically motivated or seen as a vehicle for explicit moral instruction.7 Perhaps she muted and complicated these “value-laden pronouncements” because she did not want to invest the text, in any overt way, with her own morals and beliefs.

However, it also serves as a deliberate strategy to engage the participation of the reader by denying the reader’s desire for unequivocal conclusions and presenting instead the interplay of various positions that are not necessarily reconcilable. This strategy could in fact have more far-reaching ethical effects than more overtly didactic modes of narration. Hite explains that

Ethical uncertainty does not necessarily produce reader effects that are ethically neutral. On the contrary, one of the most obvious consequences of play with conventions of sympathy, indignation, ironic distance inciting condescension, and other affective responses is to prompt attentive readers to question precisely those evaluations that are familiar, habitual, and ready to hand. In particular, the strategies of *Mrs. Dalloway* undermine snap moral

7 In her essay “The Novels of George Meredith” (1953), Woolf asserts that “when philosophy is not consumed in a novel, when we can underline this phrase with a pencil, and cut out that exhortation with a pair of scissors and paste the whole into a system, it is safe to say that there is something wrong with the philosophy or with the novel or with both” (1953: 234). She complained that “Above all, [Meredith’s] teaching is too insistent” (234).
judgments by provoking and then thwarting the mastering moves by which readers are used to recognizing authorized attitudes and grasping the ethical dimension of narratives.

(Hite 2010: 267)

This quotation clearly highlights the defamiliarizing effect caused by withholding authoritative tonal cues. The strategies Woolf employs in Mrs Dalloway encourage readers to question “precisely those evaluations that are familiar, habitual, and ready to hand”. The complex portrayal of Clarissa in the narrative is one example of the ways in which Mrs Dalloway “undermine[s] snap moral judgements”. If Woolf had kept many of the “value-laden pronouncements” (253) present in the earlier draft it would have allowed readers to more readily “grasp the ethical dimension of [the] narrative”. It would have enabled readers to draw decisive and categorical conclusions about certain characters and scenes. Instead, Woolf “provoke[es] and then thwart[s] the mastering moves by which readers are used to recognizing authorized attitudes”. Because Woolf’s novels are seldom overtly didactic and conclusions drawn are often equivocal, readers are encouraged to participate in an ongoing interpretive process. Hite agrees, “the absence or confusion of tonal cues draws readers into interaction with the text, an interaction that will not easily arrive at affective stasis” (266). Significantly, Hite says Woolf’s strategies will encourage “attentive readers” to question familiar and seemingly natural assumptions. This implies that if readers are not attentive and willing to abandon the methods used to interpret more traditional modes of narration, they may not be able to engage with Woolf’s “play with conventions”. If Woolf had kept Clarissa’s reaction to Septimus’s death as it appears in the earlier draft it would have been possible to extract a more homogenous meaning from the text, because “ambiguity [has been reduced to] polemical certainty” (Hite 2010: 255) – but this was not, I think, Woolf’s aim. It was her aim to involve the reader, to purposefully make forms “difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception” (Shklovsky 1916: 16).

Woolf’s novels do not simply present ideas for the reader to consume, because the meaning in Woolf’s texts is in part located in the process of interpretation. The phrases critics use to describe Woolf’s method reflect this emphasis on active engagement instead of passive consumption. Bishop, for example, says Woolf’s “endings are never conclusions, are always leaps into space rather than summations” and he describes the novels as “gestures” (Bishop 1991: 66, my emphasis). Bishop also says that Woolf “does not resolve the issue but
explores, dramatises, discusses, enacts the paradoxes of the relation in her work” (66, my emphasis). Similarly, Holmesland says that Woolf’s novels require “plunging participation” from the reader (1998: 33). The movement and activity suggested by these critics’ phrases again underscore that Woolf’s works are not composed of static ideas that can be extracted through paraphrase and rendered into literal, denotative prose. Bishop says Woolf’s “endings are never conclusions” and Holmesland agrees with this assertion. He explains that: “In an important respect, [the characters’] deepest questions never transcend ambiguity. Something prevents their creations from achieving completion. What is drawn attention to, therefore, is, not symbolic results, but the contradictions attending the framing processes” (Holmesland 1998: 28). If Woolf offered the reader unequivocal truths it would signify that the end is more important than the means and Woolf’s novels consistently challenge this binary. Bishop succinctly explains the active collaboration Woolf and her readers engage in. In Woolf’s texts, he argues:

Language is not fixed in its relation to the object, but it can generate a momentum, in spite of its inexactness, that can propel us to an apprehension of the object, which rests always in silence... The task, as Woolf saw it, was not to articulate meaning, for that is ineffable, but to construct the arc of language which could take the reader there.

(Bishop 1991: 60, my emphasis)

Holmesland’s discussion of a scene in Mrs Dalloway illustrates how important it is, in order to engage with the novel, that readers become aware of the difficulties involved in processing and making sense of phenomenal reality through language. In this scene an aeroplane flies over London and traces the word ‘toffee’ in the air. The people who witness this inscription are entranced by the spectacle and momentarily abandon their separate activities. Each tries to discover what the meaning of these letters in the sky might be. The plane, it seems, serves to unite the spectators for a brief time – to take them out of their disparate, subjective worlds and to connect them in their search for some transcendent meaning. According to Holmesland, however:

Their mystification by the plane is an extension of their deepest questions. Yet truth evades their method. To the reader, therefore, the interest of the scene does not lie so much in some hidden secret that the plane seems to announce. The plane is not significant as a symbol of some existing meaning. What is drawn attention to, rather, is the process by which man’s search for the inmost answer tends to be focused in terms of an interpretable
context. The scene reflects, not so much any truth about the characters’ deepest relations, as the discourse by which they try to give phenomena meaning. It is a discourse that responds to their presupposition that essence exists behind appearances.

(Holmesland 1998: 37)

Holmesland asserts that in order to comprehend the significance of this scene, readers have to recognise the incongruity between the characters’ “presupposition that essence exists behind appearances” and the “discourse by which they try to give phenomena meaning”. Holmesland repeatedly says that the plane is not significant as a symbol of “some hidden secret” or “existing meaning”; what is accentuated rather, is the “process by which man’s search for the inmost answer tends to be focused in terms of an interpretable context”. This focus on the interpretive process necessarily entails examining how something is presented and not what is presented. The emphasis shifts from conjecturing what the plane could possibly signify to exploring the means through which the characters impose meaning. This movement away from merely considering the content, or what is being presented, to exploring the means of presentation, or how something is presented, is also the method espoused by the Russian Formalists. If the reader approaches the text only in terms of content, without recognising the ways in which the text questions our assumptions about how we translate phenomenal experience into language, the reader may be left dissatisfied, feeling that s/he has not really accessed the meaning of the text. R.L. Chambers’ critical work on Woolf, “The Novels of Virginia Woolf”, was published in 1947, yet even in such an early critique, the importance of active engagement with Woolf’s form is highlighted. Chambers says Woolf’s

[M]ethod of construction, however much modified, must always be far more demanding of the reader’s concentration and sympathy and willingness to follow than the dramatic method of the traditional novel-form. This probably accounts for the large number of intelligent and sensitive readers who cannot ‘get on’ with Virginia Woolf. The trouble may be that her method not only leaves them with too much to supply for themselves, but also leads them to expect more complexity of solution behind the mystery than is actually there.

(Chambers 1947: 92, original emphasis)

Chambers’ assertion that Woolf’s method requires a “willingness to follow” from the reader echoes Holmesland’s suggestion that the novels demand “plunging participation” from the reader; these descriptions of the role of the reader again emphasise the importance of
active engagement with Woolf’s works. It is clear from the scathing comments from early reviewers of Woolf’s work, quoted earlier on, that her mode of narration presents a striking departure from conventional methods of narration. The estranged forms in Woolf’s fiction that cause defamiliarization demand that readers abandon their traditional interpretive strategies and grapple with these new forms of narrative technique that have purposefully been made difficult. When Chambers says some readers may feel that Woolf’s method “leaves them with too much to supply for themselves” it indicates an unwillingness to follow Woolf as she moves away from traditional modes of representation to experiment with different narrative techniques that engage the participation of the reader toward a “recovery/creation” of meaning (Bishop 1991: 66). If readers “expect more complexity of solution behind the mystery than is actually there”, they may have missed the incongruity Holmesland pointed out. Consequently, the sky writing in the scene just discussed is approached in terms of what it may reveal about “some hidden secret” or “existing meaning” and not for what it may expose about the processes through which humans impose/create meaning. This approach to the text tries to reinstate the traditional hierarchy that privileges content over form and fails to recognise that it is this binary that Woolf attempts to subvert. As Holmesland observes, “the kind of reflexive framing at work in Woolf’s fiction does not only depend on a self-commenting narrator, as is common in postmodern writing, but also on the reader’s awareness of incongruities between signification and reality” (1998: x).

If we return to the comments made by early reviewers we see how often Woolf’s methods of narration are misconstrued and met with resistance. Arnold Bennett’s main objection to Mrs Dalloway was that “[p]roblems are neither clearly stated nor clearly solved” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 190); consequently he “failed to discern [its] moral basis” (189). However, as I have attempted to show, it was not Woolf’s purpose clearly to state or solve problems. Certainly, she did not clearly delineate a “moral basis” in Mrs Dalloway, but this is a deliberate strategy on her part, to encourage the reader to engage with complex issues that do not necessarily have simple, unqualified resolutions. Similar to Bennett, Gerald Gould complained that “to leave the simple-minded reader guessing at connexions which might just as well be made clear for him, is a positive injury to art” (Majumdar and McLaurin 1975: 106). Yet Woolf’s art demands that the reader interact with the text; if the
connections were explicitly spelt out or “made clear for him”, if the forms were not purposefully made difficult, the reader would gain less from the reading experience.

In her own critical essays, Woolf often discusses the importance of a “willingness to follow” (Chambers 1947: 92) on the part of the reader. In “Hours in a Library” she suggests that every generation of writers will transgress the methods established by their predecessors, and if readers are to apprehend the ideas offered through these new and experimental techniques they have to be willing to accompany the writer to strange and unfamiliar places. She says these new writers “will be casting their net out over some unknown abyss to snare new shapes, and we must throw our imaginations after them if we are to accept with understanding the strange gifts they bring back to us” (Woolf 1960: 29).
Conclusion

“Biologically speaking, art is a blasphemy” (1937: 46), says Roger Fry. This provocative statement cleverly encapsulates the basic premises of Fry’s theory of art, as outlined in his collection of essays, *Vision and Design* (1937). Fry argues that our vision has evolved in such a way as to allow us instantly to identify and catalogue objects. We see objects and immediately recognise them, but we do not necessarily *perceive* them in their entirety. This practical mode of vision is vital to our functioning in the world, for if we truly attended to the complexity and beauty of our everyday environments, we would be perpetually overwhelmed and would hardly get around to the practical affairs of everyday life. This practical mode of vision is thus indispensable, but it does not appease our desire for aesthetic satisfaction. According to Fry, this is the *raison d’être* for art: it urges us to perceive and not merely recognise; it exists that we may recapture the strangeness and beauty of the world around us. The New Critics and the Russian Formalists have proposed similar definitions for the function of art. Whereas Fry focuses on the ways in which vision becomes automatized, the aforementioned schools of criticism attend to the ways in which our perception of language is dulled through routine use.

As discussed in my first chapter, the shared premise upon which the Russian Formalists and the New Critics base their theories is that the language used in literary works differs substantially from the language used for practical purposes of communication. They argue that in our everyday lives the primary function of language is to convey information; the emphasis is on the message and, as a result, we tend to think of language as a transparent medium. Poetic language, on the other hand, does not assume a transparent guise in the pursuit of effective communication. On the contrary, poetic language is a form of “language which is placed in a peculiarly self-aware relationship to itself” (Eagleton 2007: 48). In other words, in poetic language the emphasis falls not only on the message, but also on the medium of expression: the linguistic sign itself. The language used in literary works differs from practical uses of language in that it reawakens the reader’s attention to the very textures of language, or as Shklovsky contends, it forces us to think of language as something palpable (Shklovsky in Eichenbaum 1926b: 10). In this way, poetic language encourages us to reflect on the nature of language, not to see it merely as an instrument for
conveying information, but to recognise its capacity to be opaque, ambiguous, deceptive and playful. The Russian Formalists refer to poetic language’s tendency to draw attention to itself as the “aesthetic function” and acknowledge that this function is not limited to literary works, but may also inform advertisements, jokes, political speeches, etc. However, they claim that the aesthetic function predominates in literary works and an explication of how this form of language works should therefore be the primary concern of the literary critic. In this regard, they are comparable to the New Critics, who similarly maintain that the critic should principally be concerned with the intrinsic properties of the text: the language used, the structural relations in the work and the techniques used to give a specific form to the ideas expressed. They argue that when literary criticism attends to external considerations, such as the biographical, historical or psychological dimensions of the text, it strays from the proper object of literary studies. As Mark Schorer says, it is only when we speak of the “form, the work of art as a work of art, that we speak as critics” (Schorer 1948: 67).

Both the New Critics and the Russian Formalists have been criticised for lessening the importance of the text’s relation to reality, for disregarding the political, sociological and historical significance of the literary work and failing to recognize how it is itself conditioned by these factors.¹ Yet their shared advocacy of a poetics of form remains a lasting contribution to the realm of literary studies. In fact, it is their concern with the specificities of form that Terry Eagleton misses in many students’ understanding of literature today. In his book How to Read a Poem (2007), Eagleton complains that in most students’ analyses of texts, “what gets left out is the literariness” (2007: 3). What he means by this is that students often fail to recognize the fundamental way in which the language of literature, and poetry in particular, “is constitutive of its ideas” (2, original emphasis). Eagleton agrees with the formalists that poetic language generally foregrounds its linguistic medium more than other pragmatic uses of language do. He says:

Poetry is a kind of phenomenology of language – one in which the relation between word and meaning (or signifier and signified) is tighter than it is in everyday speech. There are several different ways of saying ‘Take a seat’, but only one way of saying ‘The hare limped trembling through the frozen grass’. Poetry is language in which the signified or meaning is the whole process of signification itself. It is thus always at some level language which is

¹ See, for example, Visser’s “Russian Formalism” (1982: 16) and Rabinowitz’s “New Criticism: Beloved Infidel” (1982: 39).
about itself ... Poetry is something which is done to us, not just said to us. The meaning of its words is closely bound up with the experience of them.

(Eagleton 2007: 21)

Eagleton is speaking of poetry, and of course, both the Russian Formalists’ and the New Critics’ ideas on poetic language are generally more applicable to poems than longer narratives. His claim that in poetic language the meaning is “the whole process of signification itself” (2007: 21, original emphasis) is analogous to the Russian Formalists’ conception of the aesthetic function, especially as it was later rearticulated by Jan Mukařovský. Mukařovský says that the aesthetic function serves to renew “man’s attitude toward language and the relation of language to reality” (Mukařovský 1976: 11). Eagleton’s assertion that the meaning of a poem’s “words is closely bound up with the experience of them” also brings to mind some New Critical slogans in defence of the literary work’s autonomy, such as Cleanth Brooks’s claim that poetry is “experience rather than any mere statement about experience or any mere abstraction from experience” (Brooks 1947: 213).

What these different formulations all highlight is that the reader must grapple and fully engage with the form of a work, not to try to discover the meaning hidden behind the form, but to consider anew how the form determines the meaning. It is only once we start treating language as discourse, which involves “attending to [it] in all of its material density” (Eagleton 2007: 2) and not taking for granted its transparency, that we begin to engage with questions of form.

I have shown, through my own discussion of Mrs Dalloway and an examination of the works of various Woolf critics, that Woolf’s fictions encourage, and to an extent require, the reader to engage actively with the form of her works. In my analysis of Mrs Dalloway I examined specific ways in which the novel defamiliarizes and interrogates our habitual understanding of concepts such as time and madness. In my discussion of Woolf’s treatment of time, I employed Henri Bergson’s distinction between temps and durée. I explained that

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2 Yet these formulations of poetic language are also applicable to longer narratives such as Mrs Dalloway. I have attempted to show that Woolf’s literary, modernist language is as at times as concrete and self-referential as poetry. Many of the narrative sections devoted to Septimus in particular foreground the specificity of her language usage. Consider, for example, Septimus’s reflection that to “watch a leaf quivering in the rush of air was an exquisite joy. Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them; and the flies rising and falling; and the sun spotting now this leaf, now that, in mockery, dazzling it with soft gold in pure good temper; and now and again some chime (it might be a motor horn) tinkling divinely on the grass stalks” (2000: 76).
temps, or clock time, refers to the regular passing of hours and is based on an understanding of time as linear in nature; duree, on the other hand, refers to the quality and duration of time as it is subjectively experienced by the individual. In *Mrs Dalloway* the degree to which the characters’ lives are structured and informed by clock time is suggested through the diffusive power associated with Big Ben. It provides a constant rhythm that exerts considerable control over the characters. Yet the characters’ experience of time is shown to be at odds with clock time: their experience of time transgresses the finite bounds of a measured chronology. It becomes apparent that temps, embodied by the regular booming of Big Ben, regulates society, but also to an extent belies our real experience of time.

In my second chapter, I illustrated that the text encourages us to reflect on the ways in which the language we use informs our understanding of time. In the first pages of the novel, for instance, we are informed that the war is “over; thank Heaven – over” (Woolf 2000: 5). This seems to be, at first glance, a simple, factual statement. Yet when this statement is considered in terms of Bergson’s distinction between temps and duree, we see that it is based upon the premises of temps rather than duree. Temps encourages us to think of time as occupying a clearly delineated space; something can be said to be “over” because it happened at a particular time. However, the narrative’s portrayal of characters’ experience of duree – the various ways in which we are shown that some still actively experience the war, for example – challenges the neat compartmentalization of time that words such as “over” imply. We begin to see that although the novel is set in June 1923 and it is true that the war is “over”, this is not the whole truth and thinking of it as such excludes other truths. As Michael Whitworth observes, the portrayal of time in *Mrs Dalloway* forces us to ask “[w]hat exactly do you mean by ‘over’?” (2005: 133).

Our habitual understanding of time is destabilised in *Mrs Dalloway* and, as a result, something previously considered obvious or commonplace is no longer seen as self-evident. The method Woolf uses to get readers to reconsider such conventional concepts is often, as in the above example, to adopt a position or state a commonly held truth only to interrogate its validity from various alternative positions. Yet the subtle interrogation depends on an engagement with form. Often the syntactical structure in which an idea is stated serves to undermine it. To refer to the previous example again, when we are told
that the war is “over; thank Heaven – over”, the statement is qualified with so many exceptions that it betrays its own truth. However, if the reader does not heed the form in which the idea is expressed, if the reader uncritically accepts the observations of the narrative voice, the process of defamiliarization cannot ensue. The text thus requires the reader to be active and discerning for two reasons: first, the process of defamiliarization, as it manifests in *Mrs Dalloway*, depends on a subtle engagement with form; second, the concepts that are defamiliarized are often so firmly ingrained in our habitual modes of thought that they seem natural and do not perhaps, at first glance, appear to merit critical reconsideration.

In chapter two, I also examined the character of Septimus Warren Smith and suggested that, in many ways, he can be read as an embodiment of the process of defamiliarization. I argued that although Septimus presents symptoms of ‘madness’, this madness does not vitiate his understanding of the world; instead, it serves as a knife that severs him from habitual modes of perception and allows him to pierce a reality that is untainted by norms and convention. The utilitarian mode of vision that Shklovsky and Fry assert operates automatically in our everyday lives, is abandoned in Septimus’s perception of the world; he does not only recognise, but attends “with effort, with agony” (Woolf 2000: 74) to his surroundings. His disillusionment with the war, and the discourse of war, generates a new interpretation of reality dislodged from the coercive influence of authoritarian discourse. Whether Septimus is gazing at an advertisement for toffee written in smoke letters in the sky, or reflecting on his experience in the war, signifiers are untethered from their conventional signifieds and inscribed with new meaning. His reinscription of conventional signifiers also serves to draw our attention to the linguistic sign’s instability, to the flux of meaning. Yet this linguistic free-play can be precarious. Edward Bishop warns that “in the act of playing with words one may fiddle with the delicate connection that ties them to things, and once that is loosed be borne away by language” (Bishop 1991: 59). Towards the end of the narrative, Septimus does indeed seem to be “borne away by language” and this is connected with his inability to perceive his surroundings in a way that is not defamiliarizing. Apart from the dangers inherent in his linguistic project, Septimus, as a peripheral figure who moves outside of normative ways of thinking and seeing, becomes vulnerable to persecution from those who enforce and maintain the hierarchy of the social order.
In chapter three I examined critical studies of Woolf and compared the arguments posited, and approaches adopted in these studies, to the principles advocated by the Russian Formalists and New Critics. I focused primarily on the works of Edward Bishop and Oddvar Holmesland and treated these critics’ works as case studies. These critics were selected because their studies centre on questions of language and form and, as such, a number of interesting parallels can be drawn between their ideas and the tenets of formalism.

As a starting point for my discussion I referred to Melba Cuddy-Keane’s essay “Narratological Approaches”, in which she traces the ways in which such approaches to Woolf’s works have changed over the last seventy years. In this essay she asserts that the principle of form in [Woolf’s] novels is qualitatively different from that in traditional narratives and that this substantive difference has implications for the reader’s activity. Paying increasing attention to the complex way Woolf’s narratives work, criticism began to foreground the interpretive act itself as part of the narrative’s meaning.

(Cuddy-Keane 2007: 22, original emphasis)

In this essay, Cuddy-Keane argues that whereas traditional criticism focuses on content more than form and extracts certain ‘ideas’ from the text, Woolf’s texts do not allow for an easy separation of form and content, but rather prompt us to consider in what ways meaning is dependent on the form it assumes. Her observation that with increased attention to the complexity of Woolf’s narratives, “criticism began to foreground the interpretive act itself as part of the narrative’s meaning”, to a large degree, reflects my findings in both Holmesland’s and Bishop’s studies. In the introduction to his study Form as Compensation for Life: Fictive Patterns in Virginia Woolf’s Novels (1998), Holmesland notes that many critics have approached Woolf as a “writer trying to reveal an essential unity behind the amorphous phenomenal world” (1998: x). His approach, however, is to interrogate the unifying metaphors and patterns found in Woolf’s works and to suggest that these reveal more about the processes through which we bestow meaning than anything about an underlying order to the world. Holmesland argues that the form of Woolf’s works and her language usage redirect our attention to the paradoxes and incongruities involved in processes of signification. This movement away from solely considering the content, or what is being presented, to exploring the means of representation, or how something is
presented, is, I suggested, akin to the method espoused by the Russian Formalists.\(^3\) Holmesland’s thesis attests to the validity of the formalist claim that as a result of poetic language’s emphasis on its own nature, the meaning of literary works in which the “aesthetic function” is dominant will to some extent always be bound up with “the whole process of signification itself” (Eagleton 2007: 21, original emphasis). This is particularly true of a writer such as Woolf who consistently foregrounds her language usage.

Edward Bishop’s study *Virginia Woolf* (1991) explores Woolf’s attitude to language as it is revealed in both her fictional and non-fictional writings. He suggests that our linguistic mediation of reality often surfaces as a theme in her fictions, “for even characterisation and plot turn on questions of language” (1991: 54). Bishop finds that:

> There is a delight but also dissatisfaction in her playing with words. She is determined to make discourse visible, not simply by the high degree of imagery in her prose but by constantly challenging the reader’s notion of language, forcing him or her to think of it as something palpable, but also protean, something that has not only integrity but independence, something at times capricious, even untrustworthy, perhaps perverse.

(Bishop 1991: 77)

Here we again discover the formalists’ emphasis on the medium of expression itself. Bishop’s assertion that Woolf’s texts force the reader “to think of [language] as something palpable” is particularly close to Shklovsky’s description of poetic language. However, my discussion has stressed the correlation between Bishop’s ideas and the tenets of New Criticism. I paid specific attention to Bishop’s discussion of Woolf’s posthumously published memoir “A Sketch of the Past”, in which he attends to the irreconcilable contradictions and paradoxes that characterise her analogies. I compared his ideas with Cleanth Brooks’s proposals concerning the essentially paradoxical nature of literary language. Bishop’s description of these contradictions as “deliberately irrational and untranslatable” (1991: 15) suggests that Woolf is not trying to reconcile these ideas, but rather to present the interplay between them, thereby initiating the reader into an interpretive process that does not necessitate resolutions, but rather encourages intellectual engagement. In support of his

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\(^3\) While more current Post-structuralist criticism attends to the ways in which representation functions and undermines itself, the Russian Formalists espoused a clear connection between the realms of content and form. In this regard, the Russian Formalists can be seen as precursors to subsequent theoretical movements, such as Post-structuralism.
discussion, Bishop quotes Woolf, who spoke of her use of analogies in her diary – of “never making them work out; only suggest” (Woolf 1982: 11). His description of these paradoxes and contradictions, I argued, mirrors Cleanth Brooks’s proposal that literary language should not be approached with the intent of extracting a single, uniform meaning from a text, because such an approach mistakes the function of literary language and takes the text’s “meanderings as negative” (Brooks 1947a: 1362). Speaking of these equivocal figures, Bishop says Woolf attempts to guide us “to the point where we can make our own intuitive leap, to apprehend a reality that will not submit to denotative prose” (Bishop 1991: 17). Bishop’s discussion in many ways parallels the New Critics’ claim that literary language is paradoxical precisely because it gestures toward ideas that cannot be reduced to logical summations.

In their studies both Holmesland and Bishop underscore the critical engagement that Woolf’s novels require from her readers. Woolf’s novels do not simply present ideas for the reader to consume, because the meaning in her texts is in part located in the process of interpretation. This supports Cuddy-Keane’s assertion that the “substantive difference [in form] has implications for the reader’s activity” (2007: 22). The importance of active reading practices surfaces again in Molly Hite’s essay “Tonal Cues and Uncertain Values: Affect and Ethics in Mrs Dalloway” (2010), the last critical reading of Woolf I attended to in my third chapter.

Hite asserts that Mrs Dalloway is “one of the most experimental [novels] in terms of the values its narrator complicates or withholds” (2010: 250). She contends that tonal cues supplied by an authoritative narrator usually guide readers in their interpretive process, steering them to an authorially sanctioned interpretation of events and characters. However, in Woolf’s novels, tonal cues are often contradictory or entirely absent, plunging the reader into a narrative world that is unstable, where meaning fluctuates and is indeterminate (251). Woolf’s complex use of tonal cues serves a defamiliarizing function as the reader is denied recourse to the kind of support systems that are conventionally used to steer his/her interpretation of the fictional universe. Withholding authoritative tonal cues certainly places the onus on the reader to grapple with the text, but it also opens up the text to readers and allows us to resist and challenge the text. Interestingly, Woolf, in her essay “Phases of Fiction”, praised precisely this aspect of Marcel Proust’s writing. She says:
Direction or emphasis, to be told that that is right, to be nudge and bidden to attend to that, would fall like a shadow on this profound luminosity and cut off some section of it from our view ... If we look for direction to help us put [the characters] in their place in the universe, we find it negatively in an absence of direction – perhaps sympathy is of more value than interference, understanding than judgement.

(Woolf 1960: 125)

In conclusion to this dissertation I will briefly explore the arguments posited in Melba Cuddy-Keane’s study *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (2004). Cuddy-Keane’s study is of relevance to mine for two reasons: first, she examines Woolf’s essays and argues that it is the dialogic principle of form that enables Woolf’s “specifically literary intervention in the formation of public life” (Cuddy-Keane 2010: 242, original emphasis). In other words, Cuddy-Keane asserts that it is the *form* of Woolf’s writing, not only the subject matter dealt with, which allows her to engage with issues of public concern. The formalists have of course been accused of neglecting the broader social and political significance of literary works;⁴ Cuddy-Keane’s study, however, focuses on the specificities of form and concurrently deals with literary texts’ potential for engagement with wider social and political issues. Second, the ideas put forward in her chapter “Woolf and the Theory and Pedagogy of Reading”, coincide in intriguing ways with my own discussion. I have posited, through my own close reading of *Mrs Dalloway* and an examination of Holmesland’s, Bishop’s and Hite’s studies, that the form of Woolf’s texts requires the reader to abandon the reading practices fostered by more traditional narrative modes and to adopt more self-reflexive reading practices.

Cuddy-Keane presents Woolf as an intellectual who not only meaningfully engaged with matters of social concern in various essays, but more importantly kindles within her essays a means of reading that is able to resist and oppose authoritarian modes of discourse (Cuddy-Keane 2004: 121). In the third chapter of her study, she considers the implications of Woolf’s review of a book that was intended to instil in children a “revolutionary passion ‘to redress the wrongs of the world’” (133). In this review, Woolf suggests that as our opinions are often formed through reaction, the “truth may be that if you want to breed rebels and

⁴ Leon Trotsky, in his *Literature and Revolution*, for example, described the methods of the Russian Formalists as “necessary for descriptive purposes but dangerously narrow and limited relative to the need to examine literature in the broader contexts of history and society” (Visser 1982: 16).
reformers you must impress upon them from the beginning the virtues of Tories and aristocrats” (Woolf 1986: 196). This facetious remark reveals Woolf’s deeper concern about the disadvantages of the writer’s well-meaning, but naively didactic approach (134). As Cuddy-Keane says, her serious point is that “imposed instruction pushes its recipients into either submission or resistance, locking them into either passive or oppositional roles” (134). In her own writing, Cuddy-Keane argues, Woolf consistently attempts to negotiate a space for the reader to resist and challenge the text; she “continually encourages a reading practice of ‘talking back’” (134).

I have discovered a significant correlation between Cuddy-Keane’s position and that of Molly Hite. Hite asserts that Woolf’s equivocal use of tonal cues in Mrs Dalloway creates such a space for the reader to resist and challenge the text, as this narrative strategy complicates the reader’s response to the text and precludes us from drawing any fixed conclusions:

While Woolf’s experiments with affective uncertainty certainly aim to influence readers, the consequence of that manipulation is not to evoke a determinate response like sympathy or anger. Instead, the absence or confusion of tonal cues draws readers into interaction with the text, an interaction that will not easily arrive at affective stasis. (Hite 2010: 267)

Both Hite and Cuddy-Keane posit that the form of Woolf’s writing incites the reader to engage critically with the ideas presented. Cuddy-Keane explains that in her essays, Woolf does not adopt a unilateral position and then attempt to sway the reader to her point of view; instead, various positions are adopted throughout the essay and the reader is encouraged to reflect on the advantages and limitations of each. In this way, the reader oscillates between different, perhaps irreconcilable, points of view and is drawn into a form of engagement where negotiation is preferable to outright rejection or acquiescence. Woolf’s response to the children’s book raises the important point that the form of “discourse [the writer employs] determines the possibilities for reply” (Cuddy-Keane 2004: 134).

Cuddy-Keane argues that the distinctive form of Woolf’s essays derives from her desire to engage in dialogic negotiation with the reader. To engage in dialogue or conversation necessarily involves the participation of more than one voice (Cuddy-Keane 2004: 135).
dialogic form thus presents a mode of discourse that is potentially more democratic and inclusive than monologic forms of discourse. The definition of *conversare*, Cuddy-Keane points out, is “to turn around frequently” (135); significantly, Woolf described her own rhetorical style as a “turn & turn about method” (Woolf in Cuddy-Keane 2004: 135). Woolf first consciously attempted to write a critical piece in the form of a dialogue when she reviewed Joseph Conrad’s works. In this review, entitled “Mr Conrad: A Conversation” (1923), she depicts two fictional characters, Penelope Otway and David Lowe, chatting informally about the merits and defects of Conrad’s prose (136). The characters interrogate each other’s views from various perspectives; consequently, the reader is invited to see the blind spots inherent in both positions. The reciprocal exchange of views depends upon the characters’ participation, for neither assumes “a unilateral or monologic position” (136).

This review of Conrad’s work was not greeted with enthusiasm by Woolf’s immediate circle of friends (Cuddy-Keane 2004: 137). Yet she remained convinced that her “turn & turn about method” had much potential (137). She therefore decided to alter the technique, to do away with the distracting presence of fictional characters and rather embed “the dialogue within the essayist’s voice” (137). She noted in her diary, “Characters are to be merely views” (Woolf in Cuddy-Keane 2004: 137). However, as Cuddy-Keane explains, a less literal application of the technique requires the reader to be more circumspect in attending to the subtle shifts within the texts:

> No longer situated as a spectator witnessing a debate, the reader undergoes repeated repositionings; it is as if the reader gets comfortably settled in one easy chair only to be told to shift to another facing the opposite way. The different chairs are all presented as viable locations, including the chair made from the stuff of conventional assumptions, traditional thinking, and patriarchal attitudes; however, as our positionality changes, each new perspective exposes an earlier one from a new angle.

(Cuddy-Keane 2004: 137)

The form of Woolf’s essays prompts the reader’s critical involvement; the narrative strategies she employs discourage us from simply being receptive or wholly opposed to the ideas discussed. Her characteristic “turn & turn about method” stimulates readers to reflect on the advantages and limitations of a certain point of view, only to shift to another perspective and interrogate its validity through the same process. We can thus compare this process to the concept of defamiliarization, in that a seemingly natural position or habitual
truth is suddenly placed in a new light and critically reconsidered. However, in Woolf’s essays, this does not mean that the new perspective offered is necessarily more accurate or truthful than the defamiliarized one; as Cuddy-Keane observes, the “different chairs are all presented as viable locations, including the chair made from the stuff of conventional assumptions [and] traditional thinking”. Instead, the form of the essays makes us newly aware of the fact that our thinking is never neutral or unbiased: ideas that seem natural are shown to be founded on deep-seated ideological suppositions and we come to realise that adopting a single perspective necessarily entails the exclusion of the possibilities inherent in another. Cuddy-Keane agrees that in “Woolf’s distinctive treatment, the conversation is designed not to lead the reader to a final truth but to prompt the reader’s critical thinking by juxtaposing equally justifiable views” (2004: 135).

The arguments posited in Cuddy-Keane’s study – regarding the form of Woolf’s essays – coincide in many important respects with Molly Hite’s propositions concerning Woolf’s equivocal use of tonal cues in Mrs Dalloway. Cuddy-Keane asserts that Woolf’s “turn & turn about method” encourages heuristic reading practices; Hite illustrates that the narrative techniques employed in Mrs Dalloway serve a similar purpose. Cuddy-Keane’s claim that the form of the essays is “designed not to lead the reader to a final truth but to prompt the reader’s critical thinking by juxtaposing equally justifiable views” (2004: 135), seems to me to correspond almost exactly with Hite’s argument concerning the scene in which Clarissa assimilates the death of a soldier she has never met. As discussed in the previous chapter, Hite argues that the passage in which Clarissa hears of Septimus’s death, and her reaction to his death, engender in the reader varied responses that cannot, and perhaps should not, be reconciled. She asks:

> Can they balance their sympathies for a young, war-traumatized veteran driven to suicide by the threats of the professional medical men who have power over his life and for an aging, upper class wife of a Tory minister who recovers her sense of possibility because she hears of this suicide? The answer to any of these questions has to be a very unsteady yes and no, not some stable “both/and” but a continual movement between conflicting points of view and sympathies. To “take” both Septimus and Clarissa at this peak moment involves a back-and-forth between decision and reconsideration, affirmation and rejection, sympathy and revulsion, prioritizing and subordinating.

(Hite 2010: 269)

Speaking of the dialogic form of Woolf’s essays, Cuddy-Keane observes:
The significance of the essay is not just that such questions are raised; it is equally important that they are raised through a process of settling and unsettling, as we are urged simultaneously to form opinions and never allow opinion to harden into ‘truth’. Ultimately the effect is to dissolve the conventional either/or oppositional relation between knowing and not knowing, and to hold these apparent opposites together in an ironic tension.

(Cuddy-Keane 2004: 141)

Both critics describe the effect the form of Woolf’s writing has on the reader; the phrases they use to describe this effect underscore the active and dynamic reading practices that the form of her writing cultivates. According to Hite, the narrative strategies employed in Mrs Dalloway foster a kinetic mode of engagement: the text demands “a continual movement between conflicting points of view and sympathies”; the interpretive act is characterised by a “back-and-forth” movement. Similarly, Cuddy-Keane highlights the importance of the essays’ “settling and unsettling” effect, which encourages us to “form opinions and never allow opinion to harden into ‘truth’”. In the previous chapter, I drew attention to the pervasiveness of such ‘active’ phrases in the works of Edward Bishop and Oddvar Holmesland, and suggested that Woolf’s method is often described using metaphors of motion because the process of interpretation is so often foregrounded against the desire for static resolutions.

It is evident that Hite and Cuddy-Keane concur that in Woolf’s fiction and non-fiction the process of engagement is of more importance than the attainment of any static conclusions. Cuddy-Keane asserts that the effect of the form of Woolf’s essays is to “dissolve the conventional either/or oppositional relation between knowing and not knowing, and to hold these apparent opposites together in an ironic tension” (Cuddy-Keane 2004: 141); this is precisely what Hite suggests when she says that the use of equivocal tonal cues in Mrs Dalloway denies the reader “affective stasis” (Hite 2010: 267). It is vital to note that this form of engagement is not merely “an exercise in indecision” (Cuddy-Keane 2004: 137), nor is it the same as saying that Woolf urges us to form our own opinions: it involves a constant movement between diverse perspectives and encourages us not to become entrenched in static beliefs. It is for this reason that the process of defamiliarization is of such importance in Woolf’s works: the purpose of defamiliarization is to prompt us to reconsider precisely those opinions and positions that are so ingrained in our habitual modes of thought as to appear natural. Hite says some “philosophers would argue that such engagement is the
most mature and cognitively evolved way to deal and live with the great ‘unsolvable’ problems of philosophy” (2010: 269).

Michael Whitworth has also raised the point that Woolf’s novels do not provide the reader with categorical conclusions. In his study, *Virginia Woolf* (2005), Whitworth asserts that her “novels often appear to raise questions without providing answers, either through a narrative voice or the voice of a character. This quality has seemed a weakness to those who wish to obtain some sort of positive message from a novel, and as a strength to those who like to reach their own conclusions” (2005: 132). On the surface, Whitworth’s observation seems to parallel the arguments of Hite and Cuddy-Keane, as he likewise suggests that Woolf’s writing eschews explicit didacticism. However, whether the reader obtains “some sort of positive message from a novel” or reaches his or her own conclusions, both verbs that Whitworth uses imply that some sort of stasis has been achieved. Yet it seems to me that Woolf’s fiction, and non-fiction, move beyond this form of pedagogy: the process of engaging with the text is ultimately more important, for once stasis is achieved intellectual engagement comes to a halt.

In her essay “On not Knowing Greek”, Woolf describes the intricacies involved in Plato’s method of argumentation and informs us that “even if [one] does not learn more from Plato”, no one “can fail ... to love knowledge better” (Woolf 1968: 51), for “what matters is not so much the end we reach as our manner of reaching it” (51). The same can be said of the active mode of engagement her own writing nurtures. It is her use of specifically literary elements that provokes our critical thinking: her paradoxical analogies, the shifting perspectives that characterise her fiction and critical writings, and, perhaps most importantly, her palpable use of language. These aspects of her writing continually rouse us from our habitual modes of thought and perception and encourage us to attend to our world, if only for a short spell, as Septimus does: with awe and wonder.

What, then, has this study revealed about the concept of literariness? The Russian Formalists moved away from solely attending to this concept in relation to the literary work, as this form of inquiry is certainly limiting (Jakobson 1978: 6), and creates the false impression that the ‘ideas’ expressed in literary works are of secondary importance. And yet, the elements within the text that foreground its ‘literary’ status – the techniques used,
the unusual emphasis on the medium of expression itself and the specific form the ideas assume – must be important in some way; for if we focused principally on the ‘ideas’ voiced in texts, it would be difficult to defend our analysis of literature, rather than other types of texts that deal first and foremost with ideas, such as philosophical, political or psychological treatises. This study has illustrated that the elements characterising literary works (perhaps) more than other forms of writing, are not used as ornamental features that make the text more aesthetically pleasing; instead, writers make use of these literary techniques because they often allow for the renewal of perception in ways that literal, denotative prose arguably does not.

However, it does not follow from this that the literary critic should confine him/herself to the analysis of the formal aspects of the text. Literary texts almost always give expression to ideas that are explicitly dealt with in other disciplines within the humanities, and these ideas can be explored profitably by borrowing theories and critical approaches from other disciplines. My own analysis of Woolf’s portrayal of time in *Mrs Dalloway* was influenced by the work of the philosopher Henri Bergson and his distinction between *temps* and *duree*. My discussion of the effects of defamiliarization in *Mrs Dalloway* attests to the political and sociological implications of her works. Her portrayal of time, for example, explicitly comments on mechanisms of societal control. Melba Cuddy-Keane’s and Molly Hite’s studies also illustrate that paying attention to the formal aspects of the text does not preclude us from drawing wider conclusions about the work’s political, pedagogical and sociological implications. Rather, it is essentially through a rigorous analysis of the formal elements of the text that these critics are able to comment on the wider, extra-literary concerns of the text.

From the perspective of literary studies’ disciplinary status, it is vital that these priorities are not reversed: when we attend to the literary work as literary critics, we must approach it primarily as an instance of literature, which involves paying close attention to its form, the specificity of its language and the various narrative strategies used within the text. We can employ theories and paradigms borrowed from neighbouring disciplines to elucidate our readings of texts, but the literary work should not be seen principally as a means through which to demonstrate a particular theory. When this occurs, we invert the disciplinary boundaries of literary studies. Gareth Cornwell, in his article “Literary Studies: What Went
Wrong” (2011), describes the latter use of literature as “unethical”. He observes, while “there must be a place for such instrumental readings – that is, readings that proceed inductively and use literary texts in order to demonstrate or substantiate arguments or theories about philosophy, history or culture” (Cornwell 2011), such readings should not be confused with the primary aims of literary studies.⁵

Recasting literariness as the dominance of the “poetic function” (Jakobson 1978: 6) within a specific work, as Roman Jakobson later proposed, also allows us to apply this concept to texts that are not specifically literary or are not primarily read as literature, but that nonetheless draw attention to the medium of expression itself in various ways, to achieve particular purposes. In Woolf’s essays, as Cuddy-Keane illustrates, the poetic function is more dominant than one would perhaps expect from critical expositions. She argues that to engage the reader’s participation, Woolf’s essays ask their readers to “participate in a discourse that employs fantasy, whimsy, metaphor, allusion, irony and mockery – all contrary to the expectations of transparent, instrumental prose” (Cuddy-Keane 2010: 243, original emphasis). Viewing the poetic function in this way reminds us that not all literary works will draw attention to the linguistic medium to the same degree. This study has attempted to demonstrate that the poetic function is dominant in Woolf’s works, or at least in Mrs Dalloway, but this will not necessarily be true of all forms of literature.

After completing the literary theory module of my Honours course, I was left with the impression that Russian Formalism and New Criticism present outdated modes of literary analysis, concerned solely with static descriptions of technique and form, that did not seem to offer the same exciting possibilities as other critical approaches such as Post-colonialism, Post-structuralism and New Historicism, for example. Possibly, this is because an Honours course introduces one to many varied areas of study, but does not necessarily examine each in depth. Or, perhaps it is because I often consulted primers as a means of acquainting myself with the salient features of a critical movement and such study aids necessarily flatten out complex issues in order to provide a broad overview of a subject. Yet, through

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⁵ Cornwell’s article in fact makes a case for a return within literary studies to “a more worldly, historicized version” (Cornwell 2011) of formalism. His article does not explore the concept of literariness as such; it rather focuses on the consequences of the multiple theoretical approaches that have been incorporated into the realm of English studies. In particular, he condemns the various theoretical perspectives that encourage a “hermeneutics of suspicion”.

128
this study, I have discovered complexity and diversity in the writings of both these schools of thought. It has also become apparent to me that many of the issues addressed by these schools are still relevant to literary criticism today.

Despite the necessary shift away from purely intrinsic modes of literary analysis, the formalists’ emphasis on the experience of form, particularly the struggle with estranged forms, as articulated by the Russian Formalists, remains a valuable theoretical perspective from which to approach the text. The New Critics do not speak of estranged form as such; however, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren’s assertion that we arrive at meaning only “through conflict” (Brooks and Warren 1967: xiii), seems to me to have much in common with Shklovsky’s claim that forms must be made difficult and unfamiliar if we are to experience the process of defamiliarization (Shklovsky 1916: 16). The critical engagement that such estranged or defacilitated forms necessitate on the part of the reader is demonstrated in the recent criticisms of Woolf’s works analysed in this study. The New Critics and the Russian Formalists may have disregarded the implications for the reader’s involvement in this experience with estranged form (Tompkins 1980: ix). However, if reading literature is an experience, as Brooks argues (1947: 213), something that is “done to us” (Eagleton 2007: 21), partly through the effects of its aesthetic strategies, then attention to form need not exclude the experience of reading; on the contrary, it may explain this experience to some degree, because narrative strategies are therefore also affective strategies. The principle of estranged form may thus offer a valuable point of departure from which to address this theoretical oversight; as is evidenced in Hite’s and Cuddy-Keane’s and indeed my own exploration of the ways in which Virginia Woolf’s form involves the reader in an active and dynamic process of interpretation.
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