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# *Knitting against the war: Virginia Woolf's building-up of forms*

O German mother dreaming by the fire,
While you are knitting socks to send your son
His face is trodden deeper in the mud
(S. Sassoon, *Glory of Women* 1919)

Knitting and waiting
Through hours like years –
Not with loud grieving
Nor sighing nor tears –
In their hands the needles
Flash like spears.
Every thread a sorrow,
Every strand a prayer […]
There are women knitting
Everywhere…
(C.F. Smith, *The Knitters* 1915)

Both World Wars play a crucial role in Virginia Woolf's fictional and non-fictional writings. Her macrotext variously testifies to the war on the level of content, by thematizing it, and on the formal level by mimicking the phenomenological bursting caused by the conflict. In this paper I intend to illustrate how Woolf's formal strategies convey the effects of war and how, at the same time, they are also intended as a remedial alternative to the destruction they narrate and epitomize. My analytical focus will be on Woolf's second experimental novel, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), in which she creates an even balance between narrated annihilation and narrating restoration, i.e. between content and form. The latter compensates for the former's destruction: the formal level contrasts with the thematized deadly experience by exploiting the novel's fecund dichotomy based on polar

opposites, such as life *vs* death, part *vs* whole, light *vs* darkness, health *vs* madness, surface *vs* depth, high/up *vs* low/down, female *vs* male.

Whilst on the one hand Woolf translates the war's fragmented reality into a similarly broken and parenthetical prose, on the other she manages to weave that fragmentation back into unity through specific formal devices that will be analysed shortly. In this novel, Woolf deals explicitly with the war and, more implicitly, with the possibility of opposing it through writing. It is through writing that she relates parts to form a pattern, and this building-up device can be considered the artistic counterpart to another unifying and typically female activity that the novel also thematizes: knitting and sewing.

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From *The Voyage Out* (1915) onwards, Woolf's writings make clear references to both World Wars[1]. The First World War, in particular, represented a fundamental historical reference point for modernist writers and also the climax of the fin-de-siècle crisis. It definitively revealed that the world had radically changed from what was previously known, and that the related nineteenth-century social value systems had finally collapsed.

In 1923, looking back, Lawrence and Woolf wrote respectively: «It was in 1915 the old world ended» (Lawrence 1950, 243); «on or about December, 1910, human character changed [...] And so the smashing and the crashing began. Thus it is that we hear all round us [...], the sound of breaking and falling, crashing and destruction [...]. Signs of this are everywhere apparent. Grammar is violated; syntax disintegrated» (Woolf 1966, 333f.). The year before, in *The Waste Land*, Eliot had likewise talked of destruction and war when referring to: «a heap of broken images», «fragments shored against [...] ruins», and a crowd flowing «over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many» (Eliot 1934, lines 22, 431, 62f.). With the war, the old world of social, economical, political, religious and scientific certainties was completely smashed to pieces, literally and figuratively. Besides, for the first time in human history a war was industrialized, fought through technological machine guns causing mass slaughters that no

[1] In *Jacob's Room* (1922) Jacob dies fighting as a soldier; in *To The Lighthouse* (1927) the middle section refers to the war by narrating objectual destruction and, incidentally and in parentheses, also Andrew Ramsay's death («[...] the thud of something falling. [A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous]. At that season [...]», WOOLF 1992b, 145); *The Waves* (1931) is characterized by military metaphors (cf. LEE 1991); in *The Years* (1937) the focus on death is related to the impending war which is also the main theme of *Three Guineas* (1938), the long essay in which Woolf adopts a feminist and antiwar position; finally, in *Between the Acts* (1941) the planes in battle formation zoom menacingly through the airspace above Pointz Hall. Cf. also the 1940 essay *Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid* (WOOLF 1967, 173-77).

civilian or soldier could be prepared to face. The use of gas, bombs, air raids revealed technology's highly dehumanizing and destructive potential[2]. The horror experienced by the soldiers who survived WW1 caused extremely severe forms of physical and psychological trauma, generally described as shell shock.

While men were at war killing, destroying and dying, women were at home both taking up male jobs such as working in munitions factories to help the country win the war or farming the land, whilst also continuing to carry out traditionally female activities. Among these was knitting/sewing, as amply attested in female First World War literature. Knitting became a symbol of women's endurance and resistance in the face of the pain and familial losses caused by the conflict. Both male and female writers widely employed this image from different perspectives[3]. Woolf also used the image repeatedly in her writings, making it both refer to the ordinary activity and symbolize writing. The symbolic meaning depends on the fact that knitting, sewing and similar activities all imply creating or following patterns[4]. References to this image abound in Woolf's macrotext and the recurrence of this trope establishes an intertextual isotopy that strings her novels together until her last book, *Between the Acts*, where, in keeping with their shaken faith in life, the female characters are no longer able to make enduring patterns, be they ordinary or artistic, and Isa finally «let her sewing drop» (Woolf 1992c, 128).

*Mrs Dalloway* is notably connected to both *The Voyage Out* and the short story «Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street». The former introduces the character of Mrs Dalloway, the latter provides the core idea of the novel and also serves as a working draft. Here, explicit references to the war are made through mothers mourning their young sons' deaths since «[t]housands of young men had died that things might go on» (Woolf 1985a, 152f.). The novel took two years to write (1922-1924) and its working title was «The Hours».

[2] Over 16 million people died.

[3] Among female authors, cf. Rose Macaulay's *Many Sisters to Many Brothers* (1915) and Jessie Pope's *Socks* (1915), respectively: «In a trench you are sitting, while I'm knitting / A hopeless sock that never gets done – / Well, here's luck, my dear; – and you've got it, no fear; / But for me…a war is poor fun» (MACAULAY 1915); «Shining pins that dart and click / In the fireside's sheltered peace / Check the thoughts that muster thick – / *20 plain and then decrease* […] / Wonder if he's fighting now, / What he's done an' where he's been; / He'll come out on top somehow, – / *Slip 1, knit 2, purl 14*» (POPE 1915, 21).

[4] Cf. SIM (2010). A very famous quotation from *To the Lighthouse* illustrates how female knitting opposes male destruction and pessimism since it relates to hope, protection and restoration: contradicting her husband's prediction that the weather «won't be fine», Mrs Ramsay states that «it will be fine», while *knitting* the «reddish brown stocking» (WOOLF 1992b, 8).

The war experience brought about a generalized and acute sense of loss and precariousness, which fed Woolf's own keen sensitivity to bereavement and separation. Hence, the topic of war closely matches one of her most generative themes, which tackles both death and madness, and is a major macrotextual feature.

In a 1922 entry in her diary, Woolf wrote of the novel: «Mrs Dalloway has branched into a book; and I adumbrate here a study of insanity and suicide: the world seen by the sane and the insane side by side», and «Mrs Dalloway seeing the truth, Septimus Smith the insane truth» (Woolf 1981, 207). The following year, the diary testifies to a development of the pairing: «I want to give life and death, sanity and insanity» (Woolf 1981, 248)[5]. She achieved this by employing two main characters who perfectly incarnate a dichotomous dynamic. This narrative and compositional device has a dual focus but, at the same time, the two characters are absolutely complementary. As Woolf wrote in a 1925 letter, failure to make readers understand that «Septimus and Mrs Dalloway should be entirely dependent on each other» (Woolf 1977, 189) would mean that the novel itself was a failure. But she succeeded in conveying their great interdependence.

On one single June day Mrs Dalloway's and Septimus Smith's lives intersect abstractly and implicitly. They live and walk in the same city, they share space and time, and are also connected through other characters: Mrs Dalloway's former admirer Peter Walsh bumps into the couple Rezia-Septimus in the park, and Dr Bradshaw, in whose office Septimus commits suicide, goes to Clarissa's party where he narrates the event.

In keeping with these two characters' interdependence, party(life) and war(death) alternate with each other: «The War was over [...] she [...] was going [...] to give her party» (Woolf 1992a, 4f.)[6] until, at the end of the novel, death enters the party as an unexpected guest: «A young man (that is was Sir William is telling Mr. Dalloway) had killed himself. He had been in the army. Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here's death, she thought» (201). Despite her sense of death and attraction to darkness,

[5] In June 1923 in her diary, Woolf defined the writing of the novel as «the devil of a struggle. The design is so queer & so masterful» (WOOLF 1981, 249), and «character is dissipated into shreds now [...] I insubstantiate willfully [...] distrusting reality – its cheapness. But to get further. Have I the power of conveying the true reality?» (248). The following August, she added that it was one of her «most tantalising & refractory of books» (262). Not only did she want to make a compact whole out of separate parts, she also meant to convey the simultaneous workings of consciousness through the sequential linearity of the verbal code. As Quentin Bell argued, in *Mrs Dalloway* Woolf wanted «to make literature 'radial' rather than 'linear'» (BELL 1972, 98).

[6] All quotations from *Mrs Dalloway* are drawn from this edition and page numbers are provided in parentheses after quotations in the text and notes.

she finally sides with life. The positive/constructive and negative/destructive sides of the novel hinge on Clarissa, who ends up accommodating and representing both content and form, male destruction and female construction, war/death and knitting/writing.

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Septimus Warren Smith has the war inscribed in his name. He is a war veteran suffering from shell shock. Breaking, fragmentation, destruction and death are mainly conveyed through Septimus's madness[7]. Explicit references to the war precede his entrance into the plot[8] and lexical items belonging to the relevant semantic fields recur throughout the novel (bones, dead, smoke, flames, horror, endurance). Right from the outset everybody in the streets of London is made to think about the war, also recalled by the loud sound the Royal car produces when passing through. Blocking the traffic, it makes all the pedestrians stop and look at it, sharing the same feelings: «strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire» (19); «poor women waiting to see the Queen go past – poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War» (21); «the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world» (63). Criticism of the war is initially voiced through brief statements, but it can be easily and continuously inferred by its traumatic and devastating effects on Septimus.

He has survived the war, but the experience and the loss of his comrade Evans shocked him to the extent of driving him mad. He feels guilty for having survived and recollects the traumatic events so intensely as to estrange himself from reality. The war experience has also destroyed his perception of a chronological hierarchy of past and present which, in Septimus's mind, mix as the past haunts and deforms the present. The veteran Septimus returns home full of horror and loses his lucidity, his love for writing and his poetic aspirations, his wife's love and, finally, his own life. After the war, life makes no sense:

> Septimus was one of the first to volunteer […]. There in the trenches […] he developed manliness; […] when Evans was killed […he] congratulated himself upon feeling very little and very reasonably. The War had taught him […]. The last shells missed him. He watched them explode with indifference […] now that it was all over […] he had, especially in the evenings, these sudden thunder-claps of fear. He could not feel […] something failed him […]. There were moments of waking in the

[7] The war is also indirectly referenced by other characters: Peter repeats the phrase «it was smashed to atoms» (59) and Miss Kilman provides a perspective on the German side.

[8] «[…] it was the middle of June. The War was over, except for some one like Mrs Foxcroft […] because that nice boy was killed […] or Lady Bexborough […] John, her favourite, killed» (WOOLF 1992a, 4f.); «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 […]. Think, for example, of the woman she admired most, Lady Bexborough, opening the bazaar» (10).

> early morning. The bed was falling; he was falling […]. He asked Lucrezia to marry him […] it might be possible that the world itself is without meaning. (94-97)

Septimus sees Evans in other men walking along the streets of London and the fact that «he did not feel. He had not cared when Evans was killed» (99) is a «crime» (105) to be expiated. He also hears voices talking to him and is haunted by a sense of falling downwards: «he could hardly walk. He lay on the sofa and made her hold his hand to prevent him from falling down, down, he cried, into the flames! and saw faces laughing at him, calling him horrible disgusting names, from the walls, and hands pointing round the screen […] he began to talk aloud, answering people […] getting very excited and making her write things down. Perfect nonsense it was; about death» (73). It is Rezia who writes his thoughts down for him because he has lost the capacity to do so: «That man, his friend who was killed, Evans, had come […] He was singing […]. She wrote it down» (154). The feeling of «eternal suffering» is increased by that of «eternal loneliness» (27) because he cannot express or communicate to others his traumatic feelings. At the beginning of the novel, when we do not yet know him, Septimus is reported to have said «I will kill myself» (17), but as the novel develops he feels that the whole world is inciting him to do so: «he was deserted. The whole world was clamouring: Kill yourself, kill yourself, for our sakes […]. Communication is health […] happiness» (101f.). Being unable to communicate, either orally or in written form, and feeling an extreme loneliness, he decides to throw himself out of a window. Thus, he finally responds to the irresistible lure of the downwards fall that has haunted him throughout the novel, and also surrenders to the feeling of division and separation which robs reality of sense, and which the clock strokes keep on repeating all over London: «Shredding and slicing, dividing and subdividing, the clocks of Harley Street nibbled at the June day» (112).

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Whereas Septimus's sense of fragmentation ends up in nothingness and although Clarissa shares some traits with him, she manages to restore a sense of unity by establishing relationships between what he perceives merely as inexorably fragmented parts.

Both are attracted by darkness, but she eventually escapes: «there was in the depths of her heart an awful fear […] She had escaped. But that young man had killed himself» (203). Like Septimus, she also feels guilty for surviving the dead («It was her punishment to see sink and disappear here a man, there a woman, in this profound darkness», 203), but in the end she embraces life, detaching herself from Septimus: «She felt somehow very like him […]. She felt glad that he had done it; thrown it away while they went on

living […] she must go back» (204). Contrasting with Septimus's plunge downwards, she goes back to her guests «[l]olloping on the waves […] she seemed […] to be; to exist; to sum it all up in the moment as she passed» (190). She finally manages to skim the watery surface avoiding the depths of annihilation that Septimus has yielded to.

According to Woolf's initial design, Clarissa should have killed herself, but in the end the author decided that this task would be accomplished by her alter-ego Septimus. Clarissa has also been seriously ill, and the connection between her illness and the strokes of the clock from St. Margaret's church telling the hour points explicitly backwards to her past remembrances, and implicitly forwards to the end of the novel (the approaching party) and to the end of life (for Septimus both ends coincide): «She has been ill, and the sound expressed languor and suffering. It was her heart […] and the sudden loudness of the final stroke tolled for death» (54). Both are also haunted by the passing of time and implied death. Nevertheless, while Septimus is no longer able to distinguish between past and present, as the former, related to the war, invades and distorts the latter, Clarissa keeps them separate. This is why she can provide forms of relations and bonds, whilst he cannot. And though she clearly shares with him a sense of the individual loneliness of human beings, she reacts differently. While he sees no potential for meaning, she does. Her feminine centripetal ability to unite parts and people prevails through activities that include connecting people by means of a party and also knitting/sewing/mending. This is closely connected to her transcendental disposition, which the novel describes in the following terms:

> did it matter that she must inevitably cease completely […]; did she resent it; or did it not become consoling to believe that death ended absolutely? but that somehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived […] being part […] of the trees at home; of the house there […]; part of the people she had never met; (9f.)

> she felt herself everywhere; not 'here, here, here' […] but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that […] even trees, or barns. It ended in a transcendental theory which, with her horror of death, allowed her to believe […] that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death. (167)

Clarissa is herself a central and gravitational pivot with people conglomerating «round her» «network»-like (84), and her own different selves assembling, in the world's eyes at least, into one: «That was her self when some effort […] drew the parts

together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting-point» (40). Unlike the post-war Septimus but very like Woolf, Clarissa knows how to transform plurality into unity, keeping different people, places, times and her own separate selves together: «she felt if only they could be brought together; so she did it. And it was an offering; to combine, to create» (134). This unifying ability is immediately, and in my opinion not coincidentally, followed by her decision to mend her dress and to write: «She would mend it […] would take her silks, her scissors, her […] thimble, of course, down into the drawing-room, for she must also write» (41). This is an implicit but noteworthy hint at the connection stressed in the novel between sewing and writing as mending, and thus remedial, activities.

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Shifting the focus from content to form, we see how the dichotomic relationship between Clarissa and Septimus informs the whole novel, and how a bursting and centrifugal plurality branches out from it. Form is also dichotomic in that it is on the one hand outwardly disconnected and on the other genuinely connected at a deeper structural level. We should begin by considering the centrifugal formal feature.

The Clarissa-Septimus dichotomy produces a variety of motifs and sub-motifs that can be summarized by keywords as follows:

| **Mrs Dalloway** | **Septimus** |
|---|---|
| recovered health | illness |
| life | death |
| party | war |
| sense of plenitude | sense of vacuum |
| non-rational thinking | rational thinking |
| window to look from | window to throw himself out of[9] |
| upwards | downwards |
| connection/relation | fragmentation/separation[10] |

[9] Windows are a major recurring motif in Woolf's macrotext. The dichotomic relationship between Clarissa and Septimus is peculiarly marked by the presence of windows: the initial «open window» she was standing at as a young girl in Bourton matches the final window that Septimus throws himself from and also that from which, during her party, she observes and is observed by an old woman, pushing her back to life and away from deadly thoughts.

[10] Some relevant textual references concern, for instance, the fact that while the royal car passing through the London streets makes Mrs Dalloway think of the dead caused by the war in a communal sense, it makes Septimus isolate himself from reality and others; she believes that «no mathematical instrument […] could register the vibration» (19), while he thinks that «one must be scientific, above all scientific»

Against the background of the main opposition between Clarissa-and/*vs*-Septimus, the novel's form conveys fragmentation and its reference to war by splintering the plot, its spatial and chronological references, the narrating voice and the narrative strategy.

Despite the chrono-spatial unity (London on a June day) and the novel's three main polarizing elements (the clocks' strokes everybody hears, the plane's smoke words everybody watches, the royal car everybody sees and whose roaring everybody hears), the plot explodes into a multiplicity of places and times related to the minds and memories of individual characters. This fragmentation is also conveyed by the use of multiple viewpoints mimicked by one narrating voice that splits into many, following the characters' spatial and mental meanderings. This happens, for example, in the park when Septimus, Rezia and Peter cross each other's paths without knowing one another and their thoughts are taken up by the narrator by ramifying the narrative focus:

> A man in grey was actually walking towards them. it was Evans! But no mud was on him; no wounds; he was not changed. I must tell the whole world, Septimus cried, raising his hand (as the dead man in the grey suit came nearer), […] 'But I am so unhappy, Septimus,' said Rezia, trying to make him sit down. […]. He was talking […] this man must notice him. He was looking at them. 'I will tell you the time,' said Septimus […], smiling mysteriously at the dead man in the grey suit […]. And that is being young, Peter Walsh thought as he passed them. (76f.)

This multiplication also implies that the same referent is given different meanings: the dead man in a grey suit is both Septimus's imaginary Evans and the real Peter who walks by and comments on the couple.

The confusing plurality on the level of content also results from the fact that the narration is broken up and parenthetical, often lacking a logical progression between parts which are juxtaposed without being explicitly related. Parentheses may enclose events as well as thoughts. In the following quotation, Clarissa's thought is given without parentheses while events are described parenthetically: «Richard […] did things for themselves, whereas she thought, waiting to cross, half the time she did things not simply, not for themselves […]; perfect idiocy she knew (and now the policeman held up his hand) for no one was ever for a second taken in» (10). The contrary also occurs, with thought in parentheses and reality not: «'Who can – what can,' asked Mrs Dalloway (thinking it was outrageous to be interrupted at eleven o'clock […])» (43); when Septimus decides to kill himself: «(for she was with him). Holmes and Bradshaw liked that sort of thing. (He

(24); she figuratively surfaces from the depth like a mermaid (190), while he plunges into them as believes he «went under the sea» (75).

sat on the sill.) But he would wait till the very last moment. He did not want to die. Life was good» (163f.). Parentheses may equally convey a character's thoughts within the strain of thoughts of another, as in the following example regarding Septimus (outside parentheses) and Rezia (in parentheses): «I have been dead, and yet am now alive, but let me rest still, he begged (he was talking to himself again – it was awful, awful!)» (75). A further example concerns Peter and the mixing of his thoughts about Clarissa with his actions described in parentheses and interrupting the thoughts: «She belonged to a different age, but being so entire, so complete, would always stand up on the horizon, stone-white, eminent, like a lighthouse marking some past stage on […] this interminable – (he felt for a copper to buy a paper and read about Surrey and Yorkshire; he had held out that copper millions of times – Surrey was all out once more) – this interminable life» (178).

Such atomization similarly concerns minor characters and events, and is also suggested by the use of numerous deictics whose referents are often delayed. Recurrent personal pronouns may precede their nominal reference so that it is never clear who is really talking or doing something, or what is being done or happening. This deferral is often accompanied by chronological and spatial fragmentation since we are not given precise coordinates and have to piece information together as the reading proceeds[11].

If form conveys a fragmented plurality which thus mimics the effects of war, it is also able to provide union and oppose fragmentation. We have already discussed the peculiar status of both the single narrative voice and the chrono-spatial unity. The novel's unity is further indicated by its circularity: it begins and ends with Mrs Dalloway, enclosed between her surname given in the incipit, «Mrs Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself» (3), and her name appearing at the very end, «[it] is Clarissa, he said. For there she was» (213). The use of the reflexive pronoun and cleft sentences highlights identity, life and continuation in contrast with Septimus's war experience and his suicide.

The whole novel is tightly woven through paradigmatic connections based on patterns of recurrence and variation, just as a knitted fabric is. Both knitting/sewing and writing are presented as female activities: the former practiced by Mrs Dalloway, Rezia and the nurse in the park; the latter, practiced by Septimus before the war, is now taken

[11] Despite the chronological information given by the clocks on the precise hours of the June day, if we want to identify the precise dates both of the present of narration in London and of the past events in Bourton, we must gather all the scattered information throughout the novel in order to reconstruct the precise dates. Other references to time lapses are provided incidentally («[t]hose five years – 1918 to 1923 –», 78).

up by Rezia though she has no ability or interest in it and does it only to note down what her husband wants her to as he is no longer able to write.

Like a woven pattern, the novel is built on recurring crossings between formal components. It is worth noting that Woolf sensitizes the reader to formal strategies based on the concept of crossing by first thematizing them as, for instance, road crossings (Clarissa, Peter, Rezia, Septimus are all described while waiting to cross or crossing the road). This implicitly allows the reader to shift their attention from content-related crossings to formal crossings. Focusing on the latter entails considering the formal hinges that allow for the construction of the formal network. These are unifying as they allow the characters to experience similar events simultaneously (such as loud sounds recalling the war: the violent noise, like a pistol shot, from a motor car; the strikes of Big Ben and other clocks booming the hours all day long; the zooming of an airplane over their heads). Therefore, the main hinges are:

– Time. The clocks striking the hours provide a shared temporal framework for all of the characters, uniting them despite their mnemonic forays into their different past experiences: «It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big Ben; whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London […] twelve o'clock struck as Clarissa Dalloway laid her green dress on her bed, and the Warren Smiths walked down Harley Street» (103). Relevant phrases and expressions echo each other throughout the novel («the leaden circles dissolved in the air» is used over twenty times, and «irrevocable» also recurs insistently)[12].

– Space. London is the spatial hinge with its many places (the park, the streets, Westminster, the Strand) which the characters traverse either on foot or by bus. Both the plane in the sky and the car along the streets accentuate the spatial unity as they represent centralizing and collective elements: all the pedestrians look simultaneously at them and hear their zooming and booming, trying to make out the plane's smoke words in the sky and to understand if the car has a royal figure in it.

– Characters. Some characters work as catalysts and unifiers: the child Elise Mitchell, for instance, bumps into Rezia while running in the park and the scene is observed by Peter who is also there: «scudded off again full tilt into a lady's legs. Peter Walsh laughed out. But Lucrezia Warren Smith was saying to herself, It's wicked […] having left Septimus […] to talk to himself, to talk to a dead man, on the seat over there; when the child ran full tilt into her […] The child ran straight back to its nurse […] who put

[12] From this centripetal time references irradiate a wealth of centrifugal, chronological and psychological meanderings.

down her knitting, and the kind-looking man gave her his watch» (71). The child allows Woolf to weave the characters' different viewpoints together: Peter's being seen as a «kind-looking man» by Rezia and, probably, as a «dead man» by Septimus who sees Evans in him.

– Formulae/expressions. There are some specific features that link present and past events and memories, and the characters among themselves either through similarity or difference, thus establishing isotopies. The principal ones are:

– the «squeak of the hinges» that connect the June London day with a day in the past in Bourton;

– windows (the ominous window of Septimus's suicide, the open window in Bourton where a young Clarissa felt something awful was about to happen);

– sounds (besides the plane's zooming, the car's booming and the clocks' chiming, there are also the beggar's song and the ambulance's siren);

– water, depths and downward plunges. The squeak of the hinges brings Clarissa back to the past and she «plunged at Bourton» (3), which is the same word Woolf makes her use to refer to Septimus when she hears of his suicide and wonders: «had he plunged holding his treasure?» (202). The attraction towards downward movement and watery depths is shared by many characters: Clarissa wears a «silver-green mermaid's dress» (190); Peter thinks that «our soul, […], our self, who fish-like inhabits deep seas and plies among obscurities […] and on and on into gloom, cold, deep, inscrutable; suddenly she shoots to the surface and sports on the wind-wrinkled waves; that is, has a positive need to brush, scrape, kindle herself, gossiping» (176); Peter also perceives Clarissa's centripetal power in watery terms: «it was her street […]; cabs were rushing round the corner, like water round the piers of a bridge, drawn together, it seemed to him because they bore people together going to her party» (180); Septimus sees Rezia like a «lily, drowned, under water» (97), and he also feels he is drowning and falling himself: «The bed was falling, he was falling» (95); «He was drowned, he used to say […]. He would look over the edge of the sofa down into the sea […] he was falling down, down into the flames» (154);

– other recurrent expressions are: «the yellow curtain with all the birds of Paradise blew out» (184, 186) which also marks point-of-view shifts (from Richard to Clarissa and from Clarissa to Ellie); «fear no more the heat of the sun / nor the furious winter's rages» (10) repeated either completely or partially both by Septimus and Clarissa as both know Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*; «horror» referred to Masie Johnson, Septimus and Clarissa.

Within this macroframe of formal similarities, one specific analogy is that established between Clarissa and Septimus, which relates them in almost identical terms. A brief overview of just some of the many formal crossings between them may be of help:

| **Mrs Dalloway** | **Septimus** |
|---|---|
| «a touch of the **bird** about her» (4);<br>«little face, **beaked** like a bird's» (11) | «**sparrow**[s] perched […] in Greek» (26)<br>«aged about thirty, pale-faced, **beak**-nosed» (15) |
| «**something awful was about to happen**» (3) | «**something tremendous about to happen**» (75) |
| «It **rasped** her, though, to have stirring about in her this brutal monster! […] down […] the soul […] at any moment the brute would be stirring […] which, especially since her **illness**, had power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her **spine**» (13, *down* and *brute* semantically recall Septimus's downwardness and negativity) | «**rasped** his **spine** deliciously» (24) |
| «cabs […], like water […] **draw**n **together**» (180, here an implicit echo of Septimus's references to watery depths is at work)<br>«There was an emptiness about the **heart** of life» (33), «It was something **central**» (34), «some effort […] **drew** the parts together, she alone knew how […] composed […] into **one centre**» (40) | «this gradual **draw**ing **together** of everything to **one centre**» (16)[13] |
| «A **shock** of delight» (203) | «deferred effects of shell **shock**» (201) |

Therefore, whilst on the one hand Woolf keeps Clarissa and Septimus separate on the level of content where fragmentation prevails, on the other she manages to create a strong connection between them and the level of form turns out to be a tightly-knit whole.

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[13] For Clarissa and Septimus the meaning of *centre* is simultaneously similar and different. She perceives it as related to both plenitude/life and emptiness/death, while he only feels that «self-annihilation is the only possible way to embrace that center which evades one as long as one is alive» (MILLER 1982, 197).

Clarissa returns to life through her relational power to unite people at her party, as Woolf does, creating formal relationships that constitute a whole countering any form of fragmentation. They are both knitters of patterns. The writer's pattern is verbal and the formal level of this novel testifies to art's healing power: by narrating destruction and death, the verbal form also restores fragments to unity, which is the novel itself. The highly relational network Woolf creates induces the reader to make a mnemonic and simultaneous synthesis of all the parts that defies separation and ending. It is writing that guarantees this totality. In 31 May 1933, Woolf wrote in her diary: «I thought […] something […] about the synthesis of my being: how only writing composes it: how nothing makes a whole unless I am writing» (Woolf 1983, 161).

Woolf intersperses the novel with both implicit and explicit hints at the unifying potential of words and it is worth considering the motif of writing in its various inflections, which also have a metanarrative meaning and relate to knitting.

A first form of thematized writing pertains to Septimus. Words, in particular literary words, oppose death since they keep it at a safe distance. Septimus's own would-be literary words do so: «those writings, about war; about Shakespeare; about great discoveries; how there is no death» (153). The war experience destroys his literary aspirations since, when he comes home, both his spoken and his written words are fragmented and as broken as his mind and consciousness: «Burn them! he cried. Now for his writings; how the dead sing behind rhododendron bushes; odes to Time; conversations with Shakespeare; Evans, Evans, Evans – his messages from the dead; do not cut down trees; tell the Prime Minister. Universal love: the meaning of the world» (162). Before the war he was able to assemble poetic «hard, white, imperishable words» (76), reminiscent of Clarissa's ability to provide the world around her and herself with union and solidity (« assembling that diamond shape, that single person», 41), and the plane's white words.

Unsurprisingly, a second form of writing is that of the plane above London. Previously a symbol of war, it has now become harmless because it writes white-smoke letters advertising sweets. The positive value that the plane develops as a metonymic symbol of writing and transcendence implies the opposition words/upwards/sky *vs* bombs/downwards/depths. This positivity increases through a lexical analogy based on «soar» and relating the plane to religion, in that both are reassuring: «that *aeroplane* […] *soared* and shot […] till it was […] an aspiration; a concentration; a *symbol* […] of man's *soul*» (30), and a man standing on the steps of St Paul's Cathedral reflects on how the sacred place is welcoming and reassuring since it offers company and answers to «that

plaguy spirit of truth seeking [...]» (30), so he enters it and defines «a *cross*, the *symbol* of something which has *soared* beyond seeking and questing and knocking of words together and has become all *spirit*» (31). This lexical crossing establishes a connection between the writing aeroplane and the cross as remedial symbols (both, incidentally, also have a similar form), and consolidates the redeeming value of writing as a framework that unites fragments. Consequently, by means of a network of relational similarities, the plane eventually comes to symbolize union instead of destruction, thus contrasting war and deadly bombs dropped downwards with lively words blown upwards. On the level of content, its writing flight unites the plurality of people who try to put together the letters it writes. On the formal level, it works as a *Leitmotiv* that connects different and opposite semantic areas such as female/male, death/life, bombs/words. Indeed, it coagulates Mrs Dalloway (deciphering its words above), Septimus (as initially echoing a warplane), religion and Woolf's own writing[14]. Being both negative and positive, the plane is a mark of the dichotomic structure of the novel, of its components' interdependence and of the unity opposing their separateness.

At the same time, the plane also symbolizes Woolf's own writing: its white-smoke words disappear as hers do (given the temporal and sequential nature of the verbal code), and they are difficult to make out as hers are. In the novel, «building up» is a positive action related to an upward movement that implies interacting features such as the sky, the plane, writing, delight/ecstasy and the female gender: «And now, curving up and up, straight up, like something mounting in *ecstasy*, in pure delight, out from behind poured white smoke looping, writing a T, an O, an F» (31); «What is this terror? what is this *ecstasy*? [...] It is Clarissa» (213, my italics). This generates a cluster of significance that relates the female dimension to creation.

The change undergone by the plane from a male symbol of war and destruction to a female one of life and creation, results from the fact that, in the novel, the ability to keep together and relate parts through networks of relations is female: Clarissa, with her party, unites people, their present and hers, their past memories and hers; Rezia orders Septimus's fragmented words into written ones. Both also sew, mend and create, showing a typically female patterning ability to weave threads into wholes. Clarissa mends her green silk dress: «Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle [...] collected the green folds together» (43); Rezia sews hats and Septimus admires her with «her needle flashing straight» (157), and when the needle breaks, the prose does so too, mimicking

[14] Woolf's macrotext is extensively chacterized by the generative dichotomy air/above/surface-life *vs* water/below/depth-death.

the breaking and implicitly relating the needle to a pen: «Hat, child, Brighton, needle. She built it up, first one thing than another, she built it up sewing» (160). The recurrent use of the verb *build up* in relation to female activities consolidates the idea of a female generative ability which is simultaneously a metanarrative hint about Woolf's writing. The motif is strengthened by other scattered references to knitting female figures, as when, in Regent's Park, the «grey nurse resumed her knitting […] the elderly nurse knitted over the sleeping baby» (62-64), or in «the village street where the women stand knitting» (63)[15].

Woolf's highly patterned writing depends on the many relational crossings she employs, building them on similarities, analogies, repetition-and-variation formulae.

Almost at the end of the novel, there is a revealing example that illustrates Woolf's verbal knitting[16]. Through Peter's point of view, we are given a comment on the passing of an ambulance which, we know, is that sent for Septimus: «the *ambulance* sped to the hospital, having picked up instantly […] some poor devil […] knocked over perhaps a minute or so ago at one of these *crossings* […] it *crossed* the Tottenham Court *Road*, *chiming* constantly» (165-6, my italics). The word 'crossing' means and is itself a conglomeration. On the one hand, it explicitly contains a spatial reference to road crossing which is, in turn, made to cross a temporal reference, since the word 'crossed' is linked to the word 'chiming', also hitherto referring to the chronological strokes of the clocks and the inevitable movement towards death. On the other, it also suggests a metanarrative reference to the novel's form, based on the relational and crossing-like nature of Woolf's words that create crossroads of meanings encompassing death, space and time. As the novel itself states, this allows Woolf's literary words to provide the reader with «a moment in which things came together; this ambulance; and life and death» (166).

This confirms: a. that Woolf intended her writing to be a framework of formal crossings providing relationships and therefore sense; b. the remedial role of Woolf's formal crossings previously illustrated by the analogy between the novel's *crossing* isotopy and the religious *cross*.

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[15] The sense of pattern also belongs to the male dimension but nothingness tends to prevail. Both Septimus and Peter experience this and in similar ways. The former feels: «the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body […]. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern» (24); the latter dreams that «myriads of things merged in one thing» but also of being blown «to nothingness with the rest» and men and women being swept «into complete annihilation» (63).

[16] For a reflection on writing as a sort of «memory-work», a «tapestry of memory […] woven on the basis of the experience of [both voluntary and involuntary] recurrence», cf. MILLER (1982, 8).

As we have already seen, although death enters Mrs Dalloway's party and she also feels attracted by its «embrace» (202) which preserves from the corruption of life, she at last decides that «[s]he must assemble» (204). As she had already assembled threads by sewing, she assembles both herself back to life and people together. She knows how to relate parts, splinters, fragments, things and people. And this is also what Woolf does, by writing as well as by knitting.

Thematized knitting/sewing functions as a kind of metanarrative comment on Woolf's own writing. The novel itself is a knitted whole where the narrative threads correspond to the many chronological chimes and spatial threads that run, respectively, through the air and the streets of London, intersecting with each other, from the present of a June day in 1923 and the past of the characters. Woolf manages to weave them all together as Clarissa does both with her sewing and her party. The novel embodies the sewing and the party by being itself a pattern of reciprocally related knitted threads. Creating union is what both Woolf and Clarissa do through their ability to relate parts in opposition to the annihilation of war and death.

The interdependence Woolf intended to create between Clarissa and Septimus may finally be further interpreted in the light of the knitting metaphor. On the one hand they represent two complementary ways of reading reality, with one being the exact reverse of the other: Septimus the fragmentary and impressionist way related to the multiplicity of reality, Clarissa the unifying and ordering way that re-composes plurality into unity. As in knitting, where reverse and front are simultaneously the same and different, Septimus is the reverse, showing the stitches and knots in the depths of the fabric, Clarissa is the front, allowing the overall design to be seen smoothly on the surface. Through their interdependence, the novel also represents two levels of reading and, at the same time, the reader's task which entails experiencing confusion and ordering the parts to make sense out of it.

Keeping to the knitting metaphor, at a higher level it is Woolf who holds the needles, Septimus and Clarissa, together to compose a whole.

After a nervous collapse in January 1912, Woolf wrote to Leonard: «I now feel very clear, calm, and move slowly, like one of the great big animals at the zoo. Knitting is the saving of life» (Woolf 1975, 491). Both knitting and writing involve the «delight to put the severed parts together» which coincides with the revelation of a «hidden pattern» and with the awareness that «[i]t is only by putting it into words that [she] make[s] it whole» (Woolf 1985b, 72). It is interesting that, in the same year, Vanessa Bell captured a significant image of this in her *Virginia Woolf*, where the writer is portrayed while knit-

ting. I wish to end my paper with this visual image of Woolf, in which the writer and the knitter coincide: two related forms of patterning that represent Woolf's antidotes to death and war.

***Virginia Woolf*** **by Vanessa Bell (née Stephen) oil on board, 1912**
**Reproduced courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery of London**
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