

## **GENDERED SPACES AND FEMALE RESISTANCE: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "THE MARK ON THE WALL"**

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In a retrospective analysis of the houses she had once inhabited, Virginia Woolf claimed that those spaces “explained a great deal” (1985: 124) of both her private life and her fictional works. The evocative power of space in Woolf’s recollections extends to imagining time and events in architectural terms. As Tracy Seeley has suggested (1996: 89), Woolf’s interior spaces often act as embodiments, reminders and signs. Woolf’s recollections frequently appear attached to spaces: “In order to fix a date, it is necessary to remember what one saw” (1985: 83), the narrator of “The Mark on the Wall” claims. Spaces and their significance help to clarify many aspects of Woolf’s life and work and the connection between the two: their cultural meanings attach not only to Woolf’s personal experience, but also to her aesthetics, in which architectural spaces suggest complex whole lives and describe structures of thought.

This paper intends to discuss Virginia Woolf’s conviction that space is never a neutral emptiness, but a web of cultural, social and ideological relations which condition those individuals that inhabit them. Gender and space are constructed as mutually dependant categories, and both appear in need, in Woolf’s view, of revision and rethinking. Woolf’s first published short narrative, “The Mark on the Wall” (1917) dramatises such a need through its main argumentative thread, while also advancing certain assumptions embodied in the construction of a particular imagery which were to be centrally recurrent in some of her most celebrated

works. The patriarchal mechanics of production *versus* reproduction are perfectly reflected in the divorce between the public and private realm traditionally inhabited by men and women respectively. Woolf's "The Mark on the Wall" aims at dismantling such an opposition by means of subverting the very politics of space, where the traditional living-room turns into a place of subversion in which a subjective narrative perspective is compulsively engaged in exposing and discarding the assumed consistency of the male dominant modes of viewing and representing reality. The mark on the wall, both the title and the key image which structures the story, emerges as a disturbing blot that threatens to diminish order and coherence within the confines of the space which the traditional living room entails. Revealingly, it becomes the narrator's focus of attention, as well as the starting point of her subversive reflections.

Gaston Bachelard has claimed that "inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (1958: vii) or, in other words, that memory and imagination work dependably in our recollections of space as a structural principle. However relevant Bachelard's work may have been, recent criticism has looked deeper into the interrelations of culture and space, rejecting the Kantian view of space as an *a priori* emptiness which becomes filled with activity. As Michel Foucault has argued, space used to be either dismissed as "belonging to 'nature' —that is, the given, the basic conditions, 'physical geography', in other words, a sort of pre-historical stratum, or else it was conceived as the residential state or field of expansion of peoples, of a culture, a language or a state" (1972: 149).<sup>1</sup> Certainly, as Fredric Jameson has claimed, "space is ideological" (1988: 35), although the question has tended itself to be absorbed by naturalistic or anthropological perspectives, most notably in phenomenology. Instead, Jameson underlines the relationship of the individual subject or of the subject of lived experience to the architectural, spatial object by conceiving of space as a *text*, in which "a whole range of 'signs' and 'codes' are combined, whether in the organic unity of a shared code, or in 'collage' systems of various kinds" (1988: 36). Among other recent contributors to the theory of space, Henri Lefebvre considers space as a "social product" (1991: 26) which contains and regulates the social relations of both production and reproduction. Ideology produces specific kinds of spaces which may serve as tools of "thought and action, a means of control, hence of domination and power" (1991: 26). In short, cultural space reproduces the ideology which produced it in the first place. Decoding thus the multiple "intersections" of cultural meanings in a given space can reveal a society's spatial practice, demarcated by social relations and inhabited by history both personal and public. Virginia Woolf implicitly linked personal experience, cultural history and material conditions in most of her fictional work, and more overtly in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and its sequel *Three Guineas* (1938). In the latter, Woolf shows how the ideology of public life produces

monuments of architectural space: "Within a small space are crowded together St Paul's, the Bank of England, the Mansion House, the massive if funereal battlements of the Law Courts; and on the other side, Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament" (1992a: 176). Such "monuments of its own magnificence", as W.B. Yeats would have it, shape and condition private spaces too. As Woolf sees it: "It is from this world that the private house [...] has derived its creeds, its laws, its clothes and carpets, its beef and mutton" (1992a: 177).

It seems clear that Woolf considers space and gender as mutually dependant, most commonly understood as a discrimination between the public sphere, associated with masculinity, and the private or domestic sphere, generally conceived of as female. Such an opposition is hierarchical and supports an ideology that is both patriarchal and capitalist at heart, prescribing gender roles and activities backed up by a dynamics of production and reproduction in an enslaving binary system. This opposition and its dynamics determine, then, a woman's place. As is well known, *A Room of One's Own* dramatises the 'place' of women in culture through a history of exclusion and poverty, literally and metaphorically alluded to through the use of Woolf's discriminatory imagery, which permeates the whole essay. Woolf advocates the need for material independence and creative space, particularly in relation to the public world which excludes her as an Outsider: "If one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical" (1992a: 101). In spite of such alienation, culture and literary tradition —abstract concepts which for Woolf appear embodied in specific sites and places— call for trespass by women, as she would argue in her late essay "The Leaning Tower" (1940): "Let us trespass at once. Literature is no one's private ground; literature is common ground [...]. Let us trespass freely and fearlessly and find our way for ourselves" (1992b: 178). Since a woman's 'place' can only be understood in relation to masculine culture, Woolf considers it necessary to contest and resist from the very place of oppression, thus subverting those modes of behaviour and thought which patriarchy has prescribed for women as obedient subjects, as proper to their female nature. The question goes beyond a process of rejecting a patriarchal gender role (for Woolf, embodied by the 'Angel in the House' inhabiting the Victorian house) by articulating the need to diminish the role of man as the sole maker of culture, as she had argued in *A Room of One's Own*: "Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. Without that power probably the earth would still be swamp and jungle" (1992a: 45-46).

But suppose for a moment that the "looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it is there no

longer” (1985: 85), the narrator of “The Mark on the Wall” challenges. A discussion of this proposal is already articulated in this early Woolfian text, where the narrator imagines the existence of “a quiet spacious world [...] without professors or specialists” (1985: 87). Far from being withdrawals into self-indulgence, those pictures imply that gender and space are defined through male power. In literary terms, fiction-making has been overwhelmingly a male-gendered space, dominated by male voices and technical tools and impregnated with male values, as Woolf argues in her essay “Women and Fiction”:

When a woman comes to write [...] she will find that she is perpetually wishing to alter the established values—to make serious what appears insignificant to a man, and trivial what is to him important. And for that, of course, she will be criticised; for the critic of the opposite sex will be genuinely puzzled by an attempt to alter the current scale of values, and will see in it not merely a difference in view, but a view which is weak, trivial or sentimental, because it differs from his own. (Woolf 1966: 146)

96 Yet Woolf articulates the female writer’s need to contest, to trespass, while also suggesting that fiction-making is also women’s ‘place’. In “The Mark on the Wall”, such a need appears articulated from the very place of female oppression, the realm of the domestic from the privacy of a living room. Rather than presenting a female character engaged in educated talk around the tea-table as traditional Victorian narratives would,<sup>2</sup> an anonymous conscience (implicitly female, as will be argued) appears absorbed in her own thoughts while smoking a cigarette in a typically male attitude. The sudden awareness of a mark on the wall brings to an end her initial idle thoughts and fancies: “I was smoking a cigarette when I looked up and saw the mark on the wall for the first time” (1985: 83). The mark on the wall, as the title of this narrative suggests, is the image around which a whole argumentation revolves, both literally and metaphorically: the challenge to ascertain the provenance of such a mark allows the narrator to plunge into a train of thought and speculations in a fluid interior monologue detached from the principles of order, coherence and causality that governed traditional male narratives.<sup>3</sup> Significantly, the mark on the wall as key image was to be used again in a central passage of *A Room of One’s Own*, where Woolf suggests that the absence of female figures in the public sphere is the outcome of centuries of oppression:

There is no mark on the wall to measure the precise height of women. There are no yard measures, neatly divided into the fractions of an inch, that one can lay against the qualities of a good mother or the devotion of a daughter, or the fidelity of a sister, or the capacity of a housekeeper. Few women even now have been graded at the universities; the great trials of the professions, army and navy, trade, politics and diplomacy have hardly tested them. They remain even at this moment unclassified. (1992a: 111)

Confined to the mechanics of reproduction, women have been absent from the productive space, and thus unable to reach the mark on the wall which sets a satisfactory standard and bespeaks their 'place' in culture, as is argued in the story: "What now takes the place of those things I wonder, those real standard things? Men perhaps, should you be a woman; the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency" (1985: 86). Even today, Whitaker's *Almanac* provides tables of precedence for the most prestigious public institutions from which women are excluded, while representing a whole set of beliefs, values and rules inherent to patriarchy and to monologisation, as Woolf was again, using the same image, to argue in *A Room of One's Own*: "I do not believe that even the Table of Precedency which you will find in Whitaker's *Almanac* represents a final order of values" (1992a: 138). The dynamics of precedence and inheritance which the *Almanac* tackles become thus crucial in preserving patriarchy as a social order and, as such, central images which help to develop argumentation in "The Mark on the Wall". Yet, as has been suggested, women do not partake as subjects of such an inheritance, but as mere objects of obedience and submission, metaphorically referred to in the story through the inherited portrait reproducing a "fraudulent" objectification of the female: "The miniature of a lady with white powdered curls, powder-dusted cheeks, and lips like red carnations. A *fraud of course*, for the people who had this house before us would have chosen pictures in that way—an old picture for an old room" (1985: 83; our italics). As Diane Gillespie has suggested (1988: 205), portraits not only underline a particular genealogy, but also recall those inherited values such as tradition, authority and continuity, which the narrator will resist throughout the narrative.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, the lady's imagined portrait tackles the issue of male representation of the polarised versions of the feminine that traditionally denied women the socially relevant position of full human subjectivity: either a decent lady, an Angel in the House deserving her little, miniaturised space within the domestic realm, or a whore, a highly eroticised female wearing make-up and standing for the object of men's sexual fantasies. The pure, white Lily and the red, whorish Rose: the virtuous wife-mother and the public woman.<sup>5</sup> By classifying the picture as "a fraud", the narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" aims at destabilising the male gaze, the principle through which reality is ordered in a particular way, distributing every constitutive element into its appropriate place in a hierarchical order that is taken to be the normal, true and natural way things are. Everything falls under this dominating, objectifying, classifying gaze: nature, history, fiction writing, women, even men themselves. In Woolf's repeatedly stated view it is this perspective that must be assailed and it is women who are to carry out this hard, laborious task.

In her lecture to the National Society for Women's Service of 1931—published posthumously as "Professions for Women" in *The Death of the Moth* (1942)—

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Woolf spoke about her own experience in the struggle towards self-emancipation. The first obstacle to overcome, Woolf told her audience, was to exorcise the ghostly Angel in the House in her: the detachment from the model of femininity with which she was forced to identify as a sympathetic, charming, unselfish and pure being. The identification with that particular image of womanliness was performed on behalf of a particular gaze that enforced it and to which enjoyment was offered in sacrifice: “She [the ‘Angel in the House’] was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathise always with the minds and wishes of others” (Woolf 1993: 102). In reference to feminine charm in her essay “Two Women” (1927), Woolf spoke of “the curious spectacle [...] of grave and busy women doing fancy work and playing croquet in order that the male eye might be gratified and deceived” (1992b: 117). Precluding the expression and realisation of women’s desires and aspirations to occupy relevant positions in a transformed social configuration resulting from their subjective agency, this interconnection of women’s image and its regulating male gaze must be dismantled through subversion. If the image is abandoned as the source of identity, then the power of the gaze is undermined. If the patterns of thought and conduct prescribed as ‘naturally’ feminine are openly held to be unsatisfactory and oppressive and women promote an exploration of new modes of self-representation and agency, then the masculine image (reflected in the passive gaze of women as naturally inferior beings) would be blurred and patriarchy’s safe position of domination could be effectively contested. And it is not just women’s liberation from tyranny that is at stake, it is also men’s enslavement to patriarchal desire to dominate as reflected in the gaze of women. In this sense, Woolf’s late essay “Thoughts of Peace in an Air Raid” (1940) mirrors the polarised version of femininity found in the imaginary portrait of a woman in “The Mark on the Wall”:

Let us try to drag into consciousness the subconscious Hitlerism that holds us down. It is the desire for aggression; the desire to dominate and enslave. Even in the darkness we can see that made visible. We can see shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women; women with crimson lips and crimson fingernails. They are slaves who are trying to enslave. If we could free ourselves from slavery we should free men from tyranny. Hitlers are bred by slaves. (1993: 169-170)

Significantly, “The Mark on the Wall” closes with a reference to World War I, revealingly attached to the narrator’s male companion and to his factual world of events and newspapers: “‘Though it’s no good buying newspapers [...]. Nothing ever happens. Curse this war; God damn this war!’” (Woolf 1985: 89). Though implicitly stated, the text seems to establish a subtle connection between the mechanics of war and masculinity which would again be one of Woolf’s main theses in many of both her fiction and non-fiction works, most overtly in *Three Guineas*

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(1938). This is precisely a critique of such male dynamics of patriarchy as represented by the public sphere that is at stake in "The Mark on the Wall", which also reaches out to prefigure the workings of the private realm, becoming thus the "rule" of any social behaviour:

The military sound of the word ["rule"] is enough. It recalls leading articles, cabinet ministers—a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation. Generalisations bring back somehow Sunday in London, Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons, and also ways of speaking of the dead, clothes and habits—like the habit of sitting all together in one room until a certain hour, although nobody liked it. There was a rule for everything. (Woolf 1985: 86)

As seen by the narrator, it is not just a question of subjection to some external order that enforces a certain pattern of feminine identity and conduct, but also of such an order becoming truly effective subjection to patriarchal ideology when a regulating masculine gaze is internalised (Zizek 1989: 106). In order for a woman to kill the Angel in the House, to resist the overpowering, controlling male gaze, it is necessary simultaneously to become aware that the paternal, dominating gaze on behalf of which she is enacting that role does primarily reside within herself and so be in a position to free herself from its hold. And, of course, the fact that the narrator's gender is never clearly specified in the text is by no means an irrelevant fact, but rather a conscious textual strategy. The negative self-definition at one point would fit that given of herself by a consciously and intentionally negligent housewife: "It [the mark on the wall] may even be caused by some round black substance, such as a small rose leaf, left over from the summer, and *I, not being a very vigilant housekeeper—look at the dust on the mantelpiece*, for example, the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation, as one can believe" (Woolf 1985: 84; our italics). The voice which closes the narrative fits the place of the man of this fictional household better: he makes his entrance "standing over" the narrator, is about to go out to "buy a newspaper," is exasperated by the paralysing effect of the war in the normal course of public events, and asks in a sarcastic manner "why we should have a snail on our wall" (Woolf 1985: 89). His expression of contained anger concerning the presence of a snail we take to be a reproach addressed to the narrator for her negligent housekeeping.

Despite the fact that the narrator's impersonality could be considered an instance of the androgynous mind that, for Woolf, the artist should ideally possess—which she would develop further in *A Room of One's Own* (1992a: 125-137)—it is "the masculine point of view" that is subversively assailed, thus making of the traditionally silenced feminine perspective the main agent in the process (1985: 86). The politics

of impersonality cannot be understood as lack of commitment to such a feminist perspective, but rather as a dramatisation of a new angle of vision void of the chains of anthropocentrism which the narrator attacks throughout the narrative, thus allowing this conscience to penetrate not only the solidity of external appearance, but also civilisation and its contradictions as a male construction: “I wish I could hit upon a pleasant track of thought, a track indirectly reflecting credit upon myself, for those are the pleasantest of thoughts [...]. They are not thoughts directly praising oneself; that is the beauty of them” (1985: 85).<sup>6</sup> In spite of this voice’s insistent anonymity and grammatically ungendered nature, referred to through the story as the impersonal “one”, only a female conscience would be so absolutely explicit about the fact that “the masculine point of view” (1985: 86) or, in other words, the patriarchal gaze and the feminine image it enforces, constitutes the major obstacle in women’s struggle towards an emancipatory self-representation that would give voice to desires, aspirations, talents of their own that tradition forced them to repress in order to meet the inherited standards of womanliness:

The masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker’s Table of Precedency, which has become, I suppose, since the war half a phantom to many men and women, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go, the mahogany sideboards and the Landseer prints, God and Devils, Hell and so forth, leaving us with an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom —if freedom exists [...]. (Woolf 1985: 86; our italics)

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As the quote shows, women must overcome their fear and guilt in subverting masculine expectations which they have inherited for centuries —along with the list of useless objects to be “laughed into the dustbin”— about what they are, about female nature, and about the ideological representation of the way things are in general: “Whitaker knows, and let that, so Nature counsels, comfort you, instead of enraging you; and if you can’t be comforted [...] I understand Nature’s game— her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or to pain. Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action —men, we assume, who don’t think” (1985: 88). For Woolf, writing —because it is materially available and because it is the major channel for subjective expression— paves the way towards future emancipation from the dominant *status quo*, which was a precarious ongoing process at the turn of the twentieth-century. Hence the sense of “illegitimate” freedom that the narrator enjoys only partially. Only three years after the publication of “The Mark on the Wall”, Woolf’s review essay “Men and Women” (1920) engaged in similar argumentation, namely women’s invisibility as subjects throughout the ages, overshadowed by the deeds of dubious “men of action”: even the most famous heroines in novels “represent what men desire in women, but not necessarily what women are in themselves” (1992b: 19).



Revealingly, social change and formal change appear to Woolf to be mutually dependant when giving expression to female experience in writing: "To try the accepted forms, to discard the unfit, to create others which are more fitting, is a task that must be accomplished before there is freedom and achievement" (Woolf 1992b: 20). Such formal experimentation must undoubtedly include an abandonment of the dominant perspective from which women view themselves, the world around them, and the position they occupy in it. Hence Woolf's sweeping statement about women writers of the past in "Two Women": "Writing was the most accessible of the arts, and write they did, but their books were deeply influenced by the angle from which they were forced to observe the world" (1992b: 116).

"The Mark on the Wall" poses the question that literature is also women's place, and its practice an emancipatory experience. The living room, the traditional site of pacifying domestic homeostasis, turns into its obverse: a space of subversion in which a subjective narrative perspective is compulsively engaged in exposing and throwing into disarray the assumed consistency of the dominant modes of viewing and representing reality, the values that they entail, and the subject-positions that they enforce as normal, natural ones. As a work of fiction, this short piece is at a far remove from the neutral perspective of those writers Woolf called "materialist"—whom she identified with the male gaze and patriarchal modes of thought—who constructed their narratives by placing detail after detail in a coherent and chronological fashion in the assumption that their representation of reality was objective and unbiased, a mirror of life:

Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths is there no longer, but only that shell of a person which is seen by other people—what an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes! A world not to be lived in. As we face each other in omnibuses and underground railways we are looking into the mirror; that accounts for the vagueness, the gleam of glassiness, in our eyes. And the novelists in future will realise more and more the importance of these reflections, for of course there is not one reflection but an almost infinite number; those are the depths they will explore, those the phantoms they will pursue, leaving the description more and more out of their stories, taking a knowledge of it for granted. (1985: 85-86)

The narrator of "The Mark on the Wall" does not occupy this position of presumed neutrality that for Woolf could not possibly render "life" in a true manner. Such a vision of fiction-making, attached in the story to specific sites and places dominated by patriarchy, has a female counterpart, enacted by the liberating potential of an imaginary landscape "away from the surface, with its hard separate facts" (1985: 85), where figures representing male order, coherence and authority appear neutralised:

Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world. A quiet spacious world, with the flowers so red and blue in the open fields. A world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs [...]. How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light and their reflections. (1985: 87-88)

Both the water imagery and the Edenic garden of the passage suggest initial rites of life and existence, as well as the female womb and the maternal, as Woolf herself would explain when dealing with her first memories in her autobiography "A Sketch of the Past" (1939), described in surprisingly similar terms to those quoted above: "I begin: the first memory. This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground —my mother's dress [...] and of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach" (1976: 64). Furthermore, as Ellen Hawkes has suggested (1981: 32), the imaginary garden is reminiscent of the Medieval *hortus conclusus*, an enclosed garden where women share their experiences from their exclusion of male official culture.

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And it is precisely the mark on the wall, the main *leit motif* of the story, that prompts the narrator's subjective involvement which is in itself a position of resistance to male order, bringing along with it the distortion of the co-ordinates of reality as symbolically constructed: "Still, there's no harm in putting a full stop at one's disagreeable thoughts by looking at a mark on the wall. Indeed, now that I have fixed my eyes upon it, I feel that I have grasped a plank in the sea; I feel a satisfying sense of reality which at once turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades. Here is something definite, something real" (1985: 88). The mark on the wall becomes, revealingly, the most significant object among those confined in the traditional living-room, in spite of its odd nature, which threatens order and coherence. The black blot is the narrator's sole focus of attention as well as the point of inception of her subversive thoughts. This indeterminate, meaningless stain "about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece" haunts the mind of the narrator to the point of upsetting the chronological distinction between past and present upon which traditional plots were delineated (Woolf 1985: 83). Thus, an event —the moment when the narrator "first looked up and saw the mark on the wall"— is repeated in the present of the narrative discourse causing a permanent conflation of the two temporal dimensions that should be kept separate. In the third paragraph of the story the reader is already confronted with temporal confusion: "But as for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it *was* made by a nail after all; *it's* too big, too round, for that. I *might get up*, but if I *got up and looked at it*, ten to one I *shouldn't be able* to say for certain" (Woolf 1985: 83-85; our italics). The narrator closes the story by

echoing the unequivocal statement made by the other voice heard in the narrative concerning the nature of the mark on the wall: "Ah, the mark on the wall! It *was* a snail" (Woolf 1985: 89; our emphasis). In view of the narrator's permanent confusion and of the use of the past tense in her concluding remark, the attachment of a clear meaning to the blot on the wall does not prove satisfactory for the narrator and does not bring the story to a final closure (Cyr 1996: 200).<sup>7</sup>

One of the possible ways of approaching the effects of the mark on the wall upon the narrator and the subverting implications for the dominant ideology is to consider it as a version of what Slavoj Žižek, following Jacques Lacan, called "phallic anamorphosis" (1991: 94), a distorted optical image which viewed from a certain angle reveals its true shape.<sup>8</sup> In the story, the mark on the wall functions both as the object and cause of desire, as a piece of the Lacanian unsymbolised Real that should be repressed, but returns to distort the cohesiveness of reality as symbolically constructed (1991: 94). Therefore, the dominant representation of reality or the ideological, naturalising version of how things are is questioned in Woolf's narrative and the subject's desire is activated as a result of this slackening of her pacifying, normalising identitary moorings. The eruption of the object into the surface of reality—from which it should remain excluded for reality to retain its coherence— prompts the transition in Woolf's unnamed narrator from subjectification, or the subjection to and assumption of dominant ideology as "natural", to subjectivity, or the fact that the subject is divided as to her desire. Hence the liberating potential of the anamorphic object's effects when one does not phlegmatically dismiss it as an ordinary "snail", a piece of dirt that should be wiped off "our wall". The mark of the wall, viewed as an anamorphic blot, drives the subjective narrative perspective of Woolf's story into a systematic interrogation of the consistence of all the accepted modes of representing reality. Thus, in a tone of real exasperation, the narrator starts this process of demolition by a radical questioning of the solidity of all human knowledge and of the meaning of existence: "Oh, dear me, the mystery of life! The inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity! To show how very little control of our possessions we have—what an accidental affair this living is after all our civilisation" (Woolf 1985: 84). In accordance with such provisional nature of knowledge and reality, life is perceived as a state of inaccessible, perpetual fluidity: "One must liken it [life] to being thrown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour [...]. Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadows [...]. Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard" (Woolf 1985: 84).<sup>9</sup> As opposed to this, "historical fiction", educated talk about the tea-table, the "objective" novels of the materialists, "retired Colonels" turned into antiquaries and their diligent wives, "professors or specialists or housekeepers with the profiles of policemen", not only bore the narrator, but also emerge as exemplary features of an

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unsatisfactory, precarious and lacking world (Woolf 1985: 87). Even nature acts in support of this normative status by forcing the subject to abandon her engagement with the object that disturbs her pacifying subjection through an equipoise of compensation and renunciation: “Here is Nature once more at her old game of self-preservation. This train of thought [to stand up and see what the mark on the wall really is], she [Nature] perceives, is threatening mere waste of energy, even some collision with reality, for who will ever be able to lift a finger against Whitaker’s Table of Precedency?” (Woolf 1985: 88). “The Mark on the Wall” dramatises Woolf’s position of resistance against those rules and values as embodied by Whitaker’s table. The story works on the evocative power of an irrevocably gendered space, the living-room, which Woolf saw as culturally and ideologically determined by patriarchy. It has traditionally been a feminine realm whose laws appear to be dictated by male order, a place inhabited by the ‘Angel in the House’ to which Woolf would go back in her autobiography, discussing her own mother’s place and education in her earlier Victorian household: “Little Holland House then was her education. She [Julia Stephen] was taught there to take such part as girls did then in the lives of distinguished men; to pour out tea; to hand them their strawberries and cream; to listen devoutly, reverently to their wisdom; to accept the fact that Watts was the great painter; Tennyson the great poet; and to dance with the prince of Wales” (1976: 88). The dynamics of the living-room is also the dynamics of female oppression, of subjectivisation, and of silence. The place is attached to submission as well as to a compulsion of acceptance of a particular set of values or ideology. Such was Woolf’s own education and inheritance, as she described it in her autobiographical narrative “Phyllis and Rosamond” (1906), surrogate characters of Vanessa and herself: “To see them [Phyllis and Rosamond] in a drawing-room full of well-dressed men and women, is to see the merchant in the Stock Exchange, or the barrister in the Temple. This, every motion and word proclaims, is their native air; their place of business, their professional arena. Here, clearly, they practise the arts in which they have been instructed since childhood. Here, perhaps, they win their victories and win their bread [...]. The daughters answer submissively and then keep silence” (1985: 18-19). However, as the narrator argues, the picture of these two sisters “fails, but *where* it fails and *why* it fails *it will take some time and attention to discover*” (1985: 18; our italics). It would take Woolf another ten years to dramatisate in “The Mark on the Wall” where and why those female portraits failed. The dynamics of ideology at work in the drawing-room was in urgent need of revision, and in 1917 Woolf was in a position to do so, being intellectually and economically independent as a woman and as a writer.

In this particular story, the traditionally female gendered space of the living room becomes a text, as Jameson would have it, made of objects which are culturally and ideologically charged, which work therefore as signs and codes that the narrator

reinterprets and reformulates in a subversive aesthetics of resistance. Woolf reverses the mechanics of reproduction as attached to the private and feminine realm by producing a text targeting patriarchy from the very place of its oppression. The apparent order and coherence which the living room inspires through its familiar objects—the armchair, mantelpiece, bowl of flowers and bookcases—are suddenly upset by an unfamiliar (and thus even uncanny) object threatening its former smoothness. The mark on the wall erupts into the surface of reality from which it should have remained excluded to retain its coherence. But it is precisely the presence of this black spot, with its anamorphic quality, that allows the narrator's transition from subjectification, or being the passive object of male gaze and desire as depicted in the imaginary portrait, to subjectivity, or the active female conscience that questions the assumed consistency of patriarchy and its modes of representing reality, her own femininity and the way to express it through the power of the written word. In this particular sense, the narrator argues, literature is also a female place, yet not as it exists at present in the obsolete conventions of male realist writing or "historical fiction" (1985: 85), a Victorian inheritance which, along with the "mahogany sideboards" or the "Landseer prints", the narrator rejects (1985: 84). Writing, as the narrator would have it, paves the way towards female emancipation through a radical reformulation of conventions and modes of viewing reality. Like the mark on the wall itself, female subjectivity and women's writing emerge as disruptive elements upsetting an established social order, and as anamorphic black blots out of place. And yet, as "The Mark on the Wall" shows, it is only through the exercise of this particular change of focus that such a mark realizes its full and radical liberating potential: "The mark on the wall [...] is taking its first view of modern life in the sight of a white-walled fire-lit room" (Woolf 1985: 87).

## Notes

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1. Foucault sees such a consideration inextricably related to the reduction of modern philosophical practice to the problematic of time, thus bringing about a correlative devaluation of space which would stand on the side of "understanding, the analytical, the conceptual, the dead, the fixed, the inert" (1972: 149), a view which is further developed in "Space, Knowledge, Power" (1984: 239-257). Sonia Villegas has claimed that "the category of space has been traditionally associated with the feminine gender, whereas time remained a male dominion" (2004: 12),

although Villegas herself is aware of the presence of relevant critical voices (Kristeva 1986) who deauthorise this association.

2. For an excellent discussion of the use of traditional Victorian settings in Woolf's narrative, see Rachel Bowlby's essay "We're Getting There': Woolf, Trains and the Destination of Feminist Criticism" (1997: 3-15).

3. Such principles, which prefigure realist narratives, are overtly criticised by Woolf through her attack on the artistic

method of the male triumvirate of Arnold Bennett, John Galsworthy and H.G. Wells in "Modern Fiction" (1925): "Mr Wells, Mr Bennett, and Mr Galsworthy have excited so many hopes and disappointed them so persistently that our gratitude largely takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done; what we certainly could not do, but as certainly, perhaps, do not wish to do [...]. If we fasten one label to all these books, of which one word is materialists, we mean by it that they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the transitory appear the true and the enduring" (Woolf 1993: 6, 7).

4. For an interesting discussion on the relevance of portraits in Woolf's fiction, see Dennis Denisoff, "The Forest Beyond the Frame: Picturing Women's Desire in Vernon Lee and Virginia Woolf" (1999: 251-269).

5. Penny Boumelha has shown how at the turn of the century scientific discourse helped support the patriarchal ideology according to which women were "naturally" irrational, petty, vain, inconsequential, unstable and, therefore, in need of being confined to the sphere of home and family. Furthermore, Boumelha puts the stress on the fact—which she takes to be a symptom of man's anxiety about his sexual inadequacy—that feminine sexual unresponsiveness (a moral value *per se* according to which the best wives and mothers were those that seldom desired sexual gratification) was linked to its obverse (i.e., women's insatiability) (1982: 15).

6. As Maud Ellmann has suggested (1988), authorial impersonality is one of the most outstanding features of the modernist movement. T.S. Eliot argued that "the progress of the artist is a continual extinction of personality" (1932: 17). For Woolf, impersonality in fiction allows focus on the object of narratives, and not on the subject, the "damned egotistical self" (1978: 14) which, in her view, ruined the work of otherwise great writers such as Dorothy Richardson or James Joyce. Woolf is, however, contradictory and ambivalent as regards this question in other critical discussions, as is the case with "The

Modern Essay" (1925): "The triumph is the triumph of style. For it is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self; that self which, while it is essential to literature, it is also its most dangerous antagonist. Never to be yourself and yet always—that is the problem" (1994: 221).

7. The vision of the mark on the wall is not an experience recollected by the narrator from a safe, detached perspective, but rather a troubling experience the narrator is bound to relive in a manner akin to Freud's reference to the patient's repetition compulsion triggered by trauma: "He is obliged to repeat as a current experience what is repressed, instead of, as the physician would prefer to see him do, recollecting it as a fragment of the past" (Freud 1957: 149).

8. The most renowned example of anamorphosis in visual arts is Hans Holbein's *The Ambassadors* (1553), which Jacques Lacan discusses at length (1978: 79-90). The picture portrays the two French ambassadors at the English court surrounded by the icons of Renaissance culture. The coherence and unity of the painting is undermined by the presence of an amorphous, elongated object that engages the observer in a restless search for meaning, forcing its contemplation from different angles. At a given extreme point, the enigmatic object shows its true features—a skull—while the rest of the picture decomposes and falls from view. According to Zizek, the anamorphic stain is both the object-cause of desire, the piece of the Lacanian unsymbolised Real which should be repressed but returns to distort cohesiveness of reality as symbolically constructed (1991: 94).

9. Woolf may be echoing in this passage Walter Pater's aesthetics as defined in his "Introduction" to his seminal study *The Renaissance* (1873), where life is also described as a perpetual movement of "waste" and "repair": "Our physical life is a perpetual motion [...]—the passage of the blood, the waste and repairing of the lenses of the eye, the modification of the tissues of the brain under every ray of light and sound—processes which science reduces to simpler and more elementary forces" (1986: 150).

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