

VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE
VISIBLE WORLD

EMILY DALGARNO



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CHAPTER I

The hiding places of my power: Woolf's optics

. . . the hiding-places of Man's power
Open; I would approach them, but they close;
I see by glimpses now . . .
(Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, book xi)¹

In 1928 Virginia Woolf wrote Vita Sackville-West a lighthearted letter about their travel arrangements, which included as well some thoughts on Tolstoy and on her own writing practice. The vocabulary of the letter casually reveals the sense of the visible that is at play throughout her work. She wrote:

The main thing in beginning a novel is to feel, not that you can write it, but that it exists on the far side of a gulf, which words can't cross . . . a novel, as I saw, to be good should seem, before one writes it, something unwriteable: but only visible; so that for nine months one lives in despair and only when one has forgotten what one meant, does the book seem tolerable.

In the rapid associations of the letter the passage immediately follows a suggestion that Sackville-West in her essay on Tolstoy should have questioned "what made his realism which might have been photographic, not at all; but on the contrary, moving and exciting and all the rest of it . . . some very queer arrangement . . . of perspective" (*L* III:529). It would seem that the visible world might be represented by language that acknowledges the "gulf" between it and the writer, or by a kind of realism that is based on the visual codes of photography and perspective. In Woolf's mind the visible is prior to and contrasted with the writable. It suggests a kind of power that she attributes elsewhere to Septimus Smith, to see beyond the horizon of ordinary perception into a larger world that is only partly available to verbal representation. The visible is a kind of point in space towards which she moves during a period of extraordinary anticipation, that like gestation figures the future that is being

brought into existence minute by minute. Her sense of the visible takes no account of the author in the sense of a writer who masters his material; rather it opens the question of the narrator as subject.

The letter illustrates what I see at work everywhere in Woolf's writing, how narrative begins as a response to her sense of being oriented towards an unrepresentable visible. Her career occurred at a moment when historically specific optical codes were undergoing significant change. In her work narrative comes into existence at the point of conflict between two dominant representations of ocular experience, one that is modeled on mathematical perspective, and another on the mechanical regulation of light, for instance in the camera. My study focuses on what Woolf learned from her translation of Greek literature about representing the visible, the struggle to create in her fiction an alternative to nineteenth-century adaptations of Renaissance perspective and notions of beauty, and her interest in astronomy and photojournalism.

The history of the transformation of visual codes has been widely studied.² I focus on two moments, the resurgence of interest in perspective just as it was being abandoned by Cézanne and other painters, and the coincidence of changes in the design of the camera with the Spanish Civil War, so that in different cultures photographs might represent differently the conduct of the same hostilities.

A sense of conflict is often represented by Woolf as the inability of two persons to see the same object, and her characters are often differentiated from each other by their ways of seeing. *Jacob's Room* develops the dilemma stated by the narrator: "Nobody sees anyone as he is" (*JR* 25). In *The Waves* Bernard remarks on the disjunction of the gaze, "What I see . . . you do not see" (*W* 159). So in *To the Lighthouse* the two Ramsay children, Cam and James, see the boar's head in their bedroom in entirely different terms. Lucy Swithin and her brother Bart in *Between the Acts* do not share one visual field: "What she saw he didn't; what he saw she didn't" (*BA* 15). The problematic of the visible so construed comprises who sees and who cannot, the seen and the unseen, the relationship of the visible to representation, and the constitution of the viewing subject.

The value of Jacques Lacan to my argument is that he defines the "bipolar structure" (*E* 103) of the subject that is created at the juncture of visibility and language, the subject for whom full expression in language may be blocked by a difficulty in the realm of seeing. The problem occurs in Woolf's work at the level of character,

when a speech act permits Lily Briscoe to finish the painting that she had left unfinished ten years earlier. It occurs also at the level of language: for instance after Peter Walsh's dream his repetition of the phrase, "the death of the soul," registers the event both as perception and as consciousness, as the seen and the said.

Lacan argues that psychoanalysis is neither a world view nor a philosophy: "It is governed by a particular aim, which is historically defined by the elaboration of the notion of the subject" (*FFC* 77). That position is strengthened by his claiming a place for his work and Freud's in a genealogy which goes back to Descartes. He stands for the subject defined as "I" and identified with the ego.³ Descartes is nevertheless the predecessor of Freud in the sense that "Freud, when he doubts . . . is assured that a thought is there, which is unconscious, which means that it reveals itself as absent. As soon as he comes to deal with others, it is to this place that he summons the *I think* through which the subject will reveal himself" (*FFC* 36). Since, according to Lacan, Descartes' thought was directed to the real rather than the true, he remained unaware of the subject, "but we know, thanks to Freud, that the subject of the unconscious manifests itself, that it thinks before it attains certainty" (*FFC* 37).

In this genealogy Descartes also becomes the starting point for a history of optics. His image of the window in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) suggests a frame of reference for Lacan's representation:

But then if I look out of the window and see men crossing the square, as I just happen to have done, I normally say that I see the men themselves . . . Yet do I see any more than hats and coats which could conceal automatons? I *judge* that they are men. And so something which I thought I was seeing with my eyes is in fact grasped solely by the faculty of judgement which is in my mind.⁴

David Michael Levin derives a world view from this image. It is, he argues, the mechanistic vision of a rational and controlling mind that cannot grant speech or humanity to the men seen in the street.

Jacob Flanders has a similar experience when he turns from reading *Phaedrus*, and looking out of the window observes in the street the alien figures of "Jews and the foreign woman." It is perhaps what leads the narrator to comment, "What does one fear? – the human eye" (*JR* 104 and 75). In Levin's argument this detached way of viewing the world creates the environment necessary for scientific endeavor, but it also incorporates in the same

vision an element of madness. “Descartes . . . places a window between him and the men on the street, a window which disengages him from the visible world, makes him a spectator, and interrupts, or rather destroys, all the causal connections that would normally be in effect.”⁵ Woolf’s moment in history is marked, like Levin’s, by her clear recognition of the potential for destruction in a philosophy of spectatorship.

Lacan, more concerned with the visual dimension of the window experience, sees Cartesian meditation coinciding with the moment when “geometral or flat” perspective was superseded. It is demonstrated by imagining that a set of “ideal threads or lines” can transfer an image from one plane to another. Since the method is tactile and could be taught to a blind person, Lacan concludes that it is “the mapping of space, not sight” (*FFC* 86). In contrast Dürer’s *Artist Drawing a Reclining Woman* (1538) introduces “a correct perspective image,” in the sense that the image of the female brings into existence what had previously been “immanent in the geometral division . . . a dimension that has nothing to do with vision as such . . . the phallic ghost” (*FFC* 87–8). In a way that becomes important for Woolf, “the phallic ghost” suggests that desire weds the painter to his subject.

Woolf, who may not have been aware of “geometral” perspective, represents mathematical perspective in painting in the context of its late resurgence in the twentieth century. Erwin Panofsky begins his essay “Die Perspektive als Symbolische Form” (1924–25) with Dürer’s definition of the Latin “perspectiva” as meaning to see through.⁶ Alberti in the first book of *De Pictura* (1435) writes: “I describe a rectangle of whatever size I please, which I imagine to be an open window through which I view whatever is to be depicted there.”⁷ The fundamental weakness in this organization of space is the assumption that we look with a single, immobile eye, and that it takes “no account of the enormous difference between the psychologically conditioned ‘visual image’ . . . and the mechanically conditioned ‘retinal image.’”⁸ After some discussion of the differences between Plato’s and Aristotle’s conceptions of space and the various practices among painters of the Italian and northern Renaissance, Panofsky accounts for these apparent contradictions: “Thus the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-denying human struggle for control; it is as

much a consolidation and systematization of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self."⁹

Debate over Panofsky's essay has focused on the parallel that he suggests between perspective and other cultural formations. Hubert Damisch argues from the heuristic power of perspective in the work of Lacan and Foucault that its history is plural. Given that few Italian paintings in fact conform to the laws of perspective, he questions whether it became a paradigm, in the sense of a scientific practice that traverses history and provides a model for thought. He replies to Panofsky's claim that perspective dominated the conception of space until Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger* (1911), by noting that discussion reached a new intensity just as Cézanne and painters of his era had abandoned it.¹⁰

One catches an echo of this debate in Roger Fry's analysis of the history of art as "a perpetual attempt at reconciling the claims of the understanding with the appearances of nature as revealed to the eye at each successive period."¹¹ Fry specifically rejected the significance of perspective: "neither perspective nor anatomy has any very immediate bearing upon art – both of them are means of ascertaining facts, and the question of art begins where the question of fact ends."¹² But his insistence that the processes of art are analogous to those of science, and the vocabulary of "formal relations" that he developed suggest that to some extent he continued to think within the older problematics. In several passages of his *Cézanne: A Study of His Development* (1927) he analyzes the painter's practice in terms of color laid over geometrical shapes: "instead of searching for diagonal perspective vistas, movements which cross and entwine, he accepts planes parallel to the picture-surface, and attains to the depth of his pictorial space by other and quite original methods."¹³ In other words Cézanne's originality was characterized, in Fry's interpretation, by the unquestioned necessity to represent spatial depth.

The undercurrent of elegy that runs throughout Woolf's work is often figured as the compelling power of perspective. We see it in *To the Lighthouse* when Lily Briscoe, although she theorizes her painting as "colour burning on a framework of steel," language that owes something to Fry, is yet caught up in an archaic visualization of Mrs. Ramsay as a madonna seen through a window (*TL* 54). Clarissa Dalloway in two important scenes views through a window an old woman preparing for the night, and Septimus dies by plunging

through a window. And again in *The Waves* Percival as the embodiment of desire remains forever out of reach, a kind of vanishing point that serves to focus the gaze of each character.

The camera was developed in a manner consistent with Renaissance projections of perspective. Joel Snyder writes that although the pinhole camera had been used since antiquity for the purpose of observing eclipses, its images, which “do suggest a pictorial application to a modern eye . . . did not to the medievals. And they did not suggest a pictorial use until well into the sixteenth century, when the principles of linear perspective . . . had taken root in Italy.”¹⁴ Critics and historians of photography agree that the dimensions of the image and the coincidence of the fixed point with the eye are analogous to Renaissance monocular perspective.

It is the premise of my argument that Woolf moved from a world where the philosophical mind might expand the limits of the visible, to one where seeing was transformed by an apprehension that light creates the subject as object. The shift cannot be represented in terms of a decisive historical passage to a new world view. Lacan comments on “the optical structuring of space,” which since Plato has been tied to “the straight line” as “a space that is not in its essence the visual” (*FFC* 94–5). The result is that “the relation of the subject with that which is strictly concerned with light seems, then, to be already somewhat ambiguous” (*FFC* 94). Astronomical phenomena contribute to the ambiguity. If you wish to see a star of lesser magnitude, he writes, “You will be able to see it only if you fix your eye to one side” (*FFC* 102). In a space defined by light, “the point of gaze always participates in the ambiguity of the jewel” (*FFC* 96). As a result the eye becomes caught up in a dialectic of loss, that is quite different from Lacan’s earlier sense that one lives under the gaze of others: “*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*” (*FFC* 103). *The Waves* and *Three Guineas* are in similar terms transitional works, in the sense that in them Woolf too is poised between a visible that is modeled on the perspective of the desiring subject or the subject of philosophical reflection, and a quite different visible in which the subject is witness to an event created by light, that exceeds the parameters of retinal vision.

Woolf’s work opens itself to a new set of questions when read in the context of the shift in the representation of the visible in the West. My argument goes like this. Woolf’s engagement with the visible as problematic appears to have begun with her translation of

the Greeks. She learned from them that the visible is one segment of the larger invisible world that is seen by the gods and intermittently by the mad. It is a model that with variations appears in her major novels from *The Voyage Out* to *The Years*. In this scheme death is the event that precipitates the fundamental question: how does language name the figure who is no longer visible? Her translation of *Agamemnon* includes the image of the grieving Menelaos, who awakens from a dream of the absent Helen to find his embrace once again empty, so that his waking vision and his dream confirm one another.

When we recall that Woolf's experience of the deaths of her mother, her half-sister Stella, and her brother Thoby was followed by World War I, it is not surprising to find repeated in her work the trope of the empty arms that embrace both the invisible world of the dream and the waking world. The image of a character who, seeking to exchange a glance with the dead, is revealed for the moment in the position of viewing subject is central to her work. As the visual field splits among dream, vision, and hallucination the individual character is drained of power and the subject may be momentarily glimpsed.

So in *Mrs. Dalloway* Peter Walsh dreams of "spectral presences" that are "visions" of "the figure of the mother whose sons have been killed in the battles of the world" (*MD* 57–8). When he awakens suddenly he mutters "The death of the soul" and subsequently feels the words attach themselves to the scenes of which he has been dreaming, so that they become "clearer" (*MD* 58). After a break in the text Peter then spontaneously recalls the failure of his courtship of Clarissa and his "sudden revelation" that she would marry Richard Dalloway (*MD* 61). The dream/vision of the grieving mother and the revelation of Clarissa lost are stories about the authority of instants of extraordinary visibility, joined by a phrase, "the death of the soul," that opens a narrative perspective far beyond anything that Peter can articulate. He is for the moment before he owns the phrase "the death of the soul" by repeating it, in the position of subject, and when he has repeated it, he is no longer.¹⁵ The narrative juxtaposes the subliminal effect of the war to Peter's memory of his personal history so as to suggest that a major theme of the novel and the power of its narration are prefigured in the subject's response to the empty embrace.

WHEN THE SELF SPEAKS TO THE SELF . . .

Before turning to the remarkable congruence between Woolf's understanding of the visible world and that of Jacques Lacan I first pose the questions that are addressed in my study in terms that I derive from Woolf's early work. Three of her short stories suggest that in the aftermath of World War I she recognized that the sign was historically constituted, and that as a consequence the visible world could no longer be represented simply as the object of description. The mirror experience – she preferred “looking-glass” – occurs on the troubled boundary between seeing and naming, and achieves its significance less as a phase in the development of the subject than as a moment of self-reflection that necessarily involves misrecognition. My claim in other words is that Woolf's understanding of visibility and subjectivity is grounded in the events and ideology of twentieth-century history.

The stories that I have in mind are fables of representation, in the sense that they explore but leave unresolved problems that are implicit in her novels. Each one situates the relationship of seeing to naming in a particular historical and ideological context. “The Mark on the Wall” (1917) is the narrator's meditation on the relationship of sign to object in time of war, with a digression on the historical significance of the mirror experience. The story suggests that the visible may be historically determined: “in order to fix a date it is necessary to remember what one saw” (*CSF* 77). The visible comes into existence when it is assigned a name in order to commemorate a historical moment. The narrator distinguishes this practice from that of the former owners of the house who favored “an old picture for an old room,” as though they merely required a correspondence between objects and their settings for purposes of decoration. The narrator shares their propensity when musing on castles and knights, but also recognizes that objects refer to a particular history. The list of things that the narrator has misplaced figures a life characterized by loss. The Western civilization that writes its history in terms of “the dust which, so they say, buried Troy three times over, only fragments of pots utterly refusing annihilation,” necessarily confers on those objects its sense of the problematic and fragmentary (*CSF* 78). Nor can such loss be assuaged or evaded by writing history as the biography of individuals like Shakespeare, for “this historical fiction . . . doesn't interest me

at all" (*CSF* 79). The story, which has often been appreciated for its charm, seems to me to lay out the narrator's difficult choices while leaving the relationship of language to the visible both urgent and unresolved.

At this point the narrative admits an apparent digression in order "lovingly" to protect the image of the self from "any other handling that could make it ridiculous." "Suppose the looking-glass smashes, the image disappears, and the romantic figure with the green of forest depths all about it 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!" (*CSF* 79). The mirror experience suggests Woolf's satiric view of the romantic ego, and increasingly of certain Romantic poets as well. Here as elsewhere in Woolf's work the mirror experience by isolating the individual's appearance reduces the reflected figure to the empty shell that is seen by others.¹⁶ Although mirror scenes are common in European novels, Woolf is distinguished by her engagement with its implications for narrative epistemology. In this story it leads to criticism of novelists who see no further than reflection. They endanger "the real thing" by their willingness to pursue these "phantoms . . . leaving the description of reality more and more out of their stories" (*CSF* 80). The significant limitations of self-reflection become the ground of Woolf's dissatisfaction with realistic narrative.

"The Mark on the Wall" is brought to a close not when the war ends or when the object is saved from destruction, but when the narrator is recalled from her reverie by hearing her companion remark: "It was a snail." Assigning a name brings closure in a world in which the importance of the mark is to be seen and named "in order to fix a date." The possibility of smashing the looking-glass marks a moment of resistance to the romantic notion that objects have the power to memorialize the past as a pretty picture. The destruction of the "romantic figure" is a first step towards seeing beyond the mirror, which creates no more than a self-reflecting fiction, "a world not to be lived in." Interrogating the boundary of self-reflection makes possible a new set of questions about naming and the making of history.

Lacan's discussion of structure in *Seminar III* develops a definition of subjectivity in the context of physics that involves a redefinition of the sign. He begins by distinguishing a "closed" structure, which "is always established by referring something coherent to something

else, which is complementary to it” from “an open relation.” Whereas in the work of Jakob Boehme, for example, God is present and uses the signifier, in modern physics “there is nobody who uses the signifier.” In that context “every real signifier is, as such, a signifier that signifies nothing” (*Sem III*: 183–5). Lacan takes the discussion into the area of neurotic delusion, where the signifier may be used “not so as to inform you, but precisely so as to lure you” (*Sem III*, 193). In her story Woolf contemplates at some length the possibility of a signifier “that signifies nothing.” The narrative functions to hold open the relation long enough to stimulate a sense of “ignorance” and “knowledge” in a mood of “vast upheaval.” The mark starts out as an object that remains sequestered in the realm of vision, and becomes a signified only by the arbitrary act of the other in time of war. The signifier names what had looked like a “nail” a “snail,” the rhyme undermining the authority of the “closed relation” by signaling the capacity of the sign for musical nonsense.

It is significant that in *To the Lighthouse* the narrator comments as Lily attempts to restart her painting after an interval of ten years, “Still the risk must be run; the mark made” (*TL* 172). Both story and novel are consistent with Walter Benjamin’s discriminations in “Painting, or Signs and Marks” (1917). He begins by distinguishing the mark from the sign, before analyzing the mark as an element of painting. Like Woolf he is concerned with the sign in the state of becoming. The picture is comprised of marks, he goes on, but “if the picture were only a set of marks, it would be quite impossible to name it.” Composition enables the picture to transcend its marks by linking it to “*something that it is not*,” which happens when a picture is named. The mark in Woolf’s story shares none of Benjamin’s emphasis on composition as “the entry of a higher power into the medium of the mark.”¹⁷ But if the story dismisses conventional narration, neither is transcendental nomination quite adequate to the force and insistence of Woolf’s inquiry into the mark on the wall. The difference from Benjamin highlights her sense that the visible is a problem of the phenomenal world, but the story comes to an end just where a narrative that is transformed by this perspective might have begun.

“Solid Objects” (1920) is one of several short experimental pieces written in 1918–19.¹⁸ It represents the speaking and the viewing subject as two positions which emerge from a split in the gaze. The narrator begins by noting “one small black spot” on a semicircle of

beach that is seen by an unidentified eye. As the spot approaches it is apprehended as two “bodies” engaged in violent dispute. Charles is preoccupied with a political argument, John with a round shape which he has found in the sand. The story focuses on the shards of china, glass, and rock that John accumulates as he gradually fails to represent in Parliament the needs of his constituents. Finally Charles, convinced that although he and John share a language, they are “talking about different things,” abandons him (*CSF* 101). Although commenting in full on the solid objects that John collects, the narrative offers nothing to explain his motivation: John, who had entered a world of discourse in which he represented his constituents, takes steps to leave the world that Charles continues to inhabit. Although both speak the same language, only the unitary subject is fit to represent his constituency. The two men mirror each other, suggesting a world divided between the visible and the intelligible, the artistic and the professional.

I read “Solid Objects” as Woolf’s discrimination of the two senses of *representation*, split along lines familiar in German: *vorstellen*, to represent or signify, and *vertreten*, as in proportional representation.¹⁹ How else can we understand John’s standing on the brink of a career in Parliament, until he becomes so absorbed by his collection of broken china and iron objects that he fails to win election? The story closes with a moment of incomprehension as Charles asks, “What made you give it up like that,” which John denies (*CSF* 100). But although John no longer represents his constituents, his found objects are no more than a collection, and his subjectivity is not apparent.

Objects in the story suggest the distinction between metonymy and metaphor. The “lump[s]” and “shards” which John culls from the “waste land where the household refuse is thrown away,” might if enclosed in “a rim of gold” become a jewel (*CSF* 97–8). As mere objects they image metonymy as a series of elements that have become meaningless when they are no longer useful. The metaphoric dimension of language, far less in evidence in the details of the story, remains potential: “any object mixes itself so profoundly with the stuff of thought that it loses its actual form and recomposes itself a little differently in an ideal shape which haunts the brain when we least expect it” (*CSF* 98). Woolf suggests that when a utilitarian culture reproduces itself in a system of objects, metaphor becomes ghostly idealization.²⁰

But if metaphor is in trouble, so is the unitary subject that is identified unproblematically with the self. The narrator is an eye that is not an “I,” and in fact refuses the use of “I” that is customary in the code of representation. The first person occurs in two passages. John fantasizes a “sense of power and benignity” when he chooses from the road one stone which exults: “‘It might so easily have been any other of the millions of stones, but it was I, I, I!’” (*CSF* 98). The passage satirizes the ego as a blindly self-congratulatory stone, and self representation as an amusing fiction. At the end of the story John rejects Charles’s sympathetic condolences on losing the election in two sentences, “I’ve not given it up,” and “I don’t agree” (*CSF* 100). Here “I” asserts agency in order to say no. It would appear that representation as first-person narration is an absurd limitation of the stony ego which relegates the non-unitary subject to a position of denial.

Perhaps for that reason John in failing to represent the significance of his collection fails also to attain subjectivity. The narrator mimes his failure. As the spot noted in the first sentence draws closer, it splits in two when the eye first discerns the attributes of bodies: “mouths, noses, chins, little moustaches, tweed caps, rough boots, shooting coats, and check stockings” (*CSF* 96). The gaze of the narrator recognizes entities but not identities, as though in Lacan’s terms “any center in which information is added up can be taken for a someone, but not for a subject.”²¹ What in Lacan’s terms distinguishes the subject from the someone is that the signifier brings the subject into existence. In Woolf’s story the subject in this sense fails to come into existence. Instead she emphasizes the inhibiting effect of a society whose practices assume the unitary subject. It is as though she is saying that within a culture in which representation as *vertreten* is a dominant social value, the subject can emerge only from a split position. Yet in terms of the dominant discourse the refusal to represent signifies social failure. The passionate viewer collects objects and denies that he has failed, but those actions do no more than anticipate subjectivity and representation as *vorstellen*.²²

“An Unwritten Novel” (1920) explores the limits of a narration that is derived from the unimpeded play of the gaze. A fellow passenger on the train refuses to “play the game” and returns the narrator’s gaze (*CSF* 106). On the basis of a few words exchanged the narrator constructs a family story for the woman, “Minnie Marsh – some such name as that?” (*CSF* 111). “Leaning back in my

corner, shielding my eyes from her eyes, seeing only the slopes and hollows, greys and purples, of the winter's landscape, I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze" (*CSF* 108). The invasive quality of narration under these circumstances is reflected in the invention of a story about Minnie's hostility towards her sister-in-law.

As in "Solid Objects" the position of the narrator seems constructed around the contradictory functions of language, in this story the incommensurate claims of Minnie as *she* and as *you*. Minnie contained by the gaze in the world of social practices is imagined by the narrator as *she*, but when Minnie manages to evade the gaze either by means of a gesture towards the looking-glass ("you avoid the looking-glass" *CSF* 108), or by expressing hatred, she is directly addressed as *you*. The mere possibility of the transgressions that might lead to dialog compromises the narrator's authority: "Have I read you right?" (*CSF* 111). And when at the end of the story Minnie simply walks away with a young man, suggesting another and different story, the narrator concludes with questions about function and identity: "Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? . . . Who am I?" (*CSF* 115).

"An Unwritten Novel" concludes with a meditation on desire. "Wherever I go, mysterious figures, I see you, turning the corner, mothers and sons: you, you, you . . . If I fall on my knees, if I go through the ritual, the ancient antics, it's you, unknown figures, you I adore; if I open my arms, it's you I embrace, you I draw to me – adorable world!" (*CSF* 115). The ending shifts attention to the narrator, and suggests that the relationship of narrator to tale is motivated by desire for what eludes the objectifying gaze. Desire seems to produce the figure of the other that is manifested in the split position: "when the self speaks to the self, who is speaking?" (*CSF* 114). The task of the narrator would seem to be to satisfy both the demand of the gaze that it create a familiar social context for the strangers met on a train, and that it also take note when desire disturbs the horizons of the gaze. Woolf's narrator does not enjoy a wider frame of reference or easier access to intellectual or unconscious realms than the character. Rather, the author of an unwritten novel is defined as the locus of the contradictions that imply but have yet to produce the subject.

Woolf suggests how contemporary culture naturalizes the gaze. On a railway journey it shares the appeal of the newspaper: "But the

human face – the human face at the top of the fullest sheet of print holds more, withholds more” (*CSF* 111). And at the other end of the spatial range, when the narrator engages Minnie’s gaze, “there’s a break – a division,” which is imaged as a hawk hovering over the down, “alone, unseen; seeing all so still down there” (*CSF* 111). The image idealizes the distant gaze, and from that perspective the narrator comments in language that Lacan would recognize: “The eyes of others our prisons; their thoughts our cages” (*CSF* 111). The human gaze is caged within the smaller range of the human other, its confinement expressed as Minnie’s anger over small rooms and locked doors in her sister-in-law’s house. Whereas Minnie may look through the window of her bedroom “as though to see God better,” the narrator sees the secular world comprised of roofs and sky (*CSF* 109). But when the gaze is the view from space, the viewer is “alone, unseen.”

Woolf saw two of these stories as pointing the way towards “some idea of a new form for a new novel . . . Whether I’m sufficiently mistress of things – that’s the doubt; but conceive mark on the wall, K[ew] G[ardens]. & unwritten novel taking hands & dancing in unity” (*D* II: 14). They are consistent with her uneasiness about the conventions of narrative which is apparent in phrases from the notebooks about “the burden of writing narrative” (*D* III: 189), or “my lack of narrative power” (*D* III: 241). And they reinforce her criticism of the realistic novel in her early essay “Modern Fiction” (1919), especially in the work of Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy. “Our gratitude,” she writes, “takes the form of thanking them for having shown us what they might have done but have not done” (*CR* 151). They are “materialists,” in the sense that “they write of unimportant things; that they spend immense skill and immense industry making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (*CR* 153). Yet these novelists were useful to Woolf as the other against which she asserted a problematic and independent view of the representation of the visible.

What these three stories add to Woolf’s criticism is the sense that for her narration begins in the need to negotiate the boundaries of the visible world. The stories link third-person narrative which situates behavior in the social world to the gaze which objectifies that world as a mirror image of the self, and in so doing her narrative displays ideological process. The would-be artist is drawn by desire to test the boundary of the visible that is determined by social

practice and is reflected in grammar. Nor is the narrator free to imagine an alternative to the conventions of visibility, but merely to register the questions suggested by longing for the figure who always turning a corner effectively absents herself from the gaze and thus draws the narrator on to “embrace” a larger world. Yet so keen was Woolf’s sense of the obstacles that historically have inhibited the female coming to subjectivity that although marks may be named and objects found, the narrator’s split position is often the end of the story.

. . . AND THE LADY SITS WRITING

Toril Moi in a well-known essay defends Woolf against feminist critics whose “traditional humanism” leads them to demand “work that offers a powerful expression of personal experience in a social framework.” Pairing Elaine Showalter’s criticism of the subtleties of narrative strategy in *A Room of One’s Own* with the theory of Georg Lukàcs, Moi demonstrates that Woolf’s feminism is misunderstood and obscured by critics who associate her work with the autonomous self and a realist aesthetic. In fact “the humanism they represent is in effect part of patriarchal ideology.”²³ Although she goes on to suggest readings of Woolf oriented by the work of Derrida and Kristeva, I prefer to begin with Lacan. In his theory the subject arises in language, after a precisely detailed prehistory in the visible.

Woolf’s feminism is apparent in her representation of past narrative practice. It is apparent in certain visual images, for instance of the female who looks on at a scene of male reading and writing. Cam Ramsay’s position as an observer standing on the threshold of her father’s study in *To the Lighthouse* echoes similar moments in the fiction of Jane Austen. Reading such images within the realist aesthetic suggests an argument and a plea for female education. But Woolf’s study of Greek, which I explore in Chapter 2, was both a lesson in the power of patriarchal institutions to exclude women, and a revelation about the possibilities of a position outside the university. The subject arises when an outsider, usually female, attempts to enter the realm of the symbolic. But Woolf shows that a position rather than a character is gendered when she reveals that Bernard is defined, and to some extent all art feminized, by a particular position within the boundary of the imaginary.

Accordingly my argument that the subject arises from a split

between conflicting formulations of the visible world does not accord with those studies of Woolf that assume the unproblematic nature of character and seeing. While I share Alex Zwerdling's focus in "The Enormous Eye" on Woolf as "an original and important social observer," with a strong interest in history and public issues, I take issue with the assumption that Woolf was a writer who tried "to expand the theory and practice of realism," for whom the act of seeing involved "vision" in the metaphorical sense of "insight."²⁴ My focus differentiates this study as well from work on Woolf's relationship to painters and painting.²⁵ Nor is my representation of the theory of the visible in the work of Jacques Lacan unproblematic, for although I make use of his optical models of the visual field, Woolf's work suggests a different structure of the Imaginary that makes the female's transition to the Symbolic problematic. Woolf's emphasis on the would-be artist in the characterizations of Lily Briscoe and Bernard suggests that her goal was not to achieve the Symbolic. Rather the narrator accommodates the paradox of Woolf's position as novelist while exploiting the productive contradictions of the visible world.²⁶

My project is not unlike Harvena Richter's in *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, but although we are drawn to many of the same aspects of Woolf's work, she employs a formalist vocabulary. I would agree with her emphasis on "Virginia Woolf's insistence on perspective – the spatial relationship of the object to its surroundings," and to its importance in *To the Lighthouse*. But whereas she sees perspective as "what separates her most clearly from the Post-Impressionists," I see it as already archaic and so inhibiting the work of Lily Briscoe.²⁷ Whereas in Richter's chapters on "The Mirror Modes," and "The Voice of Subjectivity," she acknowledges Woolf's interest in Freud and sees the self as "multipersonal," the concept of the subject has been reconceived in visual terms in the work of Lacan.

My entire understanding of Woolf owes a good deal to Makiko Minow-Pinkney's *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject*. She traces in Woolf's essays the emergence of her feminism and her Modernist aesthetic, which both began with a challenge to phallogocentrism. She argues that *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and its earlier version "Women and Fiction" are Woolf's first attempt to present "what was once a generational issue in terms of gender difference." Tracing a path through Woolf's stories I arrive at a position consistent with her conclusion that "Modernism may be seen as an

attempt to reintroduce the repressed Imaginary into a symbolic order identified with an oppressive Victorianism by modern writers.”²⁸

But in the essays Woolf often cast herself in the role of the common reader²⁹ and when in some essays she presents herself as a writer, she suggests that the obstacles that impede her are ethical in nature. In “Modern Fiction” she introduces the well-known image of the “luminous halo” with a plea for freedom:

if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style . . . Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (CR 154)

Whereas Woolf's essays reveal her public position as reader and writer, it may be that only in fiction does she reveal her particular attraction to the border between the seen and the said as the territory of the potential subject.

I prefer to interpret Woolf's configuration of the relationship of the visible to the invisible as an historically contextualized version of similar ideas in the work of Jacques Lacan. I locate her feminism principally in the way that she genders the experience of the Imaginary. Daniel Ferrer studies madness and suicide as they are manifest in the language of Woolf's major novels in Lacanian terms. I would agree with his interpretation, for example, of the painting of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, that while it is “ostensibly situated outside the field of language . . . ordered by the father,” it is “articulated with the space organized by the symbolic system, in which it will eventually find its place,”³⁰ but I put more emphasis on the imaginary, from which I distinguish Woolf's visible as the region of struggle between modes of representation in the course of which the subject becomes briefly apparent in the language of the narrator. In particular Lacan's interest in optics and his structuralist account of the relation of the subject to the gaze, to painting, and to light make it possible to identify in Woolf's work an interpretation of the same psychic phenomena from the perspective of fiction.

Much of the general resemblance between ideas of the visible in the work of Lacan and Woolf may be attributed to their position as twentieth-century readers of Plato, in particular of the discussion of

the visible in Book VII of *The Republic*.³¹ Though living in the era of the camera and an intensely ocular culture, both reached back to Plato for the central image of the mind as configuring the relationship of the visible to the invisible. Lacan writes that the gaze is limited by “the phantasy to be found in the Platonic perspective of an absolute being to whom is transferred the quality of being all-seeing” (FFC 75). In comparison human vision suffers certain limits: “I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides” (FFC 72). It follows from the assumption that the invisible is in a sense primary that both Woolf and Lacan represent the visible world apparent in the gaze as a problem of boundaries. In Woolf’s notes on her reading of Plato and other Greek texts as she was writing *Mrs. Dalloway* she identifies the visible with the sane view, whereas madness and dreams test the limits of the visible world. Lacan demonstrates the limits of the visible by distinguishing the gaze from the seeing that goes on in dreams. In the waking state there is “an elision of the fact that not only does it [the gaze] look, it also shows. In the field of the dream, on the other hand, what characterizes the images is that it shows” (FFC 75). It is significant that in the work of both writers the subject is lodged precisely at the intersection of two specular realms where, following Plato, the invisible is situated in the perspective of a larger, potential, visible that becomes apparent only at the expense of the unitary self.

Lacan developed the concept of the Imaginary from his work on the mirror experience as an exemplary function. In his paper “The Mirror Stage” (1936, 1949 and reprinted in *Écrits*) he attributes to the child of eighteen months an experience of his reflection that may be characterized as the experience of unity by a being in discord. Long before the infant can control its motor reflexes it sees before it a coordinated body, which is in fact a misrecognition, a fiction that may represent its future aspirations. The subordination of the child to its image, to fiction, and to the gaze of others alienates subject from self, in a gap which can never be bridged. The mirror experience thus represents not a phase of infant development, but a paradigm of the illusory nature of autonomy and the self that is identical with itself from which no subsequent development entirely frees the individual.

In “A Sketch of the Past” Woolf figures the female subject who comes into existence at the age when she becomes aware of the limits imposed by reflection in the looking-glass. Her half-brother

Gerald is the figure who represents the limitations of the vulnerable female body, and the limitations of kinship in a family which authorized the desire of the male for the young female. As a result of actions which Woolf called "violent," she was able to escape the entrapment of the family and recognize her kinship with an historical line of "ancestresses" whom she resembled not in body but in mind and spirit.

In "The Topic of the Imaginary," a seminar of 1954, Lacan follows a suggestion made by Freud that images come into being in the mind in a manner similar to the way that the camera produces images. Lacan illustrates this mechanical production of the image by introducing a well-known optical diagram, "the experiment of the inverted bouquet" (*Sem* 1: 75–8). When the viewer occupies a specific position inside the diagram of a cone formed by drawing a line from an upside down concealed vase to the surface of a curved mirror he sees a second, upright vase that is created by reflection. The illusion that the imaginary includes the real is apparent from only one position. Lacan draws the conclusion "that in the relation of the imaginary and the real, and in the constitution of the world such as results from it, everything depends on the position of the subject. And the position of the subject . . . is essentially characterised by its place in the symbolic world, in other words in the world of speech" (*Sem* 1: 80). Depending on its relation to speech, the subject may be in the cone and see the illusion, or outside the cone where it is not visible. Woolf's comment on the female who attempts to glimpse the real from the angle of incidence provided by the mirror is apparent in Mrs. McNab, who in *To the Lighthouse* becomes significant as the female character who attempts to gain control of language and of her place in history by standing at an angle to the mirror.

Lacan uses the drawing, with its angles and curves and flowers, to explore the refraction of light and hence of the image, from what seems the fixed and single position of the viewer. "Everything depends on the angle of incidence at the mirror. It's only from within the cone that one can have a clear image" (*Sem* 1: 140). Oddly, the potential to shift the angle of incidence does not suggest that in fact each eye sees from a slightly different angle, or that a female figure like Mrs. McNab might for obscure reasons approach the mirror "sideways" (*TL* 142, 143). Lacan seems for the moment caught between two positions, that of the diagram, and a realization that the visual field is defined by light, with the result that "The picture

. . . is in my eye. But I am not in the picture” (*FFC* 96). The effort to situate the viewer somewhere other than in “the place of the geometral point” (*FFC* 95) produces the notion of the viewer as the “screen” or the “stain” (*FFC* 97).

Woolf constructs the domain of the visible from a less mechanical vantage point, that of the desiring subject. Throughout her work she constantly suggests the possibility that beyond the gaze lies a space that is defined not by what the eye can or cannot see but by what it desires to see. Her subjects find themselves at the intersection between the monocular vision that is implied by mathematical perspective and something else, which may be a visual memory or a dream, or in her later writing an experience of light. In her work the subject occurs on the site of a split that is located not in the symbolic but in conflicting codes of the visible. In fact many of the most emotionally charged moments in her work occur when a character crosses out of the territory of the visible, as at the end of “An Unwritten Novel,” or when Septimus sees Evans.

In Woolf’s fiction the historicity of the subject attributes temporal consequences to perspective. The window image in her fiction figures Lacan’s future anterior tense: “What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming” (*E* 300). Woolf’s window figures death, her particular representation of the limits of the subject. At the end of *The Years*, when the party is breaking up at dawn and the family is dispersing, Maggie and Sara glimpse “the old brothers and sisters” framed in the window, seen for an instant as their own funerary statues: “The group in the window, the men in their black-and-white evening dress, the women in their crimsons, golds and silvers, wore a statuesque look for a moment, as if they were carved in stone. Their dresses fell in stiff sculptured folds. Then they moved” (*Y* 432–3). Clarissa Dalloway’s meditation on the old woman seen through the window during her party figures the perceptions of death in the novel. Together with the image of the window in the opening paragraphs it links Clarissa both to Septimus and the old woman, the two figures of death. In the context of a discussion of the historical function of the subject, Lacan writes of death “not as an eventual coming-to-term of the life of the individual . . . but, as Heidegger’s formula puts it, as that ‘possibility which is one’s