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"I'VE READ YOU RIGHT—I'M WITH YOU NOW": AESTHETIC READING IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S METAFICTIONAL SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT. ***"I've read you right—I'm with you now": Aesthetic Reading in Virginia Woolf's Metafictional Short Stories***. Despite critical interest in Virginia Woolf's intense preoccupation with the imaginative process at the root of literary creation, little attention has been paid to the manner in which, through metafiction, the writer turns her short stories into reflections upon the nature of reading. In works such as "An Unwritten Novel" (1921) and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection" (1926), the boundaries between literature and criticism, between fiction and reality, take center stage and it is precisely this point of convergence that metafictional works take as subject matter. Thus, Virginia Woolf's 'character-reading' makes its way into her stories and the author's critical stance upon the act of reading, revealed primarily in her essays, is now transmitted thematically through characters who appropriate the readers' active construction of meaning while living in the same textual world inhabited by the fictitious characters they ardently wish to interpret. Through the advancement of a specific type of reading: active, emotive, empathetic, fluid, inquisitive, intimate and indeterminate, yet always close to the text it is engaged with, Virginia Woolf may be said to prefigure the type of transactional reader-response criticism underpinned by Louise Rosenblatt,

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whose insistence upon aesthetic reading calls for a two-way transmission of meaning that is simultaneously constitutive of the literary work and of the reader's self.

***Keywords**: Virginia Woolf, metafiction, aesthetic reading, short story, reader-response criticism, Louise Rosenblatt*

REZUMAT. ***„Te-am citit bine—sunt cu tine acum": lectură estetică în povestirile metaficționale ale Virginiei Woolf.*** În ciuda interesului critic față de preocuparea intensă a Virginiei Woolf pentru procesul imaginativ care stă la baza creației literare, s-a acordat puțină atenție modului în care, prin metaficțiune, scriitoarea își transformă povestirile în reflecții asupra naturii lecturii. În opere precum „Un roman nescris" (1921) și „Doamna din oglindă". O reflecție" (1926), în centrul atenției se află granițele dintre literatură și critică, dintre ficțiune și realitate. Pentru Mark Currie, tocmai acest punct de convergență este subiectul abordat în operele metaficționale. Astfel, ceea ce Virginia Woolf numește „citirea personajului" își face loc în povestirile sale, iar poziția critică a autoarei asupra actului lecturii, dezvăluită în primul rând în eseurile sale, este transmisă tematic prin personaje care își însușesc construcția activă a cititorilor în timp ce trăiesc în aceeași lume textuală populată de personajele fictive pe care doresc cu ardoare să le interpreteze. Prin avansarea unui anumit tip de lectură: activă, emotivă, empatică, fluidă, curioasă, intimă și nedeterminată, dar întotdeauna apropiată de textul-bază, se poate spune că Virginia Woolf prefigurează tipul de critică tranzacțională a cititorului susținută de Louise Rosenblatt, a cărei insistență asupra lecturii estetice încurajează o transmitere bidirecțională a sensului, în același timp constitutivă operei literare și sinelui cititorului.

***Cuvinte cheie**: Virginia Woolf, metaficțiune, lectură estetică, povestire, critica cititorului, Louise Rosenblatt*

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's short stories have often been considered in light of their aesthetic freedom, their experimental form and their role in connection to Woolf's shift from a traditional type of fiction to the unconventional, quintessentially modernist writing that became intrinsic to her novelistic style. The flexibility, lack of constraints in terms of plot development and the potential for generic hybridity that the short story allows proved to be inspirational for the genesis of her experimental style (Goldman 2006, 88, Prudente 2008, 1), while also providing her with 'wild outbursts of freedom',

pleasurable 'treats'. Yet seldom have her short stories, much less her metafictional stories received full-length critical attention in their own right. In this sense, Dean R. Baldwin's *Virginia Woolf. A Study of the Short Fiction* (1989), Kathryn N. Benzel and Ruth Hoberman's *Trespassing Boundaries. Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004), Nena Skrbic's *Wild Outbursts of Freedom. Reading Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004) and Christine Reynier's *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story* (2009) are noteworthy studies. Out of these four volumes, it is only Reynier that gives specific consideration to metafiction, but in similar vein to the majority of the analyses that focus on Woolf's metafictional engagement with short fiction (notably Laura Maria Lojo Rodriguez, Peter Hühn, Elke D'hoker and Nóra Séllei), what lies at the center of the interpretation seems to be the universe of the *writer*. Instead, the present paper aims to offer an alternative interpretation of Virginia Woolf's metafictional short stories "An Unwritten Novel" (1921) and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection" (1929), by focusing on the *reader*'s transaction with the printed text, the type of reading that the encounter prompts and the necessary imaginative abilities that are called upon in the molding of a symbolic set of words into a literary work.

Firstly, I am going to tackle Virginia Woolf's critical stance on reading, as revealed in her essays, so as to underline the role that she assigned to the reader, in particular to the 'common reader' and the perspective upon the act of reading as endowed with (almost) the same creative powers as the process of writing. This will provide a foundation for the reading of her metafictional short stories through the lens of their association with the principles of reader-response criticism and, in particular, Louise Rosenblatt's critical theory. Virginia Woolf's "An Unwritten Novel" (1921) focuses on a highly subjective type of character-interpretation that is based on empathy and identification, foregrounding the fragmented thoughts and selective attention of the reader, her aesthetic *living through* of the literary work and its effects upon the self, while "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection." (1929) presupposes a distant, calculated and information-driven reader who is forced to reconsider their approach to literature.

Virginia Woolf's Critical Stance on Reading

In her essays, Virginia Woolf recognizes the importance of the active role of the reader in the evocation of the literary work, prefiguring later reader-response theories, among which the *transactional theory* developed by Louise Rosenblatt. In turn, Rosenblatt was among the first promoters of a reader-oriented attitude in the study of literature, albeit she advanced it in a critical

context dominated by the objectivist stance of New Criticism.[2] Both Woolf and Rosenblatt were concerned with writing about reading, as the post-war period and the 1920s and 1930s in particular witnessed a rise in public consciousness with regard to the act of reading as a cultural issue and an educational tool (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 59-62).

As Kate Flint points out, Woolf imagined the meeting point between the reader and the text in sexual terms, as *a pleasurable encounter* that is free of "assertive masculine participation" and gives way instead to "a reciprocal transaction rather than a process of establishing dominance" (187). If the writer is the one who "lay[s] an egg in the reader's mind from which springs the thing itself" (Woolf 2014, "Fishing" 348),[3] it is up to the reader to ensure its development into a literary work. The stress on equality as the basis for literary pleasure prevents the reading experience from becoming self-absorbed and solipsistic and would *not* resonate with later, highly subjective reader-response theories such as those put forth by David Bleach and Norman Holland. Instead, reciprocity falls in line with the conceptualization of an act of transaction that marks the imaginative process of creation. Provided that the reader "is willing to be creative, as Mrs. Woolf so often insists in her essays he must be, the transaction can be *rewarding* indeed" (Richter 1970, 11, my emphasis).

Although Woolf makes reference to the term 'transaction' in an essay titled "Robinson Crusoe", in which she maintains that "there is a piece of business to be transacted between writer and reader before any further dealings are possible" (2669), she does not envision it as Rosenblatt would, just in terms of a coming together of the reader and "what he senses the words as pointing to" (1994, 21), but rather as a congress between the reader and, through the text, the writer. However, in both instances, readers are conceptualized as co-creators of meaning and equal literary "partners in this business of writing books, as companions in the railway carriage, as fellow travellers with Mrs. Brown" (Woolf 1924, 23), whose independent thinking prevents the process of writing fiction from becoming an authoritative one by opening it towards multiplicity and liberating it from oppressive dominance: "To admit authorities into our

[2] As the editor of *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, Jane P. Tompkins places Louise Rosenblatt at the foundation of reader-response criticism (1980, x), acknowledging her role as a pioneer in the development of a reader-centered teaching and analyzing of literature. Although her first volume, *Literature as Exploration*, was published in 1936, it did not receive much critical attention until decades later, when the emphasis on formalist principles began to wane. Thus, it was in the 1970s that Rosenblatt's elevation of the status of the reader was developed into a fully-fledged literary approach described in her work *The Text, the Reader, the Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978).

[3] All of Woolf's essays, apart from "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" and "The Reader", are cited from the Delphi Classics *Complete Works of Virginia Woolf* (2014).

libraries and let them tell us how to read, what to read, what value to place upon what we read, is to destroy the spirit of freedom" (Woolf 2014, "How Should One Read a Book?" 2833).

The close connection between reader and writer mirrors "the inseparability of reading and writing as processes" (Flint 1996, 192) and is insisted upon in particular in Woolf's 1925 essay "How Should One Read a Book?". The reader is advised to be open-minded, creative, active and strive to work closely with the writer, consider the latter a contemporary, identify with them and appropriate their compositional abilities: "Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice. When you attempt to reconstruct it [an event] into words, you will find that it breaks into a thousand conflicting impressions. Some must be subdued; others emphasized" (2834). Thus, the act of reading is depicted as a complex art that requires *finesse* of perception, a bold imagination and insight on learning, which permits readers to simultaneously be actors and spectators (2835-7). The encouragement is to organize one's thoughts in reading as one does in writing, which is in tune with Louise Rosenblatt's statement that, since literary creation is about making choices, "the analogy with the author's creative process does provide a baseline from which to proceed in defining the reader's task"—the latter is no less immersed in such an activity (1994, 50-52). Without the reader's creative powers and active involvement, the literary work could not come into existence and would remain a mere text.

Similarly, in "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" (1924), Woolf highlights the necessity to eliminate the gap between reader and writer and strengthen their connection by recognizing their equal status and input. Readerly modesty and writerly arrogance may lead to thinking that "writers are of a different blood and bone from yourselves; that they know more of Mrs. Brown than you do. Never was there a more fatal mistake." (23). Instead, books should be the result of a healthy and equal alliance between the two parties, "between *us*" (23, my emphasis). Woolf's insistence on collaboration is also confirmed through the common use of the first-person plural pronoun 'we', which stands as "the equivalent to the team of essayist and reader" and offers a sense of the involvement of the reader, marking the latter's *cooperative identity* (Ferebee 1987, 349).

Out of the multiple types of readers that Woolf theorizes about—from the specialized reader, the scholar that is fixated on certain aspects of the text, to the pretend reader who owns a lot of books but never really reads them, to critics who merely wish to correct others and value their opinion above all others (Woolf 1979, 428 and 2014, "The Common Reader" 2437)—Virginia Woolf is most interested in common readers. Borrowed from Dr. Johnson and

foreshadowing Rosenblatt's 'ordinary reader', the name does not entail an inferior type of reader, but rather someone who does not aim to use literature as an academic tool, but only as a source of personal pleasure.

> Woolf's common reading was fundamentally an advocacy for broad, generalist reading as opposed to academic study, and it was a defense of reading for such personally directed goals as pleasure and intellectual stimulation rather than such professional purposes as publication and accreditation. (Cuddy-Keane 2003, 89)

> The common reader reads for his own pleasure Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole—a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing. (Woolf 2014, "The Common Reader" 2437)

Without the desire to carry anything away out of the reading and without a practical purpose in mind, *the experience itself* becomes the main focus and the reading shifts away from what Louise Rosenblatt calls 'efferent reading' towards 'aesthetic reading'. While the former is primarily based on solution-finding and accumulating practical information, on *efferre* (carrying away), the latter is a mode in which "the reader's primary concern is with what happens *during* the actual reading event" (1994, 24). It is this aesthetic approach of *living through* the literary work (1994, 184) that reveals how the process rather than the product leads to meaning-creation. Thus, regarded as a creator, the reader is ascribed a quality which places him/her in a similar position to that of the writer: "what the reader has in common with the writer, though much more feebly: the desire to create." (Woolf 2014, "Phases of Fiction" 3393). Seen through this lens, the term 'common' may also be indicative of the "common meeting-place" of cooperation (Woolf 1924, 17) that enables not only a channel for communication and the sharing of emotions (Richter 1970, 235), but also a sense of intimacy between reader and writer (Högberg 2020, 31).

Part of the responsibility of the common reader lies in acknowledging the importance of a subjective approach to literature and engaging with books as one does with life, in an empathetic manner that encourages feeling: "the 'book itself' is not form which you see, but emotion which *you feel*" (Woolf 2014, "On Re-reading Novels" 3438, my emphasis) and "A novel 'is an impression, not an argument'" (Woolf 2014, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy" 2830). It follows that *living through* instead of *thinking about* the literary work is the approach that the reader should have. This imaginative *reading as living* is strongly supported by Virginia Woolf, who turns it into a key element in her approach to the art of reading (Abeshaus 9). For instance, in her "Phases of Fiction" (1929),

the author stresses that "novels make us live imaginatively, with the whole of the body as well as the mind" (3406), they draw us in and require emotional involvement and identification with characters whom we develop secret sympathies for (4032), all while bringing out impressions, reactions and sensations that vary depending on our times. The recurrent advice is not to suppress these idiosyncrasies, lest we impoverish reading (Woolf 2014, "How Should One Read a Book?" 2837).

However, it is not sufficient for the reader to be a mere recipient of feelings and impressions. Great literature "will not suffer itself to be read passively" (Woolf 2014, "Notes on an Elizabethan Play" 2476), so the reader's active pursuit of the creation of meaning takes center stage in Woolf's perspective. Many of the authors that she praises in her essays, from Chaucer, to Austen, to Hardy and Peacock, among others, allow and encourage the reader's involvement.

> instead of being solemnly exhorted [by Chaucer's works] we are left to stray and stare and make out a meaning for ourselves" (Woolf 2014, "The Pastons and Chaucer" 2451)
> What she [Jane Austen] offers is, apparently, a trifle, yet is composed of something that expands in the reader's mind and endows with the most enduring form of life scenes which are outwardly trivial. (Woolf 2014, "Jane Austen" 2543)
> It is as if Hardy himself left it for his readers to make out his full meaning and to supplement it from their own experience. (Woolf 2014, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy" 2825)
> Peacock['s] reticence is not empty but suggestive so that the reader can make it out for himself. (Woolf 2014, "Phases of Fiction" 4023-4024)

Consequently, it is of utmost importance that the reader be given space to reflect and create their own stories and meanings out of personal inclinations and experiences, without dealing with strict impositions and factual, conclusive remarks on the part of the writer. For instance, it is the inconclusive nature of Russian stories in which nothing is finished that attracts Woolf's admiration and praise. In this context, multiple and equally valid readings may develop in accordance to the different conditions that the reading transaction is situated in (Rosenblatt 1994, 75), as Virginia Woolf also asserted: **"**Each [reader] has read differently, with the insight and the blindness of his own generation" (2014, "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia" 2659).

Although in "Robinson Crusoe" (1925), Woolf prompts the reader to seek the author's intention and view the work through their eyes, she then insists on the difficulties of this task, since each person has their own vision upon the world, forged out of their own experiences and prejudices (2669). So,

it is up to the readers "steeped in the impression to supply the comment" (Woolf 2014, "The Novels of Thomas Hardy" 2830) and afterwards "go on to test it and riddle it with questions." (Woolf 2014 "On Re-Reading Novels" 3439).

"An Unwritten Novel"

The 1921 short story "An Unwritten Novel" starts, as the author herself claims all novels should, with an elderly woman sitting on the opposite side of a train compartment. The similarity with the imagined situation of the critical essay "Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown" (published three years later) is evident. In both works, the train ride is symbolistic of a literary journey that mixes together fiction and criticism and brings actants from different levels of existence into a shared common space. As both a fiction writer and a critic, Woolf blends the two domains and dramatizes their intersection, exemplifying what Mark Currie identifies as the very definition of metafiction: "a borderline discourse a kind of writing which places itself on the border between fiction and criticism, and which takes that border as its subject" (2). This mutual assimilation brings about self-consciousness on both sides, making criticism more literary and bringing critical insight to literature (2).

Thus, in order to exemplify the importance of characters and their *reading*, Woolf "chooses the language of metaphor" (Lojo Rodriguez 2001, 77)[4] and imagines a fictional story within her critical essay, bringing real authors (Mr. Bennet, Mr. Galsworthy and Mr. Wells) and actual readers alongside a fictional character[5] (Mrs. Brown), as they all travel from Richmond to Waterloo. This mixture of criticism and fiction is framed by a critical inquiry which dominates the essay, yet allows for a blurring of the line between fiction and reality. In terms of the metafictional counterpart to this literary type criticism, the protagonist of "An Unwritten Novel", Minnie Marsh, is used to advance a critical perspective upon the creation of a fictional story. Yet, instead of all three 'actors' (writer, character, reader) being present in the train compartment, the short story seems to allow for only two, so the arguments that follow will be centered around the interpretation that it is the creative reader who accompanies the character in her journey.

The unnamed narrator does not shy away from the fact that what she experiences is fiction, so references to concealment, illusion, story, game, pretenses, paper, the threading of wool and the spinning of a web all indicate the artificiality of the story being told, as well as the understanding that its main

[4] "Woolf was one of the last practitioners of impressionistic criticism (in line with Walter Pater and Robert Louis Stevenson), also labeled aesthetic or subjective criticism" (Popa 2016, 153).

concern revolves around the inner workings of the fiction-making mind. Paradoxically, this is coupled with her responsibility to evoke a subjective meaning through the co-creation of the literary work.

After addressing the woman in her own thoughts and encouraging her to "play the game" and "conceal it" (15), the narrator underlines that she knows the whole business and all people know, although they prefer to pretend that they do not. In this key, the *business* is reflective of the reader's imminent transaction and negotiation of meaning, while the *pretense* becomes representative of what Samuel Taylor Coleridge called 'the willing suspension of disbelief'. The foreshadowing of metaleptical border-crossing is revealed through the narrative voice often peering at her companion "above the paper's edge" and "over the paper's rim" (15), as the word may be understood as the paper on which the text is printed. This is confirmed towards the end of the story, when she admits that she is "threading the grey wool, running it in and out. Running it in and out, across and over, spinning a web" (20).

Another overt indication of the metafictional aspect of the short story is its very title. Not only is this a fictional tale, a potential novel, but it is "an unwritten" one, an epithet which anticipates and negates from the beginning an interpretation which revolves around writing. The focus seems to be not on the words, but on what is *not* there on the page and may thus be supplemented through the act of reading. This, according to Woolf, is the mark of great writers and the unwritten nature of the novel indicates its perpetual openness: "What really matters [for Woolf] is the unwritten and unspoken part. This part stimulates the reader to be involved in the generative process of the text" (Hashimoto 340). So valuable is the reader's ability to read the unwritten elements of a text, that Virginia Woolf considered it constitutive of the reader's being: "Now the reader is completely in being. He can pause; he can ponder; he can compare. He can read directly what is on the page, or, drawing aside, can read *what is not written.* We are in a world where *nothing is concluded*" (1979, 429, my emphasis).

What attracts the narrator to the woman sitting across her in the train compartment is her expression of unhappiness and her quiet invitation to explore life through her eyes. Soon, the pull that she feels towards the character turns into captivation and immersion and results in the molding of a story that is based both on the text that is read and on the free-flowing imagination of the reader. The description of Minnie Marsh's life and her familial situation appears to be rooted in the reader's interior monologue as she processes the text and fills it with expectations, inventions, revisions, hopes and disillusionment, seamlessly fusing the printed words with her own thoughts and impressions

and turning the story into a self-begetting narrative that contains *within it* the process of its own creation.

Although the narrator-reader is hesitant at the beginning of the story, she quickly notices that the strange woman returns her gaze and disarms her: "She pierced through my shield, she gazed into my eyes" (15) and then later "She saw me" (16). This reciprocal interest marks the beginning of the transaction and proves that it is not solely the reader who acts upon the text, but also the other way round (Rosenblatt 1994, 16). This is also in tune with Woolf's own beliefs that literature reads us back.

> the body of a literature takes us and *reads us* making us, even as we enjoy, yield our ground or stick to our guns. (Woolf 2014, "Notes on an Elizabethan Play" 2476, my emphasis)

Yielding, the narrator readily embraces the unspoken alliance that is formed between her and the other woman and they are immediately referred to by means of the first-person plural pronoun *we*: "So we rattled through Surrey we were alone together" (15). So great is the immersion that the narrator identifies with the woman, invents the name Minnie for her (which includes the pronoun *me*), mirrors her gestures and becomes fully invested, reading herself into the story[6] and placing herself, quite literally, on the same page as the character (when Minnie looks out the window, the narrator gazes through her eyes: "I, too, see roofs. I see sky" (27)). In aesthetic reading, empathy and identification are key factors which encourage the living-through of the literary work: "In some instances, the reader feels himself at one with the attitudes or experiences called up. The 'I' of a lyric may seem to be himself, the images and feelings aroused may occupy the whole span of attention, as though he himself were uttering the words" (Rosenblatt 1994, 67). In fact, this is exactly what the narrator experiences: "who was saying that eggs were cheaper? You or I?" (18). Immersed in self-reflection, the reader realizes that when she is addressing the characters, she is addressing facets of herself, erasing the line between self and other: "But when the self speaks to the self, who is speaking" (20).

While Minnie communicates through gazing, speaking and moving her body, the narrator describes her own responses through references to *looking* and *reading*, that is engaging with the text and with one's own imagination, being both a spectator and an actor. Therefore, watching Minnie is not enough; the narrator feels the need to *act* and reveal her active participation and alignment with the character through the imitation of her movements. It is then

[6] See Virginia Woolf's statement: "Yet we have read ourselves into the book" (2014, "Phases of Fiction" 3401).

that she realizes that a transfer has occurred: the character communicated something to her and she was able to interpret the message: "But she had communicated, shared her secret, passed her poison, she would speak no more. I read her message, deciphered her secret, reading it beneath her gaze" (16). Interpreting Minnie while metafictionally placing herself in the same space as her becomes of utmost importance to the reader who becomes a surrogate for the actual reader who, similarly, follows Minnie's story and interprets it.

The story within the story foregrounds Minnie's relationship to her sister-in-law, her visit to her brother's house, her past crime and her present introspection. The fragmentary style, the frequent narratorial interventions, the innumerable questions, uncertainties, repetitions, vague and unfinished descriptions, as well as frequent switches from the direct address to the third person highlight the reader's freedom in interpretation, her free association of ideas and her mark as an artistic creator, while the story is in progress.

> Hilda's the sister-in-law. Hilda? what are you thinking so what would she think about sitting at the window at three o'clock in the afternoon? Health, money, hills, her God? but what God does she see? (17)

It is evident that the reader is riddled with questions, as Virginia Woolf believed they should be; however, it is important to recognize that it is the words of the text that prompt these musings and as such, they provide a fixed point of stability, helping to ground the reader's stream of thoughts. As Rosenblatt also stresses, this is the quintessential difference between writers and readers: "We should not forget that the writer encounters a blank page and the reader an already inscribed text" (1993, 384). Thus, the narrator of "An Unwritten Novel" repeatedly mentions that she peeps at the character (that is, *looks* at the text) for information that would aid her in the interpretation: "what are you thinking? (Let me peep across her opposite", "since one has a choice of crimes, but then so many (let me peep across again)" (17) and "Let me look at her" (20). This necessary and recurrent return to the subject's visualization of Minnie's body balances her interpretation and does not let her wander too far off track—a tendency that she is aware of: "But I'm off the track" (27), "But to return" (18).

The understanding of the literary text as a guide that the reader has to make sense of is also a critical perspective that is alluded to in the diegesis of "An Unwritten Novel", bringing about metafictional reflections upon the literary connection between author, text and reader. As Minnie eats eggs on the train, she places the shells onto a handkerchief that becomes the reader's map: "And now you lay across your knees a pocket-handkerchief into which drop little angular fragments of eggshell—fragments of a map—a puzzle. I wish I could

piece them together! If you would only sit still. She's moved her knees—the map's in bits again." (18). The puzzle pieces are also rendered stylistically through the sometimes radical fragmentation of the text: "Neighbours—the doctor—baby brother—the kettle—scalded—hospital—dead—or only the shock of it, the blame?" (17). The reader's responsibility lies in choosing how to fit the pieces together and endow them with meaning; it is a choice that the narrator is highly aware of, albeit she never loses sight of the transactional nature of her encounter with the character. In thinking about the possible unconscious source of guilt betrayed by Minnie's twitch, she states: "I have my choice of crimes" (17), yet the character has to agree: "she seems to nod to me, 'it's the thing I did.' so many crimes aren't *your* crime" (17).

Just when the reader thinks she has figured Minnie out, the character moves and she is forced to revise her interpretation. Minnie moves her knees and disturbs the eggshells, she twitches, "she turns the other way and runs through my [the reader's] fingers" (18), despite the narrator wanting her to be still: "Minnie, you must promise not to twitch till I've got this straight" (19). This underlines the fluidity of the interpretive process and the futility of the reader's hope that she will ever reach a final, conclusive and static meaning. What she is faced with instead is a sea of rhetorical questions, a labyrinth of possibilities: "the words have meaning Have I read you right?" (18). All of these elements constitute markers of the necessary uncertainty that accompanies readers.

Since the reader is interested in certain aspects of the text above others, she is willing to skip over passages that she considers decorative, but as a fellow character inside her own imagined story, she may also see herself physically skipping in the room, until she reaches the 'landing' on the same floor as her character: "[But this we'll skip; ornaments, curtains, trefoil china plate, yellow oblongs of cheese, white squares of biscuit—skip—oh, but wait! Halfway through luncheon one of those shivers 'Why *should* she twitch?' Skip, skip, till we reach the landing on the upper floor" (16). The same principle is shown through the representation of ellipses: "the whiff of beef from the basement; dot, dot, dot. But what I cannot thus eliminate the figures behind the ferns There I've hidden them all this time in the hope that somehow they'd disappear" (18), but also through the urge to 'dodge' certain characters in favor of others: "Let's dodge to the Moggridge household" (19). What the reader seems to be experiencing is selective attention, which is an especially useful tool in Rosenblatt's theory of aesthetically *living through* a work of art (1994, 42). Thus, readers bestow their attention selectively and choose what is most fruitful to the weaving of their meaning (43).

It is important to note that not only does the surrogate reader envision the fictional account of "An Unwritten Novel", but she also has a subjective

approach to literature, commenting upon it, threading her own opinions into the story and confirming that feelings and impressions are part and parcel of her approach. Consequently, she points towards what she considers "interesting", openly and actively negotiates with the author— "for God's sake let me have one woman with a name I like! But no" —compares her reading with other literary works— "How many die in every novel that's written—the best, the dearest, while Moggridge lives" —inserts her personal preferences— "Marsh's sister, Hilda's more my sort" (19), "Not for me—not for me" (20) —cheers for the character— "Courage, courage! Face it, be it! For God's sake don't wait on the mat now" (21) - affirms her allegiance— "I'm on your side" (21) - confronts her expectations against the text - "Not what *I* said? Dear, dear, dear!" (19), "I've read you right" —and also expresses empathy and intimacy— "I'm with you now" (21). This active emotional involvement proves that the reader does not just receive the information that she reads about, but becomes part of the story.

Upon knowing that the end is near, the narrator-reader is curious, excited, but also nervous to find out what is going to happen to her character: "Here's the crisis! Heaven be with you! Down she goes" (21). Minnie gets off the train and the narrator watches her, only to find out that her son was waiting for her at the train station. This means that her expectation of Minnie being unmarried and childless is bluntly contradicted by the text, which brings about intense feelings of disappointment and disbelief, but also confusion that is extended towards the self as well: "Well, but I'm confounded Oh, but it's untrue, it's indecent Well, my world's done for! What do I stand on? What do I know? That's not Minnie. There never was Moggerige. Who am I? Who are you? (21). Through these inquiries, the reader questions the stability of both the story-world and her own world, since the two have become inseparable, "overlapping reality and unreality which suggests how the borders between the two can be understood as thin and not precisely definable" (Prudente 2008, 5). As Louis Rosenblatt acknowledges, the transactional view "reveals the individual consciousness as a continuing self-ordering, self-creating process" (1994, 172). It follows that, while reading, the narrator had also been creating and shaping herself through toppled expectations and the embrace of pleasurable uncertain readings that confirm her love for the mysterious and unknown figures of the world.

"The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection"

Another Woolfian short story that deals with reflection in its multiple understandings—from physical mirroring to contemplations upon fiction to self-reflection and the projection of oneself into literature—is "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection", first published in 1929. Like "An Unwritten Novel",

the story reveals an unnamed narrator who is fascinated and completely absorbed by the image of a woman, except this time the space they share is no longer neutral, but owned by the character, turning the narrator into a visiting guest. Since the host, Isabella Tyson, is not in the same room as the narrator, she is only reachable through the mediation of the room's mirror. Once again, the narrator's engagement with the woman's reflection will be considered in light of their undergoing a creative reading process, as their mind enters, negotiates, reflects upon and co-creates the story world whose contour is provided by the text. Throughout their descriptions, the reader generalizes their experience through the use of the impersonal pronoun *one*, albeit it is evident that the latter is employed in relation to themselves: "one was the only person in the drawing-room" (75). Considering this self-conscious choice to renounce their gendered identity, I will refer to them by means of the third-person plural pronoun. In addition, this generalization points towards a broader look upon the nature of fiction and allows Virginia Woolf to use this metafictional short story to theorize about fiction through the process of writing it and thus relocate an extradiegetic, critical concern (how literature is constructed) into the diegesis, turning it into the main device that drives the plot forward.

Alone, sunk in "the depths of the sofa" (75), lying down and watching carefully while remaining invisible, the narrator mirrors the actual reader who could be in a similar position while reading Woolf's text: "What makes the game intriguing is the way in which the reader is implicated in this voyeurism. It is a calculated beginning that teases the reader into solidarity with the observer" (Skrbic 2004, 74). The surrogate reader is initially depicted as a spectator who, despite an uneasy feeling of invading someone's private space, cannot help but notice a mirror in the room, whose presence is interpreted as an invitation to explore the secrets and intimacy of the host's life. Thus, in the presence of a literary text, the reader cannot help but keep looking and piercing though the words. In this sense, the writer plays with the meanings of the words 'letters' (the character's correspondence, but also the symbols that make up the text) and 'drawing' (the drawing-room, but also the artistic work that is being drawn (Skrbic 2004, 78)).

Compelled to look at both the spectacle in the mirror and the darkness of their own surroundings, the narrator repeatedly relies upon visual imagery: "One could not help looking, that summer afternoon", "one could see reflected", "one could see a long grass path", "like one of those naturalists who lie watching themselves unseen" (75). Taking voyeuristic pleasure in observing episodes of life was considered part of the reading process by Virginia Woolf, whose essay "How Should One Read a Book?" compared readers to neighbours whose curiosity leads them to peep into other people's houses.

However, it becomes evident that the narrator's attention is captured by two contrasting spaces. The mirror's reality is a solid and static one, akin to that of a painting in which the reflected images are neatly ordered and pinned down "so accurately and so fixedly that they seemed held there in their reality unescapably" (75). As such, they may be associated with the permeance of the author's words whose publication renders them immutable and enduring. Like the mirror, the text is a concrete object that encourages reflection, but also circumscribes it within the boundaries of its own selective frame that only allows for certain fragments of life to be represented, so Virginia Woolf underlines that the mirror's rim *slices* and *cuts* its images, blocking the voyeur from taking in the entire view "like a surrogate author [who] decides what goes where in the story" (Skrbic 2004, 75). This is a metafictional marker that shows the artificiality of the fictional form and proves that the mirrored reflections should not be taken to represent objective reality, despite their persuasive form.

Consequently, the narrator is not merely interested in the mirror, but also in a space that grants them more freedom of movement: the playful pirouetting of the nocturnal creatures of the room as they momentarily step into the light may be interpreted as the reader "open[ing] the mind wide to the fast flocking of innumerable impressions" (Woolf 2014, "How Should One Read a Book?" 2837), whose agitation infuses the text with subjective responses[7]: "and the room had its own passions and rages and envies and sorrows coming over it and clouding it, like a human being. Nothing stayed the same for two seconds or longer" (75). In contrast to the immortal, breathless image in the mirror, the room is characterized by sounds that are transient and perishing, "coming and going like human breath" (76). Prepared to be not fully distracted by either of the two sights independently, the narrator-reader implicitly announces that they will construct the story in accordance to both, elements relying on their transaction: "It was a strange contrast—all changing here, all stillness there. One could not help looking from one to another" (75).

What seemed to have been an initial commitment to a type of reading that is polyphonous, transactional and constructive was actually a mere recognition of the inevitability of one's reaction without the acknowledgement of the necessity to follow the nocturnal entities of the mind towards the evocation of the literary work from the text. Instead of empathizing with the character, the reader places her at a distance and, as opposed to the narrator of "An Unwritten Novel", they never appear to 'forget' that they and their character are positioned on two different sides of the mirror. As such, there is never direct engagement between them and the balance of power gives way to

[7] In the essay "Reading", Woolf evoked a similar image: "Standing at the window and looking out into the garden, the lives of all these books filled the room behind with a soft murmur" (2014, 3861).

a unidirectional gaze that wants to fully expose Isabella, while maintaining its own anonymity, to shed as much light as possible on the character, while remaining in the dark and observing her from a safe distance.

Moreover, the principal concern of the reader seems to be not to mold meaning into existence, but to *know* the character for what she already is, not to generate personal interpretations, but to search the text for *the truth* about Isabella: "how very little, after all these years, one knew about her", "there must be truth; there must be a wall", "one could not say what the truth about Isabella was", (76). This one-sided, obsessive quest leads the reader into an *efferent* type of reading. It follows that the narrator's attention is directed towards what they consider *facts* about Isabella, "As for fact, it was a fact…", "For it was another fact—if facts is what one wanted…" (76): that she was a spinster, that she was rich, that she had many connections, appointments, passionate letter exchanges and tumultuous past relationships. Paradoxically, the more they see/ read Isabella's face, the less they know about her, since "Under the stress of thinking about Isabella", the room that is symbolistic of the reader's mind becomes more shadowy, darker and its objects lose their shape (77).

Isabella's letters are brought into the story by a new character whose unexpected presence disturbs, disorients and confuses the reader, putting a violent end to their reflections. The extent to which the narrator is uncomfortable with unclear and indeterminate turns of event is made explicit through their radical reaction: "A large black form loomed into the looking-glass; blotted out everything. But the picture was entirely altered. For a moment it was unrecognizable and irrational and entirely out of focus. One could not relate these tablets to any human purpose" (77). It is only after they find a logical explanation for these objects, after the text identifies the figure as the postman and integrates it into the monolithic "stillness and immortality which the looking-glass conferred" (77) that the narrator regains their confidence and re-establishes their equilibrium. However, according to Rosenblatt, this attitude misses the point, since "the [literary] text is not to be read as a simple report, as a statement of 'facts,' the reader must accord attention to the private, the qualitative or affective, the experiential, aspects of consciousness (1994, 185). This is also reflective of Virginia Woolf's opinion that approaching literature in a factual manner, with a view to what is true or false should not be part of the readers' concern: "Most commonly we come to books with blurred and divided minds, asking of fiction that it shall be true, of poetry that it shall be false If we could banish all such preconceptions when we read, that would be an admirable beginning." (Woolf 2014, "How Should One Read a Book?" 2834).

Turning again towards Isabella, the reader is tantalized by her resistance, perceives it as "a challenge" (78) and comes to be convinced that truth and meaning are to be found in her letters, if only the text would cease to conceal it

and the character would no longer lock her drawers. Since this is not the case, the narrator attempts to violently extract this meaning from Isabella by using their imagination as a tool to pin the character into place.

> Isabella did not wish to be known—but she should no longer escape one must prise her open with the first tool that came to hand—the imagination. One must fix one's mind upon her at that very moment. One must fasten her down there One must put oneself in her shoes. (78)

Such aggressiveness stands in opposition to the peaceful, pleasurable and reciprocal sexual encounter that Woolf imagined as an analogy for reading, since it establishes a hierarchy of power that is harmful to the reading process: "The common reader is, moreover, suspicious of fixed labels and settled hierarchies." (Woolf 2014, "Phases of Fiction" 3393). In this case, the reader's attitude is one of establishing dominance and the imagined physical act gains definite masculine energy in its quest to establish absolute control: "surely one could penetrate a little further into her being" (78).

However, it is odd that the narrator should add the empathetic remark about imagining themselves in the character's shoes, since this stance goes against the forceful nature of their intended act. It is, perhaps, in anticipation of the realization that this approach is futile. If the reader wants to reach Isabella's profound self, then they must tolerate and come to embrace the obscurity, unknowingness and fragmentariness of the text.

> The sun would beat down on her face, into her eyes; but no, at the critical moment a veil of cloud covered the sun, making the expression of her eyes doubtful One could only see the indeterminate outline of her rather faded, fine face at the sky. (78)

Doubt creeps in and the reader starts to reconsider their reliance on sight and their static approach to reading. It is possible that Isabella was not happy, yet the text offered merely an unfilled contour of the character. At this crucial moment, the narrator of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection" remembers the nocturnal animals that roamed free and rebellious through their mind at the beginning of the story and this creates a bond with the character whose mind is also depicted through the resemblance of a room filled with lights and shadows that intertwine, advance, retreat and pirouette as she is immersed in her thoughts. The rapport that is established, brings about a change in perspective, which proves that the reading process is far from being a linear and progressive one: "As the text unrolls [t]here is sometimes a backward flow, a revision of earlier understandings, emphases, or attitudes; there may even be the emergence of a completely altered framework or principle of organization" (Rosenblatt

1994, 60-61). The acknowledgement of the fluidity of the act of reading and the multiple revisions it necessarily entails, as well as the impact that expectations and reappraisals have on the formation of literary meaning lie at the core of reader-response theories.

Equally important is the easiness with which the narrator of Woolf's short story shifts from one stance to another, as this may be illustrative of a shift in a spectrum, rather than an abrupt leap between categories of reading perspectives. Indeed, during their reading, the narrator of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection" changes the proportion of the public and private terms of their reading transaction. Paying predominant attention to the character's private feelings rather than public facts brings about a more creative disposition that encourage the envisioning of the text as a starting point, an invitation for further reflection rather than a recipient of truth. This does not mean that the rational side of the reader is utterly rejected, but that the prevalent use of efferent tools is deemed inappropriate in the context of literary interpretation: "To talk of 'prising her open' as if she were an oyster, to use any but the finest and subtlest and most pliable tools upon her was impious and absurd. One must *imagine*—here was she in the looking-glass. It made one start" (79, my emphasis).

As the reader's experience draws closer to an end, they are ironically presented with what they have wished for all along and Isabella's body grows ever larger until it is fully absorbed into the mirror, until the light fixes her and the text crystalizes the naked *truth* that virtually kills the character and makes a mockery of the so-called facts imagined by the reader: "She stopped dead Here was the hard wall beneath. Here was the woman herself. She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty. She had no thoughts. She had no friends. She cared for nobody. As for her letters, they were all bills She did not even trouble to open them" (79-80). Just when the reader had changed their perspective, shifted their focus, the text would not leave any room for interpretation, closing in upon itself by ending with the same sentence it had begun, thus underlining the futility of reaching a conclusive ending and deriding the goal-oriented focus of the efferent reader. Examined under the pitiless scrutiny of the excessive light that denies her the ability to resist categorization, Isabella is stripped of her literariness and remains constitutive solely of negations, proving that without the reader's imaginative and creative intervention, the text itself is empty of meaning.

Conclusion

The present paper has provided an exploration into Virginia Woolf's critical perspective upon the act of reading and its prefiguration of transactional

reader-response criticism, while also offering an analysis of her two metafictional short stories "An Unwritten Novel" (1921) and "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection" (1929), with a focus on the reader's ability to aesthetically evoke a literary work. Although Woolf never loses sight of the importance of the writer, she anticipates key features of Louise Rosenblatt's theory by assigning a crucial role to the reader in the process of interpretation and regarding him as a co-creator, a close alliance member, an accomplice, a business partner and a fellow traveler of Mrs. Brown's that ensures the shaping of a collaborative type of literature, free of oppressive dominance. As an independent thinker, the reader is encouraged to be active and imaginative, imitating the writer's own creative powers and assuming the role of both spectator and actor. Just as importantly, Virginia Woolf's common reader approaches literature for their own pleasure and uses their creativity in the process of reading, which leads to an acknowledgement of their feelings, impressions, indeterminate responses and subjective constructions of multiple meanings. This stance is revealed through Woolf's metafictional short stories that enable readerly reflections to become part of the subject of the literary text.

Woolf's breaking of the distinction between creation and criticism takes center stage in "An Unwritten Novel", as the story reflects upon the genesis of a literary work and its own coming into being. In this light, the narrator is interpreted as a diegetic surrogate reader whose willing suspension of disbelief allows her to metaleptically travel in the same train compartment as her character, Minnie Marsh, journeying by her side and intensely observing her, while imaginatively constructing her life and identity. Immersed and emotionally invested in her reading, the narrator silently communicates and identifies with Minnie, forges both of their identities to the point of physical and psychological alignment and intimately lives though her experiences without losing *sight* of the printed text in front of her. Thus, what is established is a reciprocal, aesthetic transaction in which the reader's input is closely connected to the textual guide left by the author, imagined as a map made up of puzzle pieces that are constantly disturbed by the characters' movement and although the reader's expectations are ultimately contradicted, she heartily embraces the mysterious nature of literature.

Albeit placed in a similar context and also providing a metafictional mirroring of the reader, the unknown and ungendered narrator of "The Lady in the Looking-Glass. A Reflection" assumes a different reading stance than that of "An Unwritten Novel" and imagines themselves in the same house, but not in the same room as their character, Isabella Tyson. Not only is the latter solely reachable through the specular mediation of a text that gives the illusion of permanence and immutability, but the reader distances themselves from the

work, seeks to engage with it efferently through factual accumulation and ultimately desires to exercise their authoritative power through a symbolic act of sexual aggression against the character that would result in the extraction of the text's 'true' meaning. In an ironic twist, it is only after the reader starts to empathize with the character and reconsider their position, that *the truth* about Isabella's emptiness is revealed and the reader is shown how conclusiveness and singleness of meaning are conducive to the death of the literary work and how rigidity in interpretation denies the possibility of *aesthetic* inventiveness.

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