

# The Voyage Out: Thematic Tensions and Narrative Techniques

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The opening paragraphs of the first and last chapters of Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* illustrate the tension implicit in the novel's form. Chapter I begins in the tone of a novel of manners: light and ironic, distanced yet personal; Chapter XXVII begins in a tone of almost metaphysical weight: heavy and serious, committed yet impersonal.

As the streets that lead from the Strand to the Embankment are very narrow, it is better not to walk down them arm-in-arm. If you persist, lawyers' clerks will have to make flying leaps into the mud; young lady typists will have to fidget behind you. In the streets of London where beauty goes unregarded, eccentricity must pay the penalty, and it is better not to be very tall, to wear a long blue cloak, or to beat the air with your left hand.<sup>1</sup>

All that evening the clouds gathered, until they closed entirely over the blue of the sky. They seemed to narrow the space between earth and heaven, so that there was no room for the air to move in freely; and the waves, too, lay flat, and yet rigid, as if they were restrained. The leaves on the bushes and trees in the garden hung closely together, and the feeling of pressure and restraint was increased by the short chirping sounds which came from birds and insects. (p. 368)

In her first novel Woolf is working toward an appropriate form for the metaphysical concerns which dominate all her fiction. Although she has not yet found that form in *The Voyage Out*, its blending of metaphysical concerns into its structure lays the foundation for the formal originality of her later fiction.

The apparent framework of *The Voyage Out* follows from the first paragraph. The novel is, superficially, a traditional novel, in part a novel of

manners<sup>2</sup> and in part a Bildungsroman.<sup>3</sup> Its narrative surface is straightforward, tracing the voyage of the *Euphrosyne* from London to South America and then the activities in an English resort community near Santa Marina. It tells the story of Rachel Vinrace, who—under the instruction of her aunt, Helen Ambrose—emerges from her sheltered background, falls in love, and then dies.<sup>4</sup> Seen as a novel of manners, *The Voyage Out* takes shape through the arrangement of its sharply outlined characters: note the initial ironic portraits of the Ambroses, the subsequent scenes of rapid dialogue and witty comment, the quick introduction of numerous characters. Seen as a Bildungsroman, the novel takes shape through Rachel's development: her first sexual experience (however limited), her opening of new books, her introduction to a society including young men, her love encounter, and finally her death.

But within the traditional framework discordant elements jar<sup>5</sup> and begin to form their own stronger and deeper patterns in the metaphysical depth which is Woolf's real concern. These subtler patterns evolve toward the tone of the novel's final chapter and beyond that towards Woolf's later development as a novelist of formal originality and thematic strength.<sup>6</sup> The peculiar original quality of *The Voyage Out* can be found in those areas which foreshadow Woolf's later techniques: the attention to character consciousness as an expression of a nonpersonal reality; the dependence on thematic polarities; the complex patterns of imagery; and the overall, though still clumsy, control of an impersonal narrative voice.

The character of Rachel Vinrace is obviously central in the novel. The substance of her importance, however, is found not in her centrality, but in Woolf's peculiar method of portrayal. Rachel is elusive, almost shapeless. She cannot be grasped or outlined. In her shapelessness, she is totally unlike the near caricature portrayals of the novel's other characters. Rachel is characterized not as a defined physical being, but rather as a consciousness through which the reader apprehends Woolf's thematic concerns.

Early in the novel, we can see the way in which Woolf uses Rachel both within the traditional framework and as a vehicle in the novel's larger design. As a specific character, Rachel is adolescent, hesitant, emergent; she seeks to conceptualize life, self, reality. But as a consciousness, Rachel becomes a locus for images reflecting Woolf's dominant thematic tension between the affirmation of self as a specific individual and the dissolution of self into a cosmic unity. Thus, although Rachel as a character is far less interesting than Helen Ambrose, she, rather than Helen, is granted the capacity for experiences which focus this thematic tension. Her 'quest' may be limited by her adolescence, but her moments of heightened consciousness, her openness to experiences which transcend her specificity, place her in the novel's larger metaphysical design which is comprised not of personal emotions but of impersonal realities transmitted through consciousness.

Superficially, Rachel's moments of heightened consciousness correspond to stages of her emotional growth: her first kiss, her expansion of acquaintances, her growing recognition of love, her open response to love, and finally her fatal illness. For this reason, Bernard Blackstone insists that *The Voyage Out* has no 'moments of vision,' but only 'moments of ecstasy' which are ego-dependent.<sup>7</sup> But in the patterns of imagery which develop around their interrelationships, these moments do stand out distinctly from the background which surrounds them and become independent of Rachel's apparent ego-growth.<sup>8</sup> In fact, Rachel does not grow or change. Like the characters in Woolf's later novels, Rachel is essentially static; her achievement of vision, as a part of the novel's overall design, does not come in spurts of growth, but is rather the recurrent opening of consciousness toward an underlying reality which is always present. Her moments of awareness are not hers; they are a part of a pattern of thematic tension between specific individuality and cosmic unity, between exuberance and terror, between life and death.

Consider Rachel's reaction to her first kiss: as an element of plot, her reaction is the confused sexual-emotional response of a sheltered adolescent to a particular experience, but as significant imagery, it contributes to the novel's metaphysical polarity. At first Rachel responds in a kind of retreat to nature:

Far out between the waves little black and white sea-birds were riding. Rising and falling with smooth and graceful movements in the hollows of the waves they seemed singularly detached and unconcerned.

'You're peaceful,' she said. She became peaceful too, at the same time possessed with a strange exultation. Life seemed to hold infinite possibilities she had never guessed at. She leant upon the rail and looked over the troubled grey waters, where the sunlight was fitfully scattered upon the crests of the waves, until she was cold and absolutely calm again. (pp. 76-7)

Although this image-scene is much more discursively and less sharply conveyed than those found in Woolf's later novels, the effect is nevertheless similar as it leads us away from personality and toward an awareness of some larger complex cosmic unity. The detached peace, the calm expansion and partial dissolution of self, the underlying sense of tension and distress which is not fully dispelled but has been submerged beneath the surface of near calm, the potential negation of calm in the gray water and fitful sunshine—all these are implicit in the scene with which Rachel identifies. The natural image of her emotional experience foreshadows the skillful integration of nature in the later novels, especially *To the Lighthouse*; in spite of its vagueness, the image shows an interaction of character and scene which eludes the pathetic fallacy and directs the reader's attention beyond the specific character.

The significance of the natural image with its impersonal calm and potential danger in 'troubled grey waters' becomes even more evident as its

ambivalence is supplanted by the precisely conveyed horror of Rachel's dream:

She dreamt that she was walking down a long tunnel, which grew so narrow by degrees that she could touch the damp bricks on either side. At length the tunnel opened and became a vault; she found herself trapped in it, bricks meeting her wherever she turned, along with a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails. His face was pitted and like the face of an animal. The wall behind him oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down. Still and cold as death she lay, not daring to move, until she broke the agony by tossing herself across the bed, and woke crying 'Oh!' (p. 77)

The close horror, the marked deformity, and the gibbering in the dream are set in direct contrast to the openness, the complete absence of barriers, and the immense solitude or detachment in the first imaged response to the kiss. And each could be an elaborated image of the two more briefly imaged conceptualizations of life, shortly later, in which Rachel sees her life first as 'a creeping hedged-in thing ... the short season between two silences' (p. 82) and then as 'a real everlasting thing ... unmergeable, like the sea or the wind' (p. 84). These images are not, it becomes clear, simple representations of Rachel's personal response to life; instead they focus the novel's total thematic concern with the problem of personality, individuality, and cosmic unity.

In the course of a Bildungsroman, one would expect these conceptualizations of and responses to life to alter as the character alters. The fact that they do not alter in the period between Rachel's first kiss (chapter V) and her imminent death (chapter XXV) underlines their force as images of reality rather than of personality. The complex representation of individuality as both personal and impersonal, both limited and infinite, both frightening and exhilarating recurs with more force and with striking similarity as Rachel approaches death. The delirium of illness provides the plot impetus; the imagery reflects the thematic tension between personality and impersonality, individuality and unity. Her illness first emphasizes the feeling of individual isolation: 'all landmarks were obliterated, and the outer world was so far away ... She was completely cut off, and unable to communicate with the rest of the world, isolated alone with her body' (pp. 329-30). The isolation then merges into horror in a dream image markedly similar to the earlier dream:

Rachel again shut her eyes, and found herself walking through a tunnel under the Thames, where there were little deformed women sitting in archways playing cards, while the bricks of which the wall was made oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down the wall. (p. 331)

The dream, obviously derived from seeing the nurse playing cards in her room, bears a much closer relationship to the plot fact which ostensibly prompts it than did the earlier dream; but the use of damp bricks, close

tunnels, and deformed figures in both dreams brings them together on a level beyond the immediate experience in either case. Behind each is an existential horror which is something more than sex or illness or even individual death—the horror which lies at one extreme of individuality, the horror of absolute mortality.

On the other side of that horror is the giving in to death, the seeking of unity through death. In illness Rachel retreats from personality and from the particular facts of individual existence. Her illness becomes a focal point for polar tensions which are elsewhere expressed more diffusely; she continues subconsciously the attempt to conceptualize life and meaning, and she reaches subconsciously the same irreducible polarity, here emphasizing the desire for unity through self-dissolution:

For six days indeed she had been oblivious of the world outside, because it needed all her attention to follow the hot, red, quick sights which passed incessantly before her eyes. She knew that it was of enormous importance that she should attend to these sights and grasp their meaning, but she was always being just too late to hear or see something which would explain it all . . . The sights were all concerned in some plot, some adventure, some escape. The nature of what they were doing changed incessantly, although there was always a reason behind it, which she must endeavor to grasp. Now they were among trees and savages, now they were on the sea; now they were on the tops of high towers; now they jumped; now they flew. But just as the crisis was about to happen, something invariably slipped in her brain, so that the whole effort had to begin over again. The heat was suffocating. At last the faces went further away; she fell into a deep pool of sticky water, which eventually closed over her head. She saw nothing and heard nothing but a faint booming sound, which was the sound of the sea rolling over her head. While all her tormentors thought that she was dead, she was not dead, but curled up at the bottom of the sea. There she lay, sometimes seeing darkness, sometimes light, while every now and then some one turned her over at the bottom of the sea. (pp. 340-1)

When she becomes partially conscious again, she vaguely recognizes people and objects, but everything is distorted. She experiences graphically the difficulty of individuality:

But for long spaces of time she would merely lie conscious of her body floating on the top of the bed and her mind driven to some remote corner of her body, or escaped and gone flitting round the room. All sights were something of an effort, but the sight of Terence was the greatest effort, because he forced her to join mind to body in the desire to remember something. She did not wish to remember; it troubled her when people tried to disturb her loneliness; she wished to be alone. She wished for nothing else in the world. (p. 347)

In dying, Rachel experiences in extremity the novel's central thematic polarity: she seeks for meaning both in life and death; she strains toward maintaining clear and decisive individuality and she wills herself toward submersion in the peaceful unity of death. Because this struggle between

the will toward and the fear of both life and death is the most apt representation of Woolf's lifelong thematic concern, Rachel's dying is the most powerful chapter of the novel. In it we suffer little sense of personal tragedy, but we experience profoundly the powerful ambiguity of Woolf's thematic concerns.

The thrust of the novel is thus centered not in Rachel as character, but in Rachel as consciousness: her susceptibility to particular kinds of experiences and her association with powerful image patterns. These patterns are pervasive, and though, as we have seen, the significant events of Rachel's life often serve as focal points for the imagery, the patterns are also evoked through experiences which are less dramatic and more diffuse.

Take, for instance, the novel's perception of sleep both as a recurrent and prosaic experience and as a kind of mini-death. Like death, sleep is seen as a point of fulcrum for the affirmation of self (individuality) and the dissolution of self (cosmic unity). The first hint of this idea of sleep is found very early in the novel as Rachel falls asleep on ship deck:

Inextricably mixed in dreamy confusion, her mind seemed to enter into communion, to be delightfully expanded and combined, with the spirit of the whitish boards on deck, with the spirit of the sea, with the spirit of Beethoven Op. III, even with the spirit of poor William Cowper there at Olney. Like a ball of thistledown it kissed the sea, rose, kissed it again, and thus rising and kissing passed finally out of sight. The rising and falling of the ball of thistledown was represented by the sudden droop forward of her own head, and when it passed out of sight she was asleep. (p. 37)

More characteristic of Woolf's essays than of her novels, the whimsical tone, in part, reveals her uneasiness with her material in this novel. But even in the whimsy we can see the central duality of positive expansion of self and final dissolution of self. Although the dissolution is seen only in a peaceful falling asleep, its heavier negative potential is conveyed by Helen's view of the sleeping Rachel as 'a victim dropped from the claws of a bird of prey' (p. 37).

Sleep as a mini-death is further illuminated when Terence's demonstration on the picnic offers a very graphic correlation of the two phenomena: his insistence that death is not to be dreaded takes the form of a recommendation that each night children should perform the exercise of retarding the breathing until the body suggests absolute stillness and death (p. 146). Death becomes a positive and natural part of life; and both sleep and death—the loss of individual consciousness—seem to be a kind of release from a limited form.

The dissolution into sleep is beautifully imaged as the boat returns from the river trip on which Rachel and Terence have become engaged:

'You're like a bird half asleep in its nest, Rachel. You're asleep. You're talking in your sleep.'

Half asleep, and murmuring broken words, they stood in the angle made

by the bow of the boat. It slipped on down the river. Now a bell struck on the bridge, and they heard the lapping of water as it rippled away on either side, and once a bird, startled in its sleep, creaked, flew on to the next tree, and was silent again. The darkness poured down profusely, and left them with scarcely any feeling of life, except that they were standing there together in the darkness. (p. 289)

In the sleepy tone and content of the passage, the expansion-dissolution pattern recurs and draws together the ideas of sleep, love, and death. As the culmination of the engagement walk (during which they feel as if they are walking and talking in their sleep), this imaged conjunction of love, sleep, dissolution of self, and loss of life bears a heavy note of foreseen negation as well as of fulfilled peace and illustrates the thematic importance of Rachel's imaged life experiences.

Because the plot evolution of *The Voyage Out* moves from the growth of Rachel's love relationship through her death, at least one reader has concluded that death, in the novel's terms, is the fulfillment of love.<sup>9</sup> It is clear that love and death are closely related not only by plot evolution but also by an intertwining of imagery and theme. But their relationship is not causal; rather, both Rachel's love and her death are seen in the same terms—both are microcosms of the total thematic pattern of the novel.

Like death, love is frequently imaged through the sea, which functions in its inherently dual role: it is both destructive, life-denying, and creative, life-affirming. It is an instrument of negation and yet that very negation is potentially positive. During one crisis in their relationship, Terence laments that there are times 'when, if we stood on a rock together, you'd throw me into the sea' (p. 298); Rachel's response adds a desire for self-negation to Terence's fear of self-negation: 'To be flung into the sea, to be washed hither and thither, and driven about the roots of the world—the idea was incoherently delightful' (p. 298). Their love encompasses these multiple possibilities of destruction, fulfillment through self-destruction, and expansion into a knowledge of the source of reality ('the roots of the world'). The image becomes still more complex as Rachel, calming after they wrestle together, exclaims that the detestable thing in South America is 'the blue—always the blue sky and blue sea. It's like a curtain—all the things one wants are on the other side of that' (p. 302). The expanse becomes a kind of negation and yet it affirms her desire for

many more things than the love of one human being—the sea, the sky. She turned again and looked at the distant blue, which was so smooth and serene where the sky met the sea; she could not possibly want only one human being. (*ibid.*)

Rachel's feeling is more than a reaction to a lovers' quarrel. Indeed, her response retreats from the personality of their relationship and into that impersonal pattern of Woolf's imagery. Her response is not only reminiscent of her earlier and recurrent need for self-expansion, but also of the

novel's recurrent thrust toward unity. Here, her need for self-expansion exists simultaneously with her fear of that very expansion. Thus, when Rachel and Terence end their quarrel, they further enmesh its imagery into the overall pattern through a tenuous resolution which balances the forces of individuality and expansive unity. They cling together 'as if they stood on the edge of a precipice' (p. 303). Their conflicts and the shifting negation and affirmation in the imagery indicate that they do, in fact, stand on the edge of a precipice, beyond which the depths embrace both destruction and fulfillment, limitation and eternity. The contradiction inherent in their love and this tenuous conclusion to the argument is most fully conveyed through the concluding image of their closeness; although they stand on a precipice, they feel large and strong, overlooking a solid and entire world, yet the mirror in the room reflects quite another image: 'it chilled them to see themselves in the glass, for instead of being vast and indivisible they were really very small and separate, the size of the glass leaving a large space for the reflection of other things' (p. 303). Again the proportions waver; the mirror which reflects surface and reveals hidden depths<sup>10</sup> shows them isolated, mutable, mortal. But the mirror shows only a reflection, whose reality or unreality wavers, dims, and remains obscure.

The interaction of precipice and sea in the imagery of Rachel's and Terence's quarrel recalls the earlier period of their emerging relationship when they walk alone together to a cliff over the sea (chapter XVI)—and the tension in the imagery is also similar. Although the sea first appeals to both of them as something more personal than the landscape—something which could be identified with England, home, and comfort—Rachel soon sees a threat in the eternity of peace which the unbroken surface of the water represents. The stone she throws into it is her attempt to break that impersonal eternity. And yet, though both of them relish the newness which results from the broken eternity, both also relish the sensations suggested by the depths of the sea (p. 211). And each, in turn, fades away from the other toward the impersonality of the sea. It is as if they both desire and yet fear the personal ties of a growing love and the impersonal distance possible in an unfettered selfhood. At the same time, the sea is an implicit part of their togetherness which is itself a kind of expansion of self as well as a potential constriction.

Early in the novel, a discussion between Terence and St John posits a kind of paradigm for the fulfillment-destruction potential of love which the later imagery rounds out. Terence originates the basic image of self: 'You can't see my bubble; I can't see yours; all we see of each other is a speck, like the wick in the middle of that flame. The flame goes about with us everywhere; it's not ourselves exactly, but what we feel . . .' (p. 109). The real speculation concerns the possible meeting of two such bubbles. Both bubbles may be destroyed, as St John predicts; or they may become tremendous through their union, a 'billowy universe,' as Terence predicts. Although other and

variant formulations of love arise in later conversations, this conversation has set the tone for the participation of love in the thematic-imagistic pattern of the novel: love, like death, like life, is an inextricable bondage of personal and impersonal, fulfillment and destruction, individuality and unity, in constant struggle.

The events and pervasive experiences of Rachel's development thus merge into the thematic pattern of the novel. Although we can trace her life through the voyage, the new acquaintances, the love relationship, and finally death, these events do not really matter except as they are prompters of thematically and poetically significant awarenesses. And these awarenesses further do not matter except as they are part of the total pattern of the novel. If we discard the apparent pattern of traditional novel, we find that Woolf has underguarded that pattern with an emerging technique based on the control of an impersonal narrative voice.

In *The Voyage Out* the narrative voice is very uneven: here it points clumsily to a significant 'moment'; here it insists that we notice a landscape; here it comments on a character's emotions. But the power of that voice is at its greatest when it withdraws into the patterns of imagery. We have seen how Woolf creates that pattern through the imagery associated with Rachel's consciousness; I want now to point out how the pattern is sustained through a use of perspective and landscape peculiar to this novel.

Woolf establishes the impersonal framework for the events of Rachel's life by an initially skeptical view of 'reality' and the denial of a unified world view. From the novel's opening chapter, we are encouraged to recognize that no physical perception is reliable, no single vision stable, no appraisal trustworthy. The very shift in Chapter I from the city as a convenient setting for the Ambroses' little act of comedy-tragedy, to a reduction of London into a series of diminishing images places the novel in a kind of no-man's-land: we are neither in a traditional English novel firmly rooted in the social structure, the world of recognizable sense perceptions and psychological interrelationships, nor in an internalized novel concerned with mental and emotional individual understandings. This no-man's-land is not an unreal symbolic world, as Jean Guiguet asserts,<sup>11</sup> but rather a world simply lacking in the expected novelistic basis because its concern is with a thematic tension imaged in both the character's awarenesses and the narrator's descriptions.

To establish this concern, Woolf begins with a common recognition of perceptions as dependent on point of view; as the ship moves away, the city and then the island very naturally shrink in visual size from the viewpoint of those on ship. The shift is then made to psychological diminishing as well: the city is left 'sitting on its mud' (p. 27) and the country becomes a 'shrinking island in which people were imprisoned' (p. 32). The people are 'aimless ants' swarming and clamoring vainly, and finally all continents of the earth shrink into 'wrinkled little rocks.' The shrinking of all parts of the

earth brings the ship in turn into a larger-than-life view:

... she was an inhabitant of the great world, which has so few inhabitants, travelling all day across an empty universe, with veils drawn before her and behind. She was more lonely than the caravan crossing the desert, she was infinitely more mysterious, moving by her own power and sustained by her own resources. The sea might give her death of some unexampled joy, and none would know of it. She was a bride going forth to her husband, a virgin unknown of men; in her vigour and purity she might be likened to all beautiful things, worshipped and felt as a symbol. (p. 32)

The passage is an obvious source of Guiguet's idea of a symbolic voyage into an unreal world, but more significantly it is a kind of paradigm for the relationship between a personal individuality and an impersonal unity. The pattern of the shifting narrative perspective de-emphasizes the possibility of a coherent world view, diminishes the reliability of human sense perceptions, and focuses the dynamic interrelationship between the individual and the external world, the human and the nonhuman.

The South American landscape continues the focus on this interrelationship and continually raises the question of the significance of the human. The English are often made to feel a certain dread of the vast landscapes they see,<sup>12</sup> and comment on the sense of smallness such views evoke. On the picnic, they look out over the landscape: 'The effect of so much space was at first rather chilling. They felt themselves very small, and for some time no one said anything' (p. 131-2); they note, too, the smallness of towns and people in the midst of the vast stretch of land. Similarly, Helen responds to Rachel's and Terence's engagement: 'How small the little figures looked wandering through the trees! She became acutely conscious of the little limbs, the thin veins, the delicate flesh of men and women, which breaks so easily and lets the life escape compared with these great trees and deep waters' (p. 286). Even the generalized response of the group on the trip up the river is to the eternity of their surroundings and their own smallness and ephemerality.

As if to fulfill this view of a huge impersonal nature, Woolf periodically inserts impersonal descriptions which help to provide the novel's understructure and which move away from the apparently personal level of the novel into a mood neither of social breadth nor of individual emotional depth. The first of these descriptions formulates a generalized view of England in October and immediately precedes the dual perspective commentary on England and ships:

October was well advanced, but steadily burning with a warmth that made the early months of the summer appear very young and capricious. Great tracts of the earth lay now beneath the autumn sun, and the whole of England, from the bald moors to the Cornish rocks, was lit up from dawn to sunset, and showed in stretches of yellow, green, and purple. (p. 31)

Other such enlarged descriptions follow periodically throughout the novel,

focusing on the South American landscape and its vastness; e.g., as Helen sits alone (p. 95), as night passes around the hotel (p. 111), and as the view intervenes in the emotional struggle connected with Rachel's illness and death (pp. 326, 355, 368, 374). In all of these, the landscape appears huge, the people—when present at all—very small and insignificant: tiny old ladies snipping flowers in England, one individual sitting alone and looking out, nondescript people sleeping the night out in the hotel.

The natural surroundings throughout the novel, described in an impersonal narrative voice, become, then, a framework for the events of Rachel's life. The descriptions create a thematic counterpoint to her life and force us, in bridging the gap between the two, to see the real concern of the novel as a poetic tension between the human and the nonhuman. The narrative problem is to give substance to both the personal events and the impersonal pattern. *The Voyage Out* is only partially successful in its response to this problem, but its achievement is not small, and its success depends on that persistent balancing of the personal events of Rachel's life against the impersonal framework.

Occasionally Woolf pulls these two narrative forces together into a particularly representative passage which illustrates her narrative immaturity at the same time that it focuses our attention. In one such passage, rather early in the novel (chapter X), Rachel, reading alone by the window, perceives the possibility of her own nonexistence in a confrontation with the impersonal external world. Her mind is 'contracting and expanding like the mainspring of a clock' and the sounds outside join the clock 'in a regular rhythm' (p. 124).<sup>13</sup> She notes the world around her and loses a sense of self:

It was all very real, very big, very impersonal, and after a moment or two she began to raise her finger and to let it fall on the arm of her chair so as to bring back to herself some consciousness of her own existence. She was next overcome by the unspeakable queerness of the fact that she should be sitting in an arm-chair, in the morning, in the middle of the world. Who were the people in the house—moving things from one place to another? And life, what was that? It was only a light passing over the surface and vanishing as in time she would vanish, though the furniture in the room would remain. Her dissolution became so complete that she could not raise her finger any more, and sat perfectly still, listening and looking always at the same spot. It became stranger and stranger. She was overcome with awe that things should exist at all . . . She forgot that she had any fingers to raise . . . The things that existed were so immense and so desolate . . . She continued to be conscious of these vast masses of substance for a long stretch of time, the clock still ticking in the midst of the universal silence. (p. 125, Woolf's ellipsis)

The passage tends toward a conceptualization of life, a discursive report of Rachel's 'strangeness' rather than an imaged picture of thematic tensions. But the experience participates in the dominant image patterns: the rhythms of closing in and expanding, the flickering of light over surface,

the dissolution of self into a vast nothingness, and the endurance of the nonhuman. The central event of the novel—Rachel's death—is thus placed, before the fact, within the novel's dominant thematic context: through Rachel we are placed in the midst of the world of the impersonal narrative voice, and we experience the tension between personality and impersonality.

In structuring this central interrelationship between Rachel's life experiences and the novel's impersonal narrative framework, Woolf draws on another particularly useful narrative technique: the integration of Terence into the pattern both as a means of expanding the significance of Rachel's dying and as a means of emphasizing the patterns of imagery. As Terence's emotional responses in chapter XXV correspond in their dual character to Rachel's, we are reminded that Rachel's 'moments' are more than private responses to critical stages in her development, even though they occur at such stages. The concurrence of Terence in these consistently ambivalent emotional responses helps to point out their poetic rather than discursive function in the novel, and emphasizes their essentially nonlinear character as visions of reality beyond strictly temporal and personal concerns. The novel is not wholly successful in its attempt to attach these nonlinear, contemporaneous visions to a traditional plot which is both linear and temporal.<sup>14</sup> But overall, its depth and power are impressive.

Thus Terence's moving responses to Rachel's illness and death are a critical part of the novel's narrative structure and are partially integrated into the narrative voice: on one level deeply embedded in the plot as personal responses to his fiancée's illness, his perceptions of reality, on another level, contribute to the novel's powerfully ambivalent total vision. His natural anguish parallels the horror of certain phases of Rachel's delirium and is imaged most vividly as a devouring fire, 'curling up over the edges of all action, eating away the lives of men and women' (p. 345). But like Rachel's frightening dreams and visions, the horror is not the full impact of Terence's reaction. As for Rachel, chapter XXV for Terence is dominated by the rhythms of irresolution which also characterize Rachel's visions of reality throughout the novel. It is false to conclude, as Blackstone does, that this malignant aspect of life, represented in Rachel's death, is the main emphasis of the novel:<sup>15</sup> The emphasis of the novel lies, rather, in the tensions of its thematic polarities and its imagery patterns.

For Terence as for Rachel, these tensions can be seen more clearly in the imagery which places the individual in ambivalent relationship with the sense of impersonal unity. After a period of great anxiety, Terence retreats into a forgetfulness in which he immerses himself in the surrounding world of nature and its impersonality:

As if a wind that had been raging incessantly suddenly fell asleep, the fret and strain and anxiety which had been pressing on him passed away. He seemed to stand in an un vexed space of air, on a little island by himself; he was free

and immune from pain. It did not matter whether Rachel was well or ill; it did not matter whether they were apart or together; nothing mattered—nothing mattered. The waves beat on the shore far away, and the soft wind passed through the branches of the trees, seeming to encircle him with peace and security, with dark and nothingness. Surely the world of strife and fret and anxiety was not the real world, but this was the real world, the world that lay beneath the superficial world, so that, whatever happened, one was secure. The quiet and peace seemed to lap his body in a fine cool sheet, soothing every nerve; his mind seemed once more to expand, and become natural. (pp. 342-3)

But after he returns to the house and its attendant anxieties, he loses his sense of security and experiences the converse relationship with nature; he feels its threat, its 'hostility and foreboding' (p. 344) and then again immerses himself in the power of the natural world which now provides not security and a sustaining strength but threat and the dismissal of the individual:

... he thought of the immense river and the immense forest, the vast stretches of dry earth and the plains of the sea that encircled the earth; from the sea the sky rose steep and enormous, and the air washed profoundly between the sky and the sea. How vast and dark it must be to-night, lying exposed to the wind; and in all this great space it was curious to think how few the towns were, and how like little rings of light they were, scattered here and there among the swelling uncultivated folds of the world. And in those towns were little men and women, tiny men and women. Oh, it was absurd, when one thought of it, to sit here in a little room suffering and caring. What did anything matter? Rachel, a tiny creature, lay ill beneath him, and here in his little room he suffered on her account. The nearness of their bodies in this vast universe, and the minuteness of their bodies, seemed to him absurd and laughable. Nothing mattered, he repeated; they had no power, no hope. (pp. 345-6)

In both of these responses to the natural world, Terence has reached a temporal plateau similar to such moments for Rachel throughout the novel: time has simply stopped and he has moved into a world outside the plotted graphs of personal emotion. But although in each response Terence is withdrawing from his personal emotions, the responses are in effect thematic mirror images of each other. In the first, he is integrated into and unified with the impersonal world of nature; in the second, he is destroyed by it. The one approaches mysticism; the other expresses nihilism. Through such experiences, Terence is thus incorporated into the narrative patterns of imagery and theme. Neither experience is individually validated by the novel's structure, but both are implicitly true; and in their polarity, they confirm Terence's place in the overall pattern of the novel.

The conclusion of Terence's recognitions—apparently in specific response to Rachel's illness but, as we have seen, actually echoing a much broader content of the novel—is found again in his dual response to Rachel's death. At her deathbed, he experiences a vast sense of peace, of union with her, of perfect happiness. His sensation of joy takes the form of

the stone that she had earlier thrown into the unbroken surface of the sea, thereby bringing into play the contradictory senses of peaceful, unending expansion and personal struggle against the vast eternal. Though here the image is positive ('their complete union and happiness filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely' [p. 353]), its echoes of the conjunction of the previous image pattern create a tenuous balance between the preceding joy and the following despair. For after seeing the impersonal view of nature from the window ('The windows were uncurtained, and showed the moon, and a long silver pathway upon the surface of the waves' [p. 354]) and encountering the material facts of a world in which Rachel no longer exists, Terence experiences the reality of his earlier recognition of this possibility. He sees a physically enduring world without Rachel, and he responds anew to her death in an agonized shrieking of her name.

Following this final personal expression of anguish, the last two chapters of the novel withdraw into the entirely impersonal narrative voice. Rachel and Terence are no longer central and their removal now emphasizes their primary roles as vehicles for a vision which transcends their immediate experiences. The last two chapters, then, are aloof from the merely personal and finally raise to a larger scale the complex images of reality which were central in understanding Rachel and Terence. The shift of focus is evident immediately; directly following Terence's anguished cry, chapter XXVI opens with one of those generalized descriptions of nature:

For two or three hours longer the moon poured its light through the empty air. Unbroken by clouds it fell straightly, and lay almost like a chill white frost over the sea and the earth. During these hours the silence was not broken, and the only movement was caused by the movement of trees and branches which stirred slightly, and then the shadows that lay across the white spaces of the land moved too. In this profound silence one sound only was audible, the sound of a slight but continuous breathing which never ceased, although it never rose and never fell. It continued after the birds had begun to flutter from branch to branch, and could be heard behind the first thin notes of their voices. It continued all through the hours when the east whitened, and grew red, and a faint blue tinged the sky, but when the sun rose it ceased, and gave place to other sounds. (p. 355)

The description expands the image of Terence's view from the window at Rachel's deathbed, and it reestablishes a kind of stillness (though combined with underlying restlessness) after his shriek has broken the silence of his own calm. But this image transcends the earlier abbreviated version. The vague movement of light and dark, patterns formed by the trees, recalls the current image of the wavering shadows on the sea or in the landscape; Woolf reaffirms the recurrent antithesis of light and dark as images of tension in reality. The gradual dissolution of night and its impersonality, accompanied by the gratifying movement toward the rich, warm sounds of day, embraces both the stillness of the inanimate and the activity of the animate.

Most important, the whole natural progression of this image echoes and subtly alters the image which began chapter XXV. There the heat of the afternoon had made the air dance, giving a sense of sluggish frustrated movement; here the cool night projects calm in a chill frost on the sea. There the sense of settling decay; here of quiet, uneasy restoration. There the waves breaking 'like the sound of some exhausted creature'; here the even and unbroken breathing which never ceases. Although the echo of the exhausted creature is heard in the inarticulate cries of weak or pained people which replace the continuous breathing, soon these too are blotted out by the comforting signs of day. Life seems to go on much as usual: regardless of the eternal peace of the night, regardless of the interruption caused by Rachel's death.

Indeed, chapter XXVI is merely punctuated with small recognitions of the death, small sights of sorrow or meaninglessness. The remainder of life at the hotel seems to progress normally. People care and don't care, face the stark interruption of death and turn away to daily activities. The chapter ends with one of life's futile repetitions: Evelyn Murgatroyd refuses another marriage proposal, only vaguely wondering about the meaning of it all.

But there is still an uneasiness in this return to normality, much as there was an uneasiness in the outward calm of the natural image which began the chapter. The beginning of the final chapter, quoted in the opening paragraph of this essay, actualizes this submerged uncertainty, again through a description of impersonal nature. The feeling of expansion in nature is altered to a feeling of constriction; the hesitant, quiet sigh becomes a disturbing collocation of natural sounds. There is a profound sense of apprehension leading to the inevitable storm.

As the ordinary routine of the hotel is upset, we are reminded of the 'violent grey tumult' (p. 71) which interrupted the peaceful voyage of the ship. Both come as an interruption of a routine way of life. But now, as then, the ordinary order of the world soon reasserts itself. On the ship, the passengers had seen the daylight 'at the end of the tunnel' as they saw that 'on the skirts of all the grey tumult was a misty spot of gold. Instantly the world dropped into shape; they were no longer atoms flying in the void' (p. 72). Here too the storm passes: 'the great confused ocean of air was travelling away from them, and passing high overhead with its clouds and its rods of fire, out to sea. The building, which had seemed so small in the tumult of the storm, now became square and spacious as usual' (pp. 369-70). Both storms end with a return of shape and order, a reaffirmation of faith in the usual: the disorientation in both instances is temporary. But in both instances, there is also a tenuousness about the return to normal. As with other images of shape and order (e.g., those applied to love), these also seem to bear within themselves their own negation. Order and chaos are mutually interdependent.

The hotel life immediately following the storm confirms this impression.

The storm in one sense offers a means of catharsis through nature's tumultuous counterpart to the potentially tumultuous human response to Rachel's death; the tumult of feeling, shown visibly only in Terence's cry, passes with the tumult of air. But already in the conclusion to the catharsis—the lively gathering in the hotel hall—there is a hint of the final irresolution to come, the implicit irresolution of chaos and order, death and life. This hint is found in the simple presence of the flitting moth, which is a full participant in the 'indescribable stir of life' which pervades the room. Its activity, while affirming the stir of life, also hints at life's meaninglessness. It moves only toward self-destruction, and yet it never ceases in its active, if meaningless, expression of vitality.<sup>16</sup>

The ambivalence of the hotel's liveliness is disturbed by one further component of the after-storm picture: St John Hirst, the only direct link to the emotional tumult at the villa, comes into the midst of the idle conversation on life and death. Moving as if in a dream, he cannot fully recognize the reality of those around him. Even his contentedness expresses his confusion of reality and dream:

Without any sense of disloyalty to Terence and Rachel he ceased to think about either of them. The movements and the voices seemed to draw together from different parts of the room, and to combine themselves into a pattern before his eyes; he was content to sit silently watching the pattern build itself up, looking at what he hardly saw. (p. 374)

The novel never returns to the villa—its assumption of the impersonal makes that return impossible—but the tenuous return to the pattern of daily existence seems to be universal as nature now even more definitely regathers her calm:

The rain had ceased, the heavy clouds were blown away, and the air was thin and clear, although vapourish mists were being driven swiftly across the moon. The sky was once more a deep and solemn blue, and the shape of the earth was visible at the bottom of the air, enormous, dark and solid, rising into the tapering mass of the mountain, and pricked here and there on the slopes by the tiny lights of villas. (p. 374)

The storm succeeded by calm becomes the enclosing framework of Rachel's expanding life: the earlier storm precedes the kiss—the beginning of new experiences for her—and the final storm punctuates her death. But, as the kiss was an ambivalent beginning and her reaction to it expressed far more than the kiss itself, so the death is an ambivalent conclusion and again the imagery participates in more than death alone. In one sense, this world after the storm, which seems ordered and reliable again, is merely a view of the world as Terence had seen it when Rachel was dying—a world without her, a meaningless world of nature discounting people ('He saw the room and the garden, and the trees moving in the air, they could go on without her; she could die' [p. 348]). But in another sense Rachel has merely

become a part of the process and there is no reason to mourn her death: each significant moment of her 'development' has been a moment of life-death in which the two are inseparable; and each has been a moment of intense relationship, whether positive or negative, with the natural world. During the first storm, she 'had just enough consciousness to suppose herself a donkey on the summit of a moor in a hailstorm, with its coat blown into furrows; then she became a wizened tree, perpetually driven back by the salt Atlantic gale' (p. 71). Both are images of life in the midst of tumult, and yet on the brink of unconsciousness; these images, like the senseless activity of the moth, affirm a capacity which stands against the storm and which demonstrates the active participation of negation in life itself. The bits of vaporish mist which remain after the storm, the places of uncertainty in the picture of the solid earth, make impossible a unilateral statement about reality. As the everyday world closes over the surface, St John, half-asleep, yet vividly conscious (but then sleep itself—and hence death—was already identified as a special kind of consciousness), watches the world reassemble itself: 'Across his eyes passed a procession of objects black and indistinct, the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed' (p. 375).

It is impossible to identify the nature of the sleep to which St John or the others are going: sleep has been placed in too complex a relationship with life and death. A simple conclusion to *The Voyage Out* is, in fact, impossible. Life and death, mist and clarity, reality and unreality, light and dark, self and other, nature and humanity—the accumulation of pairs seems endless. Each takes its place in the aggregate image-picture which Woolf has presented, and yet never can any pair be resolved nor any group of pairs be plotted into relationship.

In attempting to explain the novel, Woolf wrote to Lytton Strachey: 'What I wanted to do was to give the feeling of a vast tumult of life, as various and disorderly as possible, which should be cut short for a moment by the death, and go on again—and the whole was to have a sort of pattern, and be somehow controlled.'<sup>17</sup> Rachel's life and death are, in fact, mere incidents in the overall vision, but it is largely through her that this vision is conveyed: she is both an individual and a vehicle for the recognition of reality. Woolf has used the events of Rachel's life as a part of that overall 'controlled' pattern and has begun, in this novel, to develop her unique narrative voice.

Later, Woolf discusses narrative form in 'On Re-reading Novels,' where she writes,

when we speak of form we mean that certain emotions have been placed in the right relations to each other; . . . that the novelist is able to dispose these emotions and make them tell by methods which he inherits, bends to his purpose, models anew, or even invents for himself.<sup>18</sup>

This statement illuminates Woolf's unique concern with fictional form as the arrangement of potent emotions into a pattern: each of her works offers a new insight into this idea of form; each shows a careful arrangement of thematic concerns into a poetic whole. Woolf's later works, beginning with *Mrs Dalloway*, are nearly seamless integrals, composed of masterful arrangements of images and themes. In *The Voyage Out* she, in effect, adopts an inherited form, but her thematic irresolution forces her to begin bending that inherited form to suit her purpose. Although she has not yet learned to place emotions in a vividly right relation to each other—as her later works do—she is working toward that formal poetic unity in the unevenness of her use of the traditional novel form. Woolf's first novel lacks the subtlety and rich unity of her later novels: its obvious thematic polarities are potentially tiresome, and it is sometimes clumsy, immature, and loosely fabricated. Nevertheless, *The Voyage Out* has a unique depth and richness, and it offers the reader indirect access to those narrative techniques which mark the success of Woolf's later novels.

## Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (1915; rpt. N.Y.: Harcourt Brace, 1920), p. 9. Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text.
2. A. D. Moody calls it 'for the most part, simply a series of satiric observations of "civilized living" . . .'; *Virginia Woolf* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1963), p. 15.
3. See Bernard Blackstone, whose consistent emphasis in discussing *The Voyage Out* is on character growth: 'it shows a series of shocks profoundly modifying the personality of a young woman.' *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary* (1949; rpt. N.Y.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, n.d.), p. 22. More to the point, though with exaggerated emphasis on sexuality, is James Naremore's view that *The Voyage Out* 'concerns the elemental forces of sexuality, of life and death . . .' and that Rachel 'is a personification of that theme.' *The World Without a Self* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1973), p. 55.
4. Mitchell A. Leaska's analysis views this progression of events not as a *Bildungsroman* but as a psychological character study; in his view, which focuses on motives and personalities, the novel is not about Rachel's education, but about her psychological self-protection which ends in her 'self-willed death.' See 'Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*: Character Deduction and the Function of Ambiguity,' *Virginia Woolf Quarterly*, 1 (Winter, 1973), 18–41.
5. David Daiches notes the tension between traditional form and original vision. *Virginia Woolf* (Norfolk, Conn.: New Directions, 1942), p. 9. For the contrasting view that the novel shows 'no special "struggle" between its form and content,' see James Hafley, *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1954), p. 26.
6. For a revealing discussion of the formal emphases in *The Voyage Out* in relation to Roger Fry's aesthetics, see Carole O. Brown, 'The Art of the Novel: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*', *Virginia Woolf Quarterly*, 3: 67–84.
7. Blackstone, *Virginia Woolf: A Commentary*, pp. 24–5.
8. Avrom Fleishman's useful analysis of *The Voyage Out* recognizes its metaphysical concerns but still sees Rachel's 'moments of vision' as revealing a growth process from a conventional view toward a metaphysical awareness. See *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1975), p. 3.
9. This view is held by Robert Peel, 'Virginia Woolf,' *The Criterion*, 13 (Oct. 1933), 83; for a more complex discussion of the interrelationships of love, sex, and death, see Naremore's discussion of *The Voyage Out*. Fleishman points out that 'Woolf manages to scorn the *Liebestod* motif and affirm it, too' (p. 16).

10. See Jean Guiguet's discussion of the looking-glass image, where he emphasizes its paradoxical possibilities. *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, trans. Jean Stewart (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1966), p. 417.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 199.
12. Note, for example, Mrs Dalloway's aversion to 'views' (p. 210).
13. This use of the clock emphasizes the importance of the rhythms I have noted previously in such moments of intense awareness and invalidates Shiv Kumar's statement: 'The clock here in *The Voyage Out* assumes its traditional role and, except for announcing hours and suggesting conventional analogies, has no deeper significance'; *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1963), p. 71.
14. Daiches recognizes this same disparity between chronology and significance in his comment on the discrepancy between appearance and reality (*Virginia Woolf*, p. 16).
15. Blackstone concludes that this malignant aspect of life, represented in Rachel's death, is the main emphasis of the novel (*Virginia Woolf: A Commentary*, p. 31).
16. The activity of the moth here is reminiscent of the moth in Woolf's essay 'The Death of the Moth,' which concludes on a note of simple acceptance of death following the total expression of life, 'a thread of vital light.' See *Collected Essays*, I (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 360.
17. Letter to Lytton Strachey, 28 Feb. 1916, *Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey: Letters*, ed. Leonard Woolf and James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1956), p. 57.
18. Woolf, *Collected Essays*, II (London: Hogarth Press, 1966), p. 129.

## Toward the Far Side of Language: Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*

E. L. BISHOP

One of Virginia Woolf's most eloquent statements on the role of language appears in her essay 'On Not Knowing Greek' where she asserts that, in order to understand Aeschylus,

it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. It is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words which Shakespeare also asks of us . . . Connecting them in a rapid flight of the mind we know instantly and instinctively what they mean, but could not decent that meaning afresh into other words. The meaning is just on the far side of language.<sup>1</sup>

The passage accurately describes the workings of Woolf's own mature art, yet even in her first novel, *The Voyage Out* (1915), language attains the concentration and suggestiveness of poetry. That this rather traditional work contains both thematic and stylistic intimations of her later, more experimental, novels has been remarked but never adequately explored.<sup>2</sup> However, the novel rewards patient analysis, for in Rachel's restive questioning of the functions of language, Woolf introduces what will become a persistent theme in all her works: the problem of how words can encompass and communicate human experience. Further, it is in *The Voyage Out* that one discovers Woolf laboring to achieve what she would later effect with felicitous ease: a mode of discourse which compels the reader's active participation, guiding him to the point where he can make his own intuitive leap, to apprehend a reality that will not submit to denotative prose.<sup>3</sup>

It was not until the spring of 1919, with the publication of 'Modern Fiction' and 'Kew Gardens' (manifestos in complementary modes), that



Portrait of Virginia Woolf by Vanessa Bell.  
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# VIRGINIA WOOLF

## Critical Assessments

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Edited by  
*Eleanor McNees*

**VOLUME III**  
Critical Responses to the Novels from *The Voyage Out*  
to *To the Lighthouse*



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