THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

STRUCTURE AS INTERPRETATION IN THE WORK OF VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE INNER SUBSTANCE OF OUR LIVES

by

Helen Kruger

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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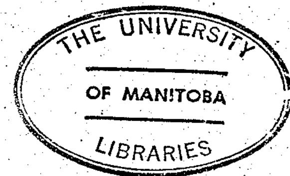

THE UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, a Master's thesis entitled: STRUCTURE AS INTERPRETATION IN THE WORK OF VIRGINIA WOOLF: THE INNER SUBSTANCE OF OUR LIVES

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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CHAPTER I

THE SHAPING OF A VISION: THE TRANSLATION OF FEELINGS AND IMPRESSIONS

A critical approach based on a preconceived set of beliefs and system of values, or on a fixed structure of created characters, constructed plot and connected incidents, will find the work of an artist such as Virginia Woolf unsatisfying and inconclusive. It assumes a measuring stick which allows the critic to express himself in terms that describe a relation between himself and the work of art, but not necessarily the relation between the artist and his purpose. The intrinsic truth or merit of an artistic creation lies in the relation of the creation to the creator: the integral expression of a vision. This is not to say that these artists have a 'message' or 'something to say', and find a way of expressing it; rather, it is "an exploration which itself creates its own significations, as it proceeds,"[1] because the artist is subordinate to his vision.

Obviously, original means of expression adapted to

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[1] Alain Robbe-Grillet, For a New Novel (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1965), p. 141.

the artist's inner vision will result in the creation of new forms. These forms and techniques can only be adequate or inadequate insomuch as they serve or disserve the artist's purpose. For the critic a certain amount of courage is required to approach the work of art on this basis. It is a daring of the intellect which opens up new modes of thought, willing to be relative to the work of art, with a measure that changes as the art form varies. This will involve more than merely categorizing or classifying, it will be rather a "sensitive tracing out of the converging relationships that accumulate into form and become meaning,"[2] allowing the critic to follow behind the artist in tracing out the design of the pattern for others to see.

The early twentieth century was perhaps especially suited to a new literary form, for it saw the "final dissolution of that common background of belief and attitude"[3] of religion and philosophy which earlier writers and critics could take for granted. No longer was the cosmos understood as a great chain of Being, from highest to lowest, with a corresponding hierarchical scale of values. Without a community of belief, artists were faced with the problem of providing their own philosophic and emotional background;

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[2]R. G. Collins, "Divagations on the Novel as Experiment," Mosaic 4 (Spring, 1971): 4.

[3]David Daiches, Virginia Woolf, (New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 1963; New Directions Paperbook), p. 39.

the ladder to higher reality was gone, as Yeats put it. The artist must explain an inexplicable world where "the movement of the spirit is no longer vertical but only horizontal,"[4] and formal art structures must change correspondingly.

Virginia Woolf came to recognize that old rules and conventions interposed a screen in front of the reality that she wanted to express. After the nineteenth century novel of sociological implications, and that century's art of realism, she rejected the novel that lead to external action and deliberately sought a self-contained quality of art, as did the artists who were associated with her in the Bloomsbury Group. The shared intellectual experience of contemporary artists and literary friends stimulated her own vision of reality and of man, through criticism "spoken over wineglasses and coffee-cups late at night, flashed out on the spur of the moment by people passing who have no time to finish their sentences . . . ."[5] But if on the one hand she seemed revolutionary, she was also part of the contemporary movement that ended a long tradition of aesthetic and Romantic writers. Artistic temperament based on feeling and intuition had been carefully cultivated and prepared by

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[4]William Barrett, Irrational Man (New York: Doubleday and Co. Inc., 1958; Anchor Books, 1962), p. 49.

[5]Virginia Woolf, The Death of the Moth and other Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), p. 100.

the Romantic movement, with roots in Coleridge. The passion for the life of the imagination in poets and painters from Ruskin onwards showed a constant tendency to turn from the interests of common life to art as the highest value, with imagination as the central and dominating seat of the human faculties.

E. M. Forster, a contemporary of Virginia Woolf and a "spiritual" writer as opposed to "materialist" in her own classification, was one of the last Romantic novelists to attempt to achieve some kind of balance between the individual and social interest. In Howards End the child of two classes offers hope for the future society, while the reconciliation of intellect and emotion between Margaret and Helen restores personal values. Nevertheless, the final impression remains one of personal values which cannot solve the problems of society, and a society which cannot tolerate personal values.[6] In Forster's final novel, the meaninglessness of the universe echoes in the Marabar caves, but the sensitivity and mutal sympathy of the characters finally connects two cultures. In Virginia Woolf social interest is dimmed to a shadow; in the later novels especially is it absent, though it still exists. Though her novels certainly say something about society, her primary

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[6]Mark Schorer, The Novelist in the Modern World (Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press, 1957), p. 17.

purpose is not social commentary. She attempted novels of pure sensibility based on "the spirit we live by," spontaneous revelation of freshness, wonder and surprise. "Moments of being," "myriads of impressions" were presented, not against a social background but against cosmic forces bounded by life and death. The ultimate questions are always asked: "What is life?" "What is death?" "What does it all mean?"

The year 1910 was heralded as a new epoch by Virginia Woolf' "in or about December, 1910, human character changed."[7] It was the year of the exhibition of the Post-Impressionist paintings, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Picasso. Her somewhat startling statement related as much to the technique of expressing character as to a new view of man's nature itself. In a universe without hierarchical order, inanimate objects assume a greater importance, man becomes less significant, human relations change. The artist, from his vantage point, can depict what he sees in a particular mood and at a particular moment, but even more he seeks to create the concept of mind, its sensations and feelings, taking the responsibility for the outline his work assumes. The actions of his characters spring from impressions of reality rather than prejudice, or habit, or dogma. What is this

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[7]Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" Collected Essays I, ed. Leonard Woolf (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin and Co. Ltd., 1966), p. 320.

reality?

> It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable--now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech--and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly. Sometimes too, it seems to dwell in shapes too far away for us to discern what their nature is. But whatever it touches it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates.[8]

A character or a man's nature is expressed when, in a work of art, the artist creates some kind of harmony from the chaos of impressions, revealing thereby the inner essence or spirit of the man.

The translation of the great nineteenth century Russian novels into English, with publication beginning about 1912, had a profound effect on Virginia Woolf. In her essay "The Russian Point of View," she showed how deeply it affected her, and how her own vision was taking form.

> The novels of Dostoevsky are seething whirlpools, gyrating sandstorms, waterspouts which hiss and boil and suck us in. They are composed purely and wholly of the stuff of the soul. Against our wills we are drawn in, whirled round, blinded, suffocated, and at the same time filled with a

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[8]Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own (First published 1928; reprint ed., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: C. Nicholls & Company Ltd., 1945; Penguin Books, 1970), p. 108.

giddy rapture.[9]

Again "nothing is solved, we feel; nothing is rightly held together. On the other hand, the method which at first seemed so casual, inconclusive, and occupied with trifles, now appears the result of an exquisitely original and fastidious taste."[10] The Russian novel seemed to deal with the essentials of life--such as common suffering and happiness. The inner world of emotions, feelings, and intuitive beliefs were shown as possessing universal interest and as being far more important than that which could be measured by science or naturalism (e.g., Dmitri in The Brothers Karamazov). If this had been implied by other writers, it was finally the Russians who dared to state its sadness and inconclusiveness. "It is the sense that there is no answer, that if honestly examined life presents question after question which must be left to sound on and on after the story is over . . ."[11] The flux of life presented by the inner spiritual world of the emotions and the anguish and uncertainty of unanswered questions, inconclusive and often apparently meaningless, this was the reality Virginia

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[9]Virginia Woolf, "The Russian Point of View," The Common Reader I, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1968), p. 226.

[10]Ibid., pp. 224-25.

[11]Woolf, "Modern Fiction," The Common Reader I, p. 194.

Woolf wanted to present. Her novels took on a form which presented the consciousness of her characters in a state of becoming, the exploring of the spiritual life and psychic states. The novels deal with those exceptionally sensitive human beings who search for meaning always aware that "there is no reason, order, justice: but suffering, death, the poor. There was no treachery too base for the world to commit; she knew that. No happiness lasted . . ."[12]

If the human spirit in its solitude is the center of her works, the area of human relations, that sharing and communication for which the individual yearns but which he perhaps can never totally achieve, grew out of the search for meaning and identification. "She would never know him. He would never know her. Human relations were all like that, . . ."[13] says Lily Briscoe, the painter. Can one live with other people and still be free to live as oneself? That is the question asked by Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay. Human beings obviously need one another, for moments of perception are intensified if they are held in common. "By far the most valuable things, which we know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse

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[12]Virginia Woolf, To The Lighthouse (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World Inc., 1927; Harvest Books, 1955), p. 98.

[13]Ibid., p. 139.

and the enjoyment of beautiful objects,"[14] said G. E. Moore, whose Principia Ethica influenced Virginia Woolf and her Bloomsbury friends. The freedom to follow intuition, subject to the intellect and good taste, in the search for beauty in nature, art and human relations: this defines Virginia Woolf's aesthetic and also her ethics as it relates to the interrelationship of people; conduct will look after itself if men know what is good. It was through the world of the mind, the inward stream deep within the nature of things that an understanding of oneself and one's outward relationships could be achieved. The artist must find his own way to express that vision, or "intuition, of life, and in finding that he will find the form of his work."[15] Intuition demanding its own form will result in harmony and truth of insight.

A writer contemporary with Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, was also experimenting at this time with the use of technique to simulate the form of life itself. Though his three major novels were literary fragments, making it tempting for critics to speculate on their meaning--'had they been completed', it was even more fitting that they were not concluded; the probing and exploration which is the technique of his novels came close to the experience of

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[14] J. K. Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group (London: Secker and Warburg, 1954), p. 23.

[15] Ibid., p. 93.

life itself. It was a deliberate stylistic technique to investigate reality by all possible means. Kafka did not like figurative language and spoke with near despair of the ineffectiveness of words, even his own writing, at communicating essential meaning. His method was to transpose inward states of mind into material beings and proceed on that image (The Metamorphosis, for example). He mirrored effectively the inner spiritual life--the anguish, guilt and suffering reflected in physical realistic details. The world of sensations and impressions was translated into thought and recreated into art. For him, as well as Virginia Woolf, Dostoevsky expressed the process: "Special methods of thinking. Permeated with emotion. Everything feels itself to be a thought, even the vaguest feelings," (Dostoevsky).[16]

The problem faced by spiritual writers who dwell on thinking and feeling rather than on action, is how to give external form to untranslatable qualities. Word arrangements translate feelings and thoughts into a different medium than they possess, but paradoxically they cannot be communicated at all until they find expression in words. If they are to retain a perceptual impression of life, they cannot follow verbal structures, or logic,

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[16]Max Brod, ed., The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1910-1913, trans. by Joseph Kresh (New York: Shocken Books, 1965), p. 291.

or tense, or the laws of cause and effect.[17] Simply setting down what arises in the consciousness, in the order in which it arises is not artistically satisfying; there must be something of universal significance or value, in an aesthetically pleasing arrangement: ". . . merely to repeat one's emotions, merely to look into one's heart and write, is also merely to repeat the round of emotional self-bondage. If our books are to be exercises in self-analysis, then technique must--and alone can--take the place of the absent analyst."[18]

Virginia Woolf used the same principle as that of the Romantic poets: the subjective perception of the artist projecting on the world an inner eye of imagination. The process of transforming impressions into writing begins with the writer's own sensations and experiences. In _A Room of One's Own_, she describes a significant moment of her own: she was looking out of her window when,

> as so often happens in London, there was a complete lull and suspension of traffic. Nothing came down the street; nobody passed. A single leaf detached itself from the plane tree at the end of the street, and in that pause and suspension fell. Somehow it was like a signal falling, a signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past,

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[17] A. A. Mendilow, _Time and the Novel_ (London: Peter Nevill, 1952), p. 207.

[18] Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," _Critical Approaches to Fiction_, eds. S. K. Kumar and Keith McKean (New York: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1968), p. 274.

> invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along . . . . Now it was bringing from one side of the street to the other diagonally a girl in patent leather boots, and then a young man in a maroon overcoat; it was also bringing a taxicab; and it brought all three together at a point directly beneath my window; where the taxi stopped; and the girl and the young man stopped; and they got into the taxi; and then the cab glided off as if it were swept on by the current elsewhere.
> The sight was ordinary enough; what was strange was the rhythmical order with which my imagination had invested it; and the fact that the ordinary sight of two people getting into a cab had the power to communicate something of their own seeming satisfaction.[19]

A moment like this and many other similar ones combine to make a world of their own in the artist's subconscious. All the impressions, sights and sounds, at least the important ones, remain in the memory. Then after reflection, when the 'upper-mind' is at peace, the unconscious puts them together. When they are wanted--there they are--in rhythmical order. When writing, the artist matches each word as closely as possible to this vision in his subconscious.[20] If he is successful, there will be glimpses of reality in his art which far transcend the counterpart in his life because they have a new relation. The novelist feels emotions, names them and ranges them in final order by feeling their right relatedness to one another.

The use of the detail to represent inner meaning

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[19]Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 95.

[20]Virginia Woolf, "The Leaning Tower," The Moment and other Essays (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), pp. 109-110.

was analogous to the use of the moment as a substitute for normal time sequence. A moment contains life of the past, present and future; it is a "moment of being" which is life at its fullest, and must substitute for days, months and years. Thus the past is seen from the present, and everything before the novel takes place is given only as it arises in the character's mind, or as it becomes a part of his present. Clock time is abolished and replaced by the real time that makes up the inner substance of our lives. The central factor of the novel becomes the interplay of things, persons and atmosphere within a moment, rather than a character. Characters are analyzed and projected by perception, but fundamentally they remain different aspects of the author's mind.

Virginia Woolf sought and found a new way of expressing life, an original perspective of a vision of experience.

CHAPTER II

THE RELATION OF FORM TO MEANING

The aesthetic emotion produced by a work of art is the reaction to a relation. "It 'is not an emotion about sensations, however necessary a responsive sensualism may be for our apprehension of aesthetic wholes. Nor is it an emotion about objects or persons or events' [Roger Fry]."[1] It is an emotion about the harmony that exists between these things in a work of art. The artist borrows from life events, persons and objects which he builds into a structure, but the meaning of each one of these individual things represented is not as important as the interrelation and harmony established between them.

The artist must pierce beneath the surface appearances of an object to come to an intimate understanding of its internal rhythms. To come to this understanding he must have a vision of the universe. The Bloomsbury Group believed that rationalism and sensibility, reason and intuition, could establish first principles; they trusted in the ability of the intellect to examine the findings of

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[1]Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group, p. 50.

intuition, while they rejected convention, tradition and authority.

The artist expresses what he sees in forms that are related to each other. He may experience emotional and spiritual meaning in objects or nature which he wants to communicate; in the work of art he externalizes his experience and communicates it. "Art--[says Roger Fry]. . . is 'the only means by which human beings can communicate to each other the quality and quiddity of their experiences'. This, together with its power to help us understand the universe, is its raison d'être [reason for being]."[2]

Art discovers emotional harmonies--sensations and feelings and their significance. The form of the objects presented by the artist's imagination will have inherent emotional elements expressed in an order which is beyond their natural capabilities. The final form will not be just a pleasing object, but the outcome of an endeavor to express an idea. "It is the idea, the state of mind, behind a work of art that gives it its significance, and causes us to feel, if the idea is well expressed, that everything is in its appointed place, that not a color could be changed or an object disturbed."[3] This is the emotional harmony or unity of a work of art.

As a novelist, Virginia Woolf attempted to build

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[2]Ibid., p. 53.

[3]Ibid., p. 57.

structures that had internal harmony, and were self-contained works of art. In her comments about the novel in the essays "Modern Fiction" (1919) and "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1924), she criticizes the Edwardian novelists, calling them "materialists" because they are concerned with the body (form) rather than the spirit. Referring to the little old lady, Mrs. Brown, she says that they, i.e., Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy, would describe the carriage, clothes, cushions, buttons, or the outward circumstances of society, or a Utopia where a real view of such women does not exist. Their books lacked completion; they call for some kind of action, such as "joining a society or writing a cheque." For her, the novel was emotion in and for itself, not a device to bring about action.

Realistic details should be used to serve aesthetic demands; "fact and vision" must be combined. She felt that Defoe managed to embody a spiritual experience in what at first seems only realistic representation. There is "truth of insight" in <u>Robinson Crusoe</u>, but the Edwardians, she felt, did not achieve a similar result. Their vision being superficial, they inevitably neglected Mrs. Brown, who is "human nature," the spirit we live by, life itself. The Russian novelists, however, pierced through the flesh to reveal the soul. And if we do not have as complete a vision, at least, she says, we still know Mrs. Brown.

. . . she is just as visible to you who remain

> silent as to us who tell stories about her. In the course of your daily life this past week you have had far stranger and more interesting experiences than the one I have tried to describe. You have overheard scraps of talk that filled you with amazement. You have gone to bed at night bewildered by the complexity of your feelings. In one day thousands of ideas have coursed through your brains, thousands of emotions have met, collided, and disappeared in astonishing disorder.[4]

All this "life itself," the inner life, is Mrs. Brown. It is individual, yet common to all. The novelists' subject must be Mrs. Brown. "'The proper stuff of fiction' does not exist; everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought, every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss."[5]

She protests against the traditional novel because it has become too far removed from real life, that is, inner life. The form seems interposed between us and the book as we know it. "Must novels be like this?" she asks.

> Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'. Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad of impressions--trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday and Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be

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[4]Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," p. 336.

[5]Idem, "Modern Fiction," p. 194.

> no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?[6]

"Let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance," she continues. She was not saying that a novel should have no form, but that the conventions of novel-writing would not do. Though the chapters of a novel make something as formed as a building, the novel should be a work of art, its beauty in its words and rhythms, not in its formula. A novel "should be self-contained, . . . should come from the deepest part of its author's being, should be more real than life, and should at once surprise us and convince us that it is true."[7] She was determined to explore the inner life and present it in such a way that the reader would feel the emotion rather than see the form.[8] The internal rhythm or order of events would replace the conventional external form of them.

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[6]Ibid., p. 189.

[7]Johnstone, The Bloomsbury Group, p. 86.

[8]Woolf, "On Re-Reading Novels," The Moment and other Essays, p. 130.