

**Writing the Subject:
Virginia Woolf and Clothes**

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Virginia Woolf had a fascination with clothes and textiles. She wrote about clothes in her diaries, fiction and non-fiction and she even wrote for *Vogue* magazine – the editor was a friend.¹ There may have been some influence from William Morris's designs and tapestries, the Omega workshops of the time, Serge Diaghilev and costume designs for the *Ballets Russes*, and we know that she worked needlepoint with her sister Vanessa Bell. However, in regard to writing the subject, it was more than a mere fascination with clothes: she recognized the important link between clothes and the body. The other aspect of her life and work of relevance here is her intrigue with childhood and childhood experience – particularly the memory of her mother. I am interested in the way Woolf's fascination with clothes and intrigue are entwined with childhood experience and memory in her work. In this paper, I suggest that Virginia Woolf has a method of writing the subject that involves clothes and textiles. The method stems from her autobiographical writing, in particular the childhood memory of her mother, and is carried through into her novelistic practice. I will argue that Woolf is able to fictionalize/ re-work memory as perception of the body by involving "clothes and textiles",² that is, she understands a confluence between body and clothes which she writes via the nonverbal and, in particular, the tactile to create the subject in her writing practice. It is this confluence which I un-

derstand as “writing the subject.”

The “confluence” of body and clothes can be defined as Flugel does in *The Psychology of Clothes*. Clothes create a variety of illusions such as to do with status, power, size, space and so on, according to Flugel, but the very fundamental importance of clothes is the illusion of the identity between body and clothes. This however is no more than an effect known to

psychologists as “confluence.” In this illusion, the mind fails to distinguish two things which under other circumstances are easily kept apart. ... The extension of the total (human) figure, really due to clothes, is unconsciously attributed to the body that wears them, as being the more vital and interesting portion of the whole.³

And,

Apart from face and hands – which, it is true, are the most socially expressive parts of our anatomy, and to which we have learnt to devote an especially alert attention – what we actually see and react to are, not the bodies, but the clothes of those about us.⁴

This paper will commence with an analysis of certain detail in Woolf’s autobiographical work “A Sketch of the Past” and then define what I see as her extension of Bergson’s theory of memory. This will then enable me to discuss her method of writing the subject as a political ficto-performative subject in her novelistic practice.

Autobiographical Writings

As mentioned above, Woolf’s ability to fictionalize memory as perception seems to be developed from, and to begin with, a conceptual understanding of the memory of her mother. The following analysis of three brief moments from Woolf’s autobiographical work “A Sketch of the Past” should help us to begin to understand this concept.

*I begin: the first memory. This was of red and purple flowers on a black background – my mother’s dress; and she was either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close; and can still see purple and red and blue, I think, against the black; they must have been anemones, I suppose.*⁵

Certainly there she was, in the very centre of that great Cathedral space which was childhood; there she was from the very first. My first memory is of her lap; the scratch of some beads on her dress

comes back to me as I pressed my cheek against it. Then I see her in her white dressing gown on the balcony; and the passion flower with the purple star on its petals. Her voice is still faintly in my ears – decided quick; and in particular the little drops with which laugh ended – three diminishing ahs ... ‘Ah-ah-ah ...’ I sometimes end a laugh that way myself. And I see her hands, like Adrian’s, with the very individual square-tipped finger, each finger with a waist to it, and the nail broadening out. (My own are the same size all the way, so that I can slip a ring over my thumb.) She had three rings; a diamond ring, an emerald ring, and an opal ring. ...⁶

Also I hear the tinkle of her bracelets, made of twisted silver... I do not think that I separated her face from that general being; or from her whole body.⁷

I want to argue that the clothes and, in particular, the fabric of her mother’s clothes in these quotations, play a role in conveying the childhood memory. It is important to note the emphasis upon the fact that it is “the first memory,” for Woolf was forever striving to achieve that first memory as far back as possible before adulthood and experience of life diluted and inhibited her feelings. In the first quote it is the memory of proximity with her mother; she is “sitting on her lap.” What is interesting about this piece is the way it plays with the visual in the cinematic sense, initially, to exhibit visual closeness. The filmic type of close-up of the flowers on the dress sets up a myopic focus so that there is a nearness that is both emotional and physical. The colours on the dress produce a certain painterly effect and rhythm of the body – “red and purple.” Next, the blackness of the background of the flowers on the dress provides a void so that there is the feeling of being alone with the flowers, that is, immersed in the rhythm and separate from the rest of the world. The mother is her world. These flowers then procure a virtual life in the present when in retrospect the child subject proposes that these flowers must have been anemones. They become real flowers so that the olfactory comes into play; we smell the perfume of the flowers because we are as if so near. In consequence, the perfume of the flowers is then super-imposed upon the mother and becomes as if the mother’s perfume. And as part of the dress, the perfume and flowers cause the dress (to which she is close) to be the mother. That is, there is a confluence between her body and dress. The activation of the proximal sense between mother and child is juxtaposed against the indefinite sense of place: “she was either in a train or in an omnibus,” so that emphasis is of being on her lap. Even the fact of the anemones is not absolutely clear if we take into account the concluding adjunct of “I suppose.” The indefiniteness of de-

scription could be regarded as a painterly blurring type of Post-Impressionistic effect, but it should not be left at the aesthetic level of interpretation. Part of the reason is that the inexactness of vision produces a corporeality of indefiniteness that, for Woolf, provided the impetus for the production of ficto-performative subjects, as will be shown in due course.

The second quotation is once again about “first memory” and mediated in terms of the aesthetics of the fragmented dream space, or cinematic montage, while maintaining an emphasis on proximity between mother and child, both near and far. The montage shifts between close-up and long shots putting emphasis, once again, upon the proximity that is both emotional as well as physical. Even the long shot of the dressing-gown implies an intimate knowledge of the tactile feeling of the cloth due to the understanding produced in the following close-up. While the mother is described as “the centre of that great Cathedral space of childhood,” as if both physically as well as spiritually towering over the child, it is not the verbal that directly confirms presence. Rather, it is the visual image of the Madonna and child (created through the verbal) that conveys emotion, and a certain awesome spirituality out of a visual painterly aspect. However, I argue that it is the cloth of the dressing-gown that summons the child to become enfolded so there is a fluid type of merging, between child, mother and cloth.

Next, it is the beads on the dress that not only cause the felt, tactile, presence of the mother but simultaneously dispel the spiritual myth. As displeasure, the scratch of the beads is as if a reprimand from the mother – “the scratch of some beads on her dress comes back to me as I pressed my cheek against it.” The mother is now a human mother as opposed to a mythical figure in that she is denied spiritual “perfection.” Instead, she reprimands the child, causing pain, which contritely, reinforces the recollected closeness. Similarly, while the vision of the mother “in her white dressing-gown on the balcony” depicts a certain ethereal presence, it is the following close-up of “the passion flower with the purple star on its petals” that refocuses the mother as bodily rhythm. Her presence is confirmed by the recalled laughter which is then superimposed upon a self as if it is *her* laughter now or at least an inherited laughter. The comparison of the hands is pertinent, that is, between Adrian, the mother and the self, But it should be stressed that it is the jewellery that not only enables presence but, far more importantly, it enables the “other’s” hand to feel like her own. There is a merging of selves, a linking caused by the rings that once again produce the feeling of putting on the rings while recalling the other hands. “And I see her hands, like Adrian’s, with the very individual square-tipped finger, each finger with a waist to it, and the nail broadening out. (My own are the same

size all the way, so that I can slip a ring over my thumb.) She had three rings; a diamond ring, an emerald ring, and an opal ring.”

In the third quote, the tinkling sound of her mother’s bracelets is very much *her* sound as was her laughter. She has a general being that is a merging of bracelets, face and whole body. Yet it is the fact that they are made of twisted silver that gives the impression of the child twisting the bracelets on the mother’s arm; or her own arm. It is a strong tactile and performative image.

*Also I hear the tinkle of her bracelets, made of twisted silver... I do not think that I separated her face from that general being; or from her whole body.*⁸

There is a persistent activation of multiple senses – visual, auditory, olfactory, tactile – in Woolf’s autobiographical work and I am interested in how she reworks this method in her fiction. I shall argue, as stated earlier, that Woolf creates the subject via clothes and textiles due to her understanding of the confluence of clothes and the body; and that she includes her own experiential ficto-autobiographical memory. In other words, I maintain that Woolf fictionalizes memory as perception and, in particular the intensely emotional memory of her mother in order to create the subject. It will be productive now to define some understanding of Woolf’s philosophy of memory.

Memory: Beyond Bergson

With regard to memory, Woolf is most often read as a Bergsonian or follower of Proust. While she did perhaps work with some ideas that were similar to that of Bergson’s, it is a mistake to regard her merely as a Bergsonian.⁹ The main difference is that she worked with recollected memory in the manner of childhood feelings and sensations and it is in this respect that she is considered to be Proustian. However, it seems that Woolf extends the aims of Proust to include the political. While Proust is famous for recalling the sensation of childhood, such as in the well-known *petite madeleine* episode,¹⁰ Woolf recovers childhood feelings and fictionalizes (re-works) them so as to mediate certain sensations that create the subject as a politics of the body in writing. Her achievements in this regard are complex and partly to do with an understanding of writing itself but also with the way she comprehends memory; and in many ways an extension of Bergson’s ideas on memory as well as Proustian memory. Let us begin with the thoughts of Bergson that are relevant.

Bergson proposes that there are three aspects of memory: pure mem-

ory, memory-image, and perception. He posits that pure memory and memory-images are realized from the Perception of the present.

Whenever we are trying to recover a recollection, to call up some period of our history, we become conscious of an act *sui generis* by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past – a work of adjustment, something like the focussing of a camera. But our recollection still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual; and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on colour, it tends to imitate perception. But it remains attached to the past by its deepest roots.¹¹

Virginia Woolf had a keen interest in cinema¹² and we can see that she works with traits of the cinema in her writing such as, for instance, close-ups enable things to “come into view” and imitate perception. Yet, it is in the previous sentence, where Bergson says that we “prepare ourselves to see it by appropriating the right attitude,” that we begin to see how Woolf differs. It seems there are two main differences between Woolf and Bergson. The first is that the adopted appropriate attitude, for Woolf, is specific and one of childhood feelings and sensations. So far we have only seen this childhood attitude in relation to the memory of her mother. I now want to work towards arguing that in her fictional writing, that is, in the presentation of subjects, she also applies a similar attitude of childhood in order to create the uninhibited closeness which children so often live in relation to others. The second difference is related to the first in that Woolf does indeed appropriate the Proustian attitude of the recollection of a broad range of childhood sensations, whereas Bergson seems to want to put the main emphasis upon the visual. For instance, Bergson stresses the visual focusing in the latter part of the above quote. “Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual; and as its outlines become more distinct and its surface takes on colour, it tends to imitate perception.” (Woolf does not rely merely on the visual but works with multiple senses.) This is in fact partly the reason that Bergson then argues for the impossibility of pure memory because we are inclined to adopt a memory-image that in effect denies or obliterates pure memory because of perception.

If it is the remembered image that we are considering, we are bidden to take it already made, realized in a weak perception, and to shut our eyes to the pure memory which this image has progressively de-

veloped. In the rivalry which associationism thus sets up between the stable and the unstable, perception is bound to expel the memory-image, and the memory-image to expel pure memory. And thus the pure memory disappears altogether.¹³

A memory-image does indeed expel pure memory because it obliterates, or at least works instead of pure memory, as in representation, and thus causing a barrier between the past and present. Bergson states that “To *picture* is not to *remember*.”¹⁴ And memory-image type of writing was, of course, part of the aesthetics of realism. As a modernist, Woolf aims rather, to present the subject as one who *feels* and, although she does produce images, they are not reliant on the visual as in direct delineation and nor are they reliant on the verbal, albeit through the verbal. Thus the type of perception now differs. Bergson argues that we cannot know the past unless we put ourselves in it (which, of course, we cannot do in any literal sense) but, as we have seen, Woolf manages to re-create the *feeling* of being in the past.

Yet, with regard to writing the body as movement, Woolf does follow Bergson, to a certain extent, in the way he understands the present and indeed past to be a determination of a future.

[W]hat I call “my present” has one foot in my past and another in my future ... next, because this moment is impending over the future: it is to the future that I am tending. ... The psychological state, then, that I call my “present,” must be both a perception of the immediate past and a determination of the immediate future ... my present consists in a joint system of sensations and movements. ... my present consists in the consciousness that I have of my body.¹⁵

Woolf’s difference, however, is fundamental because Bergson can only understand the body in the present. He does not realize that the body of the past can live by another means such as in writing.

My actual sensations occupy definite portions of the surface of my body; pure memory, on the other hand, interests no part of my body. No doubt, it will beget sensations as it materializes; but at that very moment it will cease to be a memory and pass into the state of a present thing, something actually lived.¹⁶

Bergson fails to realize that in pure memory the body cannot play a role.

The problem, or at least his difference, is that Bergson, unlike Woolf, is not referring to a specific type of language with the use of multiple senses to convey memory. Woolf does not tell all in terms of language but, rather, part of her strategy is to activate multiple senses – such as the visual, haptic, auditory and so on – via and through language to the extent that the

nonverbal dominates. Not only does she create a corporeal presence of her mother in her autobiographical writing (as demonstrated above) but, she also carries this through to her novelistic practice in that she fictionalizes memory as perception via the nonverbal and at times the non-visual. This type of writing differs because, by focussing on multiple senses, the language operates with what might be described as a certain “literary aphasia”¹⁷ in that it feels, it touches, it hears and so on, and develops an alterity¹⁸ of the subject. It is by no means an objective representation but instead, a very private and secret memory that cannot be created in ordinary everyday language. By working with the nonverbal she is able to achieve her aim of writing the body. While it is construed from the fictionalization of memory in perception, it is through the inclusion of the aesthetic dimensions of clothes and textiles that she writes the political. I want to argue now that for Woolf there is a domination of the tactile. In this regard, let us now look a little more at the importance of the tactile in memory in order to understand how memory becomes fictionalized/re-written as perception and produces the body.

Memory: The Tactile

My point now is that the tactile is very much to do with memory. Earlier in the paper, we discussed some of Woolf’s autobiographical writing. I now want to take a step further and define how she transforms her ability to write about the “closeness” of her mother into the creation of a selfhood and indeed other subjects. It is to do with her ability to fictionalize memory as perception, but the transformation has specificities of the tactile as well as complexities that will need unpacking. In terms of the subject and bodily closeness, Woolf works with the nonverbal with a specific emphasis upon the tactile. As Horst Ruthrof has argued in *The Body in Language*, when we go beyond ordinary syntax “we step into the sign systems of the body.”¹⁹ That is, when we work with other senses beyond the verbal and understand by a form of “perceptual or quasi-perceptual” fantasy which is inherently tactile, olfactory and so on: the corporeal signified is the “linguistic signifier activated by nonverbal signs.”²⁰ Woolf is profoundly aware of the remembered non-linguistic sensations of childhood.

I am hardly aware of myself, but only of sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength. Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong; or if not less strong less isolated, less complete.²¹

This is a very personal perspective on memory with a profundity of sensation and feeling. In a memory of St Ives, we can note, in particular, how Woolf stresses that it is not possible to describe (in language) the “rapture” and yet the sense of “rapture” is excessive.

The next memory – all these colour-and-sound memories hang together at St Ives – was much more robust; it was highly sensual. It was later. It still makes me feel warm; as if everything were ripe; humming; sunny; smelling so many smells at once; and all making a whole that even now makes me stop – as I stopped then going down to the beach; I stopped at the top to look down at the gardens. They were sunk beneath the road. The apples were on a level with one’s head. The gardens gave off a murmur of bees; the apples were red and gold; there were also pink flowers; and grey and silver leaves. The buzz, the croon, the smell, all seemed to press voluptuously against some membrane; not to burst it; but to hum round one such a complete rapture of pleasure that I stopped, smelt; looked. But again I cannot describe the rapture. It was rapture rather than ecstasy.²²

There is the emphasis on “colour and sound memories” that hang together, but what does this emphasis do but activate other senses such as the haptic, olfactory, proximal and tactile so that we understand that none operate on their own nor rely on the verbal for meaning. However, it is this lateral means of making meaning via a multitude of senses that accrues the dominance of the tactile and in turn seems to *be* the understanding of rapture. Notice how she stops to touch, as if it is to stop time, to form a repetition, a perpetuation, to install the feeling of rapture as tactile.

Next, I want to look at a couple of Woolf’s childhood memories of old women because I think that they exemplify how Woolf begins to develop the tactile sense of the subject. These are instances, where we can recognize a potential for the transition from memory per se towards the fictionalization or (re)writing memory as perception. The recollection of the first old woman is interesting for the way the writing works specifically with the non-verbal and texture in relation to clothes and the body.

The Queen’s Gate old woman was an elongated emaciated figure with a goat-like face, yellow and pockmarked. She sold nuts and boot-laces, I think ... She always sat, and wore a shawl and had to me a faint, obliterated, debased likeness to Granny; whose face was elongated too, but she wore a very soft shawl, like tapioca pudding, over her head, and it was fastened by an amethyst brooch set in pearls.²³

Understanding is in terms of texture here and causes the tactile to dominate. The “goat-like face” of the old woman that is “yellow and pock-marked” gives the impression that her face is almost furry and nubbled like a goat. The amethyst brooch is proximally very close with its detail of the pearls. But it is not so much that the brooch is seen as a cinematic close-up (although this does play a minor role) but, rather, it is the texture of the brooch with its smoothness of the pearls that becomes super-imposed upon the old woman’s face. There is, thus, a sense of childhood’s uninhibited rapture, as if she touches the face in awe and dispels the vision of what might be, from an adult’s point of view, an otherwise rather unattractive pockmarked face. The face then has an exquisite jewel-like texture. Next, and perhaps what is even more important, is the tactile softness of the shawl. While the reference to tapioca pudding may add the feeling of warmth and satiated comfort, it is the texture of softness that causes a certain yielding of response:²⁴ a certain humble relation between child and subject that is taken even further in the next excerpt. There is an induced performance of the subject by the child, who as such re-enacts the old woman’s spiderly gait, by the means of focusing upon the tactile sense of textures.

One more caricature comes into mind; though pity entered into this one. I am thinking of Justine Nonon. She was immensely old. Little hairs sprouted on her long bony chin. She was a hunchback; and walked like a spider, feeling her way with her long dry fingers from one chair to another. Most of the time she sat in the arm-chair beside the fire. I used to sit on her knee; and her knee jogged up and down; and she sang in hoarse cracked voice ‘Ron ron ron – et plon plon plon –’ and then her knee gave and I was tumbled onto the floor. She was French; she had been with the Thackerays. She only came to us on visits. She lived by herself at Shepherd’s Bush; and used to bring Adrian a glass jar of honey. I got the notion that she was extremely poor.²⁵

While it can be argued that the presence of this old woman is accrued via multiple nonverbal means such as rhythm, the auditory (in particular the intonation), the visual and so on, it is pertinent to argue that it is the tactile sense of texture that causes the intimacy. In other words, it is because the child-subject mimics the old woman (as a performance of the subject) that there is an inference of the chair as tactile. Note how she felt her way “with her long dry fingers from one chair to another.” Not only is it the texture of her skin but the texture of the cloth on the backs of the chairs that creates the child-like fun of enacting the spiderly gait. It is to do with the understood

bodily connection between subject and cloth that is the tactile response. However, I suggest that not only does Woolf create fictional subjects from memory per se but that she also creates the subject as a selfhood through the means of clothes. That is, she recalls the tactile *experience* or memory perception of clothes to produce a ficto-self as subject in writing.

Clothes and the Ficto-Performative Self

However, Woolf was not only able to develop a highly sensitive understanding of the feeling of wearing clothes but, also, she was well aware of the power and opportunities, or the potential detriment and shame, that clothes could give an individual. While others have discussed this diverse interest as a double consciousness,²⁶ I am interested in, and will focus on, the means in which Woolf produces the subject as a self via clothes. Thus, I am taking the idea of corporeality of the subject a step further to see how Woolf presents the self as a body consciousness. She sought to research the matter further and in a diary entry dated Thursday 14th May 1925 wrote:

But I must remember to write about my *clothes* next time I have an impulse to write. My love of clothes interests me profoundly; only it is not love; & what it is I must discover.²⁷

At times, she presents the subject by the way a subject feels wearing certain types of clothes so there is a corporeal feeling of being a subject as a self. Such a concept can be extended to say that the subject as a self is created by a performance, a consciousness, which is enhanced by clothes and textiles. In a diary entry dated Monday 27th April, 1925 we can observe her interest in different levels of consciousness.

But my present reflection is that people have any number of states of consciousness: &c. I should like to investigate the party consciousness, the frock consciousness &c.²⁸

Yet, she still works with memory. As opposed to being the memory of her mother recalled so as to produce a bodily closeness of an other subject, we now work towards understanding her means of creating a self as subject in writing. This is an intimate knowledge of a selfhood and thus a greater closeness than we have seen so far. Because we are dealing with feelings that we might consider to be of the specific, as well as non-specific, it is worthwhile running through some of the layers of consciousness to do with the wearing of clothes. Again, I shall first return to a "Sketch of the Past" where Woolf speaks of the shame that can be related to the wearing of certain clothes.

Vanessa and I were both what was called tomboys. ... Perhaps therefore to have been found looking in the glass would have been against our tomboy code. But I think that my feeling of shame went a great deal deeper. ... Everything to do with dress – to be fitted, to come into a room wearing a new dress – still frightens me; at least makes me shy, self-conscious uncomfortable. ... Yet femininity was very strong in our family. We were famous for our beauty – my mother's beauty, Stella's beauty, gave me as early as I can remember, pride and pleasure. What then gave me this feeling of shame, unless it were that I inherited some opposite instinct? My father was spartan.²⁹

The shame here is like a torment imposed upon the body and exemplifies the confluence between body and clothes in that, as is stated, shame is "everything to do with dress – to be fitted, to come into a room wearing a new dress" and so on. But what is of particular interest here is the way it gives the memory of the intimate feelings of the shame of the body. This shame has perhaps a causal history to do with the sexual abuse Woolf received as a child and more general "bourgeois Victorian taboos surrounding the body."³⁰ But we can also observe that she put such experience to work in her philosophy of the subject – as a fictionalization/re-working of memory as perception. The feelings of the subject are expressed in a non-verbal manner (and indeed via clothes) in that the fear and shame is described in terms of the tactile: to be fitted; to be touched. In addition the subject is not the one that looks but rather, the feeling of being observed is portrayed by movement of the body: "to come into a room" as if with lowered eyes. This excerpt from "A Sketch" can almost be regarded as a prototype of the short story "The New Dress" although as we shall see the nonverbal, theoretical aspect is extended. We have in this story the sense of a performance of what Hermione Lee has called a "secret self."³¹ There is a sense of being the subject that differs from being near other subjects such as was described in relation to Woolf's mother because there is access to her thoughts.

[O]h these men, oh these women were thinking – "What's Mabel wearing? What a fright she looks! What a hideous new dress!"

... But she dared not look in the glass. She could not face the whole horror – the pale yellow, idiotically old-fashioned silk dress with its long skirt and its high sleeves and its waist and all the things that looked so charming in the fashion book, but not on her, not among all these ordinary people. She felt like a dressmaker's dummy standing there, for young people to stick pins into.³²

It is not so much how she feels, but rather that her feelings are portrayed by nonverbal emotions and sensations. The visual delineation is limited in that she does not look (in the glass) nor is the fact that she is being looked at defined in a verbal manner. Instead, it is the tactile that produces the feeling of a self and once again it is the bodily aspect of language that gives meaning. There is the tactile feeling of wearing the silk dress, which could otherwise be sensual if the sensuality was not diminished by the lack of power which is signified as above by the lowering of the eyes that merely notices the “long skirt.” The painful situation is then metaphorically summarised by the pins that are stuck into her as if she were a dressmaker’s dummy. In other words, it is the feeling of immobility that is so disempowering and this immobility and shame is caused by the particular dress. However, Woolf was, of course, not writing about the disempowerment of women but, rather, the empowerment of women as subjects and this example, we might say, highlights the important link between clothes and the body.

In a manner similar to how Flugel was interested in how clothes could empower the body, Woolf also used clothing to enable the subject to perform in an empowering manner. According to Flugel, “clothing, by adding to the apparent size of the body in one way or another, gives us an increased sense of power, a sense of extension of our bodily self – ultimately by enabling us to fill more space.”³³ Whereas in the previous example Woolf’s subject has limited space and little or no extension of the body (as in the appropriation of further bodily space with clothes), at other times she mobilizes the body and extends space with the use of clothes. Watch how not only is space made for Ottoline in the diary entry here dated Friday 13th February, 1920 – “I must spare a phrase [space]” – but also how the colour of the dress dominates the room; it is brought close by the tactile sense of the silk. “I must spare a phrase for the sealing wax green of Ottoline’s dress. This bright silk stood out over genuine crinoline. She did control the room on account of it.”³⁴ This diary entry is perhaps a memory ripe for Woolf to fictionalize as perception but there is often an overlap between Woolf’s fictional writing and non-fiction. It is as if she practiced her fiction in the diaries. The difference in the diary entry here, for instance, is that she tells us that Ottoline controlled the room on account of the dress whereas in the fictional texts the meaning is more likely to be conveyed via the non-verbal such as in the next excerpt from “The New Dress.”

Miss Milan’s little workroom was really terribly hot, stuffy, sordid. It smelt of clothes and cabbage cooking; and yet when Miss Milan put the glass in her hand, and she looked at herself with the dress on, finished, an extraordinary bliss shot through her heart. Suffused with

light, she sprang into existence.³⁵

Boredom and the unpleasantness of the situation (being fitted for clothes as mentioned earlier as well as the smell of cabbage cooking) precede the delight of the empowered performance of the subject as she looks in the mirror when the dress is finished. However, it is the fact that she becomes mobile as well as that she extends her space that it is empowering. “[A]n extraordinary bliss shot through her heart. Suffused with light she sprang into existence.”³⁶ The created energy is created by the tactile feel of the dress and brings awareness and connectedness of the body. The body is the dress. The dress is movement: the mobile body is performativity due to the confluence of dress and body. Woolf works with the confluence of body and clothes to fictionalize memory and experience of sensation as perception. As we have seen in the last quote from “A Sketch of the Past,” it is the memory of the feeling of lightness of body and movement that certain clothes give, as opposed to the inflicted humiliation by others. Note how in the concluding lines of the story “The New Dress” the movement and fluid swirl of cloth create the feeling of not only presence but in addition the feeling of almost being the subject who wraps herself, round and round in the cloak.

“Lies, lies, lies!” she said to herself, going downstairs, and “Right in the saucer!” she said to herself as he thanked Mrs Barnet for helping her and wrapped herself, round and round and round, in the Chinese cloak she had worn these twenty years.³⁷

There is the creation of selfhood, which is tactile and cocoon-like but, also with the sensation of a type of unfolding free movement.

Thus it can be seen that Virginia Woolf’s interest in clothes and textiles and childhood memory are entwined in her work. Not only does she understand the confluence between body and clothes, but she is able to fictionalize memory as perception. It seems that she has developed this method of writing the subject from her autobiographical writings, in particular those involving the memory of her mother. Woolf’s understanding of memory, then, goes beyond Bergson’s theory to include multiple nonverbal senses, through the verbal, with an emphasis on the tactile. By implementing this method in her novelistic practice she is able to create the ficto-performative subject.

NOTES

- ¹ I am disrupting the notion that Woolf wrote for Vogue purely for financial reasons, suggesting that it was perhaps in addition an interest and gave impetus for and furthered her politico-creative writing practice.
- ² I shall be making no clear boundaries between “clothes and textiles” and will include jewellery in this category.
- ³ J.C. Flugel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1971), p. 36.
- ⁴ Flugel, *Psychology*, p. 15.
- ⁵ Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”, *Moments of Being* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1985), p. 64.
- ⁶ Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 81.
- ⁷ Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 82.
- ⁸ Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 82.
- ⁹ We cannot be sure that Woolf did actually read Bergson, but this is not my concern. Rather, I am interested in the similarity of some of her ideas on memory. However, we do know that Proust read Bergson and that Woolf did read Proust, so the influence may have been indirect.
- ¹⁰ See Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past: 1*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1989), pp. 48-51, where the subject recalls the childhood memory of the taste of the “petites madeleines” given to him by his mother.
- ¹¹ Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 171.
- ¹² See for instance, Virginia Woolf’s essay, “The Cinema”, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Day Life* (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1993); see also my paper on Woolf and the cinema, Carolyn Abbs, “Virginia Woolf and Gilles Deleuze: Cinematic emotion and the Mobile Subject”, *Interactive Media: E-Journal of the National Academy of Screen and Sound*, 1 (2005), Murdoch University, date of access: 28.3.05, http://wwwmcc.murdoch.edu.au/nass/nass_current_issue.htm; and, see many instances in Woolf’s diaries.
- ¹³ Bergson, *Matter*, p.172.
- ¹⁴ Bergson, *Matter*, pp. 173-4.
- ¹⁵ Bergson, *Matter*, p. 177.
- ¹⁶ Bergson, *Matter*, p. 179.
- ¹⁷ I am not using the term “literary aphasia” in any medical or clinical sense but as a means of referring to a disruption of the linguistic. I am suggesting that, when Virginia Woolf works with multiple senses in writing to create the visual, auditory, haptic and so on, she operates with a form of “literary aphasia” and disrupts the

ordinary (prose) use of language so that it leans towards “poetic” language. For further explanation of this type of language see Roman Jakobson, “On the Relation between Visual and Auditory Signs”, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2 (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 345-59; Jakobson, *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971). And, in particular, Roman Jakobson, “The Metaphoric and Metonymic Poles”, *Modern Criticism and Theory: A Reader*, ed. D. Lodge (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 57-61, for a discussion on clinical aphasia in children where he argues that the metaphoric pole links to poetic language. From this perspective, “literary aphasia” is poetic and linguistic.

¹⁸ By the use of the term “alterity” here I am merely referring to the “otherness” of the subject in that the subject’s *feelings* are understood as if from her point of view.

¹⁹ Horst Ruthrof, *The Body in Language* (London: Cassell, 2000), p. 99.

²⁰ Ruthrof, *The Body*, p.103.

²¹ Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 67.

²² Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 66.

²³ Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 75.

²⁴ Gail Jones writes of softness in relation to textiles, stating that the art critic Max Kosloff in an essay entitled “The Poetics of Softness” (although writing about sculpture) “sought to examine how engagement with yielding substance evokes a particular field of sensibility and response. Softness, he suggests, ‘Mimes a kind of surrender to the natural condition that pulls bodies down.’ In the best sense, then, the soft edges yielding, pressure, gravity, even fatigue; that is to say it corresponds in certain hypothetical ways to haptic intuitions – to the flexible, the organic, the elastic, the impressionable, and most of all, to the depredation of time. This might suggest why works of cloth, ‘miming surrender,’ so often suggest pathos and sentimentality. The connection is a subtle one. ... It also connects, albeit obliquely, tropes of mortality, artifice and the precariousness of selfhood.” See Gail Jones, “Four Meditations on the Poetics of Cloth”, *From Within: Jane Whiteley Works in Cloth* (Fremantle, Western Australia: Art on the Move, 1999), pp. 7-8.

²⁵ Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 74.

²⁶ See Lisa Cohen, “Frock Consciousness: Virginia Woolf, the Open Secret, and the Language of Fashion”, *Fashion Theory*, 3.2 (1999), pp. 149-74; and Molly Hite, “Virginia Woolf’s Two Bodies”, *Genders* 31 (2000), pp. 1-22.

²⁷ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Three: 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego Harcourt Brace, 1980), p. 21.

²⁸ Woolf, *Diary*, vol. 3, p. 12.

²⁹ Woolf, “A Sketch”, p. 68.

³⁰ Sidonie Smith, *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body: Women’s Autobiographical Practices in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1993), p. 89.

³¹ I am referring here to the introductory theme of Hermione Lee’s edited book of short stories *The Secret Self: A Century of Short Stories by Women* (London: Phoenix Giants, 1995).

³² Virginia Woolf, “The New Dress”, *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*,

ed. Susan Dick (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1989), pp. 171-2.

³³ Flugel, *Psychology*, p. 34.

³⁴ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume Two: 1920-1924*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1980), pp. 19-20.

³⁵ Woolf, "New Dress", p. 172.

³⁶ Woolf, "New Dress", p.172.

³⁷ Woolf, "New Dress", p. 177.