

THREE GUINEAS: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S POETICS OF COMMUNITY

CHANTAL DELOURME

Université de Paris Ouest Nanterre

1. The point of departure of this contribution is the impression that the critical reception of Virginia Woolf's way of engaging the question of politics, has long been the consequence of a misunderstanding: ranging from the Leavises' spiteful essays, Quentin Bell's amused comments on his aunt's political non-discernment to John Carey's criticism of social prejudice, to mention but a few. When focusing on the essay *Three Guineas*, this misunderstanding took the form of a reversal whereby Virginia Woolf's notion of the outsiders' society was turned into different charges against her: that of non-commitment based on the list of "the numerous complaints about organizations she would rather not join¹"; that of social prejudice and ingrained snobbishness (as expressed in the unease of her association with the Women's Cooperative Guild). The issue might even well be one of the reasons which prompted the writing of *Three Guineas* since Hermione Lee suggests that it was written as a response to fierce criticisms from Windham Lewis who had reduced her work to "the security of the private mind²".

2. However, recent reappraisals of the issue prove how fecund a misunderstanding can be: I am thinking of such studies as Christine Froula's re-historicizing the modernist moment and its questioning of civilisation within the Enlightenment project³ or Jessica Berman's seeing in the modernist moment and its cosmopolitanism an elaboration of community akin to postmodern and mobile, fluid apprehensions of it⁴.

3. I would suggest that this misunderstanding results from an unidentified displacement. Indeed in *Three Guineas*, or in her last novel *Between the Acts*, Woolf's approach of politics does not fall into the realm of the different forms of governing men; it may even appear blind to some of its current issues such as when Nazi dictatorship is reduced to the tyranny of an "I" which is answered by the old cry of misery "Ay, ay, ay, ay" and of which she says "it is not a new cry, it is a

1 N. Rosenfeld, *Outsiders Together*, 155.

2 H. Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 658.

3 C. Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant garde: War, Civilization, Modernity*.

4 J. Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*.

very old cry⁵”, that of tyranny⁶. Nor is it attached to the means implemented to regulate the bonds between individuals and a collectivity, but to an exploration of the very conditions of a community that would want to attain the ancient political goal: that which is defined by Aristotle as the pursuit of the happiness to live together. I would go one step further to identify more thoroughly the very nature of the displacement: she explores in this essay the very conditions for community, which consubstantially implies that it breaks away from — or Jean-Luc Nancy would say “interrupts” — its myth (the myth of community and myth as community).

4. Such an exploration is double faced and in that respect intricately enmeshed with her mode of vision in her novels where forms of power are not scrutinized from the perspective of government or even justice but from the concept of life as potential, as “puissance”: on the one hand it implies the anatomy of the mortifying forms of power within patriarchal society, their material, bodily and spiritual cost (if we give this term its lay, profane acceptance) and on the other hand a suspicion as regards forms of political communities, their mythical potentials when they come together into a body. To such a point that the essay does not try to provide a new “model” of community, contrary to what Jessica Berman suggests when she speaks of “the model of community⁷” to be found in Virginia Woolf’s writing. My contention is that the essay probes into the condition of community and, as writing, is a praxis of this condition in the form of resistance to its “models” and definitely not as model. The very tentative form of the “essay”, deliberately elaborated through a rhetoric of trials and errors and a weaving of voices, practises another way of thinking of community, not as a utopia to be effected at a later stage, but as the endless renewing of its condition. This is why I chose to give this paper the title of “Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*: a poetics of community”, because just as the essay is an ever-deferred answer, community is an ever-deferred *poïen*.

5. I would even go further by saying that questioning the sense of community in this manner makes of her essay, an historic one. That sense of an historic moment may be found within the text under different guises. First, as Christine Froula already noted⁸, in the very opening lines when Virginia Woolf writes both in jest and in earnest that the letter is perhaps “unique in the history of human correspondence” (101). It is also to be traced in the historiographic dimension of the essay

5 V. Woolf, *Three Guineas*, 239.

6 Dictatorship is approached through the ancient patriarchal figure of “tyranny”. What is left unidentified is what with the benefit of hindsight, and through the illuminating studies of Hannah Arendt, we have come to grasp as the differences between tyranny and totalitarianism.

7 J. Berman, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism*, 5.

8 C. Froula, *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant garde*, 259.

particularly in its choice of epoch-making dates: thus the historic date of emancipation for Virginia Woolf is not the year when women were given the right to vote, not the year of their actual political expression through the vote, but their economic, physical and even more spiritual emancipation from the home, from the domestic scene through their being given access to professions. (I will later return to what this might imply). I would like to suggest that the “historic” dimension of the essay also derives from its being the expression of an epistemological moment which Jean-Luc Nancy in his work on *The Inoperative Community* calls the “interruption of myth”. At the very moment when Nazism founds itself on the folding back of history onto nature through myth, discrete voices (in the sense of subdued and separate), from different angles, began to question the myth of community, and its mythical forms.

6. I am fully aware of the difference in context between the different works I thus engage in a dialogue, yet through her own critical devices, her archaeology of discourses in the Foucauldian sense⁹, her deliberate transfer of the “sacred” into the profane, in a context of a menacing war when the return to mythical forms of identification are more than pregnant, she keeps probing into the mythical temptations hovering over the cradle of humanity. Though she is not the only one to have reacted to the dangerous mythologizing of propaganda¹⁰, she is perhaps the one who has most extended the fields under the sway of mythological inscriptions of community: family, home, church, nation, art, culture¹¹.

7. I would also suggest that the singularity of her poetical reading of the object “community” is certainly not indebted to her being “as a woman temperamentally an individualist¹²” as Carolyn Higginson writes, but perhaps also less indebted to her mode of engagement in the political debates of her age than to her own practise and experience of writing and creation. Her literary idiom tracing multiplicity, processes, becomings, in-finition, informs her vision of community as process and not as body. Her vision of political emancipation is coexistent with a sharing of the sensible (and this is perhaps where the difference of emphasis from her husband Leonard Woolf’s lies). I will try to show how Jacques Rancière’s concepts of “the distribution of the sensible” and Virginia Woolf’s writing of the sensible in the essay may enlighten each other. This is yet another reason why I have chosen the word “poetics” as my title. Poetics in different senses: as Jacques Rancière

9 Such an archeological dimension is materialized by the scrap book in which she collects material for her essay.

10 Leonard Woolf also expressed his distrust of patriotism, his belief in cooperation rather than power politics. See L. Woolf, *War for Peace*, 200-201.

11 This insight of hers introduces yet another dividing line between Modernist authors.

12 C. Higginson, *The Concept of Civilisation in the Works of Leonard and Virginia Woolf*.

defines it when he says that it is a mode of discourse aware of its own conditions of production, but also because of the root *poïen* as defining within the process of writing and of living an auto-poietic process, a self-creative process as a mode of being and becoming. This reading will lead me to counter arguments whereby Virginia Woolf's (and her husband's late writings) would be tempted "by a mystifying nostalgia for pre-lapsarian innocence" implying that "the garden is never far from either Woolf's mind¹³" as suggested in the study *Outsiders Together* by Natania Rosenfeld.

The anatomy of banishment

8. What makes Virginia Woolf's reading of the social and political community original is her displacing the paradigm of class structures which is the prevailing political paradigm of her age, and its fracture lines, in favour of patriarchy: a displacement which is in no way a denial of the former since she admits the transformation of birth contingency into class law — "though birth is mixed, classes still remain fixed" (102), she writes in the first pages. The common body of a class (the upper middle class) may cohere *mores* and discourse and shape "bodies and minds" into a class ethos. Yet her point is that this "commonality" of class ethos is but a surface that will prove to be the stifling cement of gentility and decency masking invisible fault lines and domestic oppression. Her rhetoric is thus not hegemonic: there is no such thing as one type of difference, which would subject discourse to one type of order, but the collective body is affected by multiple, shifting dividing lines, which is also the only way to not transform the concept of difference into a dogma, a didactic instrument for those lecturing voices which Virginia Woolf detected so aptly under so many forms of expressions.

9. When anatomizing the question of "goods and parts" within the community and giving voice to the part and role of those who are not reckoned with (what Jacques Rancière calls the share of those who have no part) her reading unveils less a historical process than a structure. The structure I would say she exposes is a paradoxical structure of "exclusion within": a political structure of what modern "political" philosophers Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben have exposed as the structure of banishment. The paradox inherent to the predicament of banishment is that it does not consist in an exclusion from the domain of the law but that the banished individual remains under the province of the law even as he is banished, abandoned to its deadly power, excluded from its rights. The division between the "goods and shares" (goods, wealth, property, education, relations)

13 N. Rosenfeld, *Outsiders Together*, 155-181.

is not a division between those who “have” and those who “haven’t” but between those whose exclusion is the very foundation of the order in power and those in power. Arthur’s education Fund is the banning of women from education as the very condition of patriarchal order. Virginia Woolf pays attention to all the subtle forms of dispossession within; thus the exercise of educated women’s influence at home is but a form of narcissistic servitude both for men who would not identify it as dependence because it would weaken their power and servitude for women who would thereby prostitute their souls. Licence is granted as long as it confined within a place under control and the paradox of the long struggle for “franchise” is that it was eventually granted through the use of “force” and participation in the war effort, not through a dispute expressing the yearning for another form of the common.

10. By exposing this invisible structure of barring as banning (“debarred from the right to earn a living”¹¹⁵) affecting their status as workers as well as women, the essay brings to light a political symptom in the prevailing symbolic order, if we bear in mind the idea that a symptom is the surface expression of an inner structure which is both central and excluded within. We cannot but be struck by the inverted mirror effect between Freud’s unveiling of symptoms of feminine hysteria as bringing about a major epistemological crisis and Virginia Woolf’s unveiling of the suppressed structure at the core of the political order of her age.
11. But there is something even more specific to her critical thrust: “being barred” names the rule of politics and power structures at the expense of forms of life, modes of living. The political symptom is this dissociation between the rules of the *polis* and “living”, the exclusion within not of happiness but of “living” as “puissance” (that is both potential and quickening). Hence the emphasis in her semiological study of the expressions of patriarchal power on fetishist forms, stone petrifying and congealing images stifling potentializing forces of living: the crowding of monuments of power, the fetishist symbols encouraging a sort of magic thinking, perpetrating the law of the selfsame. She denounces the appropriation of the legal and symbolic codes not as the condition of the renewal of time and of the possible but as satisfying denying and mortifying drives performed by the unary mythical bodies of processions, ceremonies. She has an ear and an eye for everything that appropriates the body to naturalize the performance of meaning, that is to shape it into a myth. The symbolic function as she reads it is in the wake of the post-Edwardian sophisticated shell whereby the accretion of symbols exposes the value of a power-preserving order at the expense of what the exercise of the law is supposed to do as the guarantee of forces, energies, renewals. A fossilized shell inhabited by self-destructive death drives.

Interrupting myth

12. I would like to call attention to the ways in which Virginia Woolf in her own manner “interrupts myth”, the myth of community and the community of myth. First by the insistent reminders of the contingency of birth (“birth is mixed” 102) and of the constructedness of social identities which makes it impossible for the gesture of community to anchor itself in a founding moment. Second, even if some arguments are allured by essentialization¹⁴, when she both attributes the will for power and aggressiveness to “man’s habit, not the woman’s” (104)¹⁵, she is however also aware that the political question of the relation to community is not an outer worldly one but finds one of its roots in the way the psyche testifies to the drama of human nature. She thus relocates the ethical question of responsibility within the self, in its individual private negotiation with others, which makes of community a question of interrelations rather than of place.
13. Woolf also dismantles the rhetoric of all the objects that might serve as “opus”, works or tasks legitimizing and thus binding and bounding the mythical community: nation, church, home, patriotism, family, culture. Objects which are idealized into the creation of a “communion-we”. She does so with the sole means of the rhetorical instruments she has at hand: exposing them as discourse, as signifying constructions, mimicking them through quotations and pseudo-authoritarian introductions, opposing them to alternative views, parroting them through ironical diction: that is, into the monological mythical discourse, she introduces the wedge of an inner difference (whether it be outer or inner as in the case of irony) that resists the mythical sleight of hand that consists in transforming the sharing of a symbolization into a pseudo naturalization of the object supposedly sealing the community together. It is obviously the rhetoric more than the content that motivates her selection of quotes: they are the text of mythological discourse the workings of which Roland Barthes has deconstructed in his essay “What is a Myth Today?”¹⁶ written in 1956: the conversion of “biography” into hackneyed celebration of heroism, the rhetoric of presentification masking the tautology: “such a magnificent regiment! Such men! Such horses!” (105), the revelation of a destiny which is to be effected, of an essence which is to be manifested.
14. Virginia Woolf restores the discourses that have been stolen away by the mythological discourse; she challenges the appropriation of such concepts as “liberty” and “justice” by myth, their being abusively enlisted as self-obvious notions to celebrate the nation, the soil. Their

14 A perspective which might be mediated by her personal experience of abuse at home

15 It is however to be noted that she revises it when saying “whether innate or accidental”(104).

16 R. Barthes, “Qu’est-ce qu’un mythe aujourd’hui ?”

becoming a “home” concept is a form of linguistic embezzlement of a self-legitimizing strategy which prevents them from remaining polemical, debatable, an object of a necessary disagreement, “mis-cord”. She thus radically dissociates the concept of freedom from the idea of unreflected belonging and within-ness, by recalling that there is always one who is left out¹⁷ or excluded within. Through her quotations, she also leaves traces of the paranoid “we” that inevitably poses “they” as the enemy without or within. “It is true that in our midst there are many enemies of liberty”, the Lord Chief Justice of England writes (107) before celebrating “our” England.

15. She subjects the myth of home to exposure through similar strategies: she constantly challenges the meaning of home and the sense of belonging and of place, positions supposedly fostered by it. Not only does she expose the servitude of “home” as “daughter”, by which the servitude of a profession is a blessing (114) but sometimes, with the energy of laughter, she resemiotizes its meaning when she makes of the art of matching and married bliss (“the art of choosing the human being with whom to live life successfully” 104) not the inscription of a place but a privileged ground for the study of psyche and thereby turns it into a political and ethical site. She denounces the delusions of power at home: the imaginary fictions and the ignored dependencies that on the part of men as well as women sustain a structure of dispossession. She thus shatters the myth of home by pointing out that there is an outside to it, that its integrity and its unity is but a fiction for the preservation of inside power. But not only is there one outside to it, there are rather different outsides: the outside of those who are given no voice, but also that internal outside that she pinpoints when she deliberately uses the pronoun “we” to name that deadly form of power within, that “egg” of fascism that lies within the collective “ego” of any society. There is no such thing as the sealed up within-ness of home.

16. The interruption of myth also proceeds from an unrelenting questioning of the “sacred” and a just as wilful re-appropriation of its sense. Christine Froula has paid attention to this motif as related to the scapegoating process; I would like to draw attention to Virginia Woolf’s profaning strategies and to what is at stake, from the perspective of community. The predicate “sacred” is most of the time ironically used to refer to the “chalk-marking”, “the penning” of buildings, gates (“the sacred edifices” 104) materializing exclusion and debarring processes; if the verb “sacrare” refers to the “taking away of things from the sphere of human law¹⁸”, its ironical use adds to the denunciation of a violence within human laws, a legitimized sacrificial spoliation. She thus revives

17 The general outcry against her ingratitude showed she had touched on a soft spot when questioning that commonality of belonging attached to the body of the “nation”.

18 My translation from G. Agamben, *Profanations*: “la sortie des choses de la sphère de droit humain”, 95.

the ambiguity of the word “sacer” which paradoxically both designates what is dedicated to the Gods but also what is cursed and excluded from the community.

17. The use of the word “sacer” as both the debarred “sacred” space or status and as the curse of “education of the private house” is highly significant in Virginia Woolf’s rhetoric and given full weight through the insistent signifier “daughters”. The repeated use of the determiner “its” (“the private house and its cruelty, its hypocrisy, its immorality, its inanity” 137) bears the inflexion of a mortifying reification which is at the very heart of the organic community and claims its due of spiritual or psychic deaths often internalized by women’s surrender¹⁹. The binary of war and peace is thus deconstructed through a reading of forms of life, lethal ones and potentializing ones. The author uses “the sacred” to expose the reversal of the blessing of the inclusion for the elect into a curse of petrified structures of power, transforms the magical or “mystic” value of symbols and rites (procession, pageants, ceremonies, rituals) into fossilized law-preserving displays, “haunting” even those who think they master them (125). She thus exposes the mis-enlistment of the “sacred” into the service of vested interests and controlling power. To such an extent that the mis-appropriation of the term is exposed as clinically perverse, when it amounts to a recognition *as* denial, a matter involving psychic life and death: “it was the woman, the human being whose sex made it her sacred duty to sacrifice herself to the father” (232).
18. It is therefore no wonder that women’s bodies are at the very heart of this transformation of “sacred” into “sacer”, when controlled as “sacred” objects of desire by patriarchy’s power structures within the “private house” to be excluded as subjects of desire within the public office. What is at stake is the regulation of the “place” for the erotic body in patriarchal spaces and a redefinition of its experience and of the meaning “sacred” in demotic ones. The circulation of physical and erotic images denounces the collusion between forms of desire and abusive power investing language or such a sign as “miss”: “such is the smell of it, so rank does it stink in the nostrils of Whitehall” (150). The battling ground is in the very words, in their fantasmatical charges as Eros and power. Semes seem to be contaminating each other through echoes or polysemy: “order” and “odour” overlap, “rank” is the cornerstone of patriarchy and of its home economics and would be the offensive quality of a smell that challenges it? (150)
19. Virginia Woolf’s rhetoric consists in systematically profaning the use of the term, if

19 Such as the cost of body discipline on the market economy of marriage, women’s sacrificial ambivalence, or fake autonomy as escape. (135-136)

“profaning” means its “being restituted to men’s free use²⁰”, restoring it to *demos* and giving thus to her rhetoric a performative turn. By denouncing the nature of the misappropriation through a number of lay discourses available at the time, ideological, political, psychological, Woolf sediments the word with a number of pragmatic implications putting its meaning to the test. She thus exposes the collusion between the material and fantasmatical texture (the hatred of the feminine) of the construction of sacredness but also the violence of its effectiveness (the use of force). The exposure of power issues, the emphasis on interpretation dislodges the word from any founding value it might have. There is even more to it: she uncovers the major signifiers that serve as the cornerstones of the mythical foundation of community — God, Nature, Law, and Property and their reciprocal binding that holds together the “sacred gates” (163). The reading of religion instead of its practise is as certainly an invitation to a new “free” use of bonds as that expounded by Walter Benjamin when he said that the day when the law would be studied instead of being applied would be the beginning of justice.

20. Virginia Woolf reappropriates the term when speaking of “the sacred six pence” (114) retaining the idea of a spiritual power, of a “potential” but as a secular power, to celebrate the historic possibility of a new experience. Or when drawing a parallel between the task of the early prophetesses and women “who read and write in their own tongues”, perhaps not “the mouthpieces of the divine spirit” (160) but voices as speaking tongues. In a provocative vein, which is typical of many counter discourses, she vindicates poverty, limited means, disinterested non-vested education, the reciprocity between teaching and learning as the realm of profane loyalties and sharing. There is no position that cannot be re-appropriated, no subjection that cannot be transformed into the awakening to a new subjectivity in the sense that Judith Butler gives to this strategy of displacement²¹. The profaning is deliberately demotic and it may be historicizing but it is even more a way of “making history” (and this is perhaps as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests the difference between modernity and our times). The import of profanation is to Giorgio Agamben’s mind more potent than of secularisation in that “profanation dis-activates the workings or ‘dispositifs’ of power and restores the confiscated spaces to common use²²”. It is not limited to what is said but, as is always the case with Virginia Woolf, involves the very saying since her rhetoric is profaning when she reactivates the tension between rituals and playful dancing, re-creation and singing of songs.

20 My translation from G. Agamben, *Profanations*. (“Profaner signifiait leur restitution au libre usage des hommes”, 95).

21 J. Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 163.

22 My translation from G. Agamben, *Profanations*, 98.

Sharing the sensible

21. But the anatomy of the social and political community of her age, and the interruption of myth are not yet enough to give a full account of what is at stake in her essay. To put it in the terms of Jacques Rancière, Virginia Woolf does more than restrict the question of community to matters of “police”: that is that form of politics that oversees the distribution of “goods and parts”. However detailed her reckoning of the inequality of shares might be (for instance when speaking of women’s salaries), she never makes of this issue an end, but only a means. “Police” is no creation of community but still the servitude of instrumentalized bodies and crushed “souls” (170), making of man “only a cripple in a cave” (170) and though freeing women from the private house, it dooms them to a circling dance around the “mulberry tree of property” (172). Let us phrase it in the terms of Jacques Rancière: “Justice as the principle of a community does not exist yet when one is only concerned with preventing individuals from inflicting wrongs on one another and with correcting, where they do so, the balance of profits and damage. It only begins when what is at stake is what citizens possess in common [...] It is the order which determines their sharing of the common²³”.
22. My argument is that Virginia Woolf’s rhetoric reads like an invitation to think of community, of the sharing of the common, as an experience of being lacking an a priori foundation, exposed to what non-foundation risks. In what ways?
23. First she does more than provide an anatomy of the damage resulting from the inevitably unfair distribution of power and goods. She redefines the conditions for an egalitarian principle that can never be a given, but has endlessly to be turned into a dispute: hence the endless deferring structure of the letter. The letter does not presuppose an egalitarian principle as a given but necessitates the creation of the scene of dispute (the image of the trial is often used). It states the wrongdoings from which the egalitarian principle is to be continually less redefined than worked out: a *dissensus* which is effected through the interruption of the myth of community performed by the disjunctive “society of outsiders”, ever suspending the “we”-to-be because it is outwardly and innerly disjunctive and liminal — “we believe we can help you most effectively by refusing to join your society; by working for our common ends — justice, liberty and equality for all men and women — outside your society, not within” (204). I would relate this inner division to Jacques Rancière’s very definition of the political, as opposed to any form of pre-defined consensual working positing rights and places as the *arche* and the end: there is no end to the dispute and it behoves to the society of outsiders to maintain within the community the possibility of its condition

23 My translation from J. Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 23.

— “there is no politics but through the interruption that institutes politics as the unveiling of a wrong, or of a fundamental dispute [...] politics is the sphere of activity of a community that can only be the object of dispute²⁴”.

24. Second, this scene of dispute is not restricted to the correcting of the distribution of goods and parts: it opens onto the yearning for a freedom that always exceeds the shares and the parts of society. Jacques Rancière’s understanding of the ever-dissenting political and Jean-Luc Nancy’s envisioning of community as inoperative, however different, converge in a reading of community as not to be enclosed within the realm of the effectively realized by totalizing bodies. Neither “police” nor “opus”, this is also what we find in Virginia Woolf’s “essay” (in Montaigne’s sense) of an idea of community.

25. This appears in the way she translates the acquisition of any capital into a potential (“travel, society, solitude, a lodging apart from the family house”), into a power of the mind, into a mode of being as potentializing. There is something Spinozist in her definition of the use of goods: goods are of value only if they increase the power of affects to act, to imagine, to create. Far from being the teleological end of a political project, material and social emancipation makes sense only if it fosters the emancipation of every singular mind as a potential. But this emancipation of the mind itself has nothing to do with the solitary exercise of the mind: instead it implies a renewing of the self away from the Victorian home and finding its figure in an urban nomadic self, ever exposed, altered by and figuring the other, hosting the other within the self or extending the self into a transpersonal bond. What they have in common is an *aesthesis*, intensity or energy, that is a freeing of creation as overreaching bounds, the cultivation of that *modus* as superior to any end since it does not even try to found itself in an object. She ardently believes in the emancipating power of “education for itself” (114), of reading, of creativity: she gives it different names “the desire to learn”, a creativity that is beyond the critical “they would be creative in their activities and not merely critical” (211). The question arises of what creation names in a political context: definitely not the establishment of an “opus” but a metaphor for becoming, a metonymy for political freedom as potential even more than empowerment since empowerment is only a means for the potentializing of being. One of those words by default since that other community is still “a word to be coined” (176), the yearned for object of a *poïen* to be.

26. Of what nature is emancipation then or rather what does it necessitate? Why should it for

24 My translation from J. Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 33, 35.

Virginia Woolf be so definitely associated with economic independence rather than with the right to vote?

27. Because there is for her a constant circulation between her idea of modes of life and her idea of politics. The politic lies in the coming forth of a form of life, that is a *poiesis*. Hence the importance of material metaphors in her essay, which are not metaphorical but performative and perlocutionary, the call for a *poiesis*, taken up later in her essay as “experimenting”. What makes Virginia Woolf’s poetics political is consonant with Giorgio Agamben’s definition of “a form of life”: “a form of life defines a life in which all the modes, deeds, processes are never merely facts but above all and before everything else possibilities, above all and before everything else potentials [des puissances]²⁵”. “The door of the private house was thrown open” (114) is thus the birth of a new form of life, not a matter of rights but the risking of a new experience. The question of “what do I do” with this material gain is rephrased into “what do I see with it?” and freedom is expressed as an invigorating, bracing breath (114). And the sentence “every thought, every sight, every action looked different” is no figure of speech but the “calling” for a renewal of the subject, what Jacques Rancière calls a subjectivization. What is gained is often expressed through the somehow paradoxical phrase “the possession of an influence that is disinterested” (115), of a paradoxical chastity freed from economics and the law of exchange and provocatively at the service of being. The desire for knowledge always exceeds the object, and education has no other object than the exercise and the renewing of the condition of freedom. Community is not defined by its end, or by any object founding in turn its body. In her own way, and which makes sense of the nature of many of her “engagements not to”, rather than non-engagements, Virginia Woolf is prefiguring what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “the Inoperative community”, or Giorgio Agamben “modes without ends”.

28. What are we then to make of the references to the sensible in the midst of this essay? To put them down to a lyrical rhetoric, an ornament of a visionary prose and of its prophetic undertones? A mark of Virginia Woolf’s idiosyncratic style contradicting her unsigning the letter?

29. Or aren’t they to be considered as an expression of that *aesthesis* which might be part of a sharing in common? We could approach it through what Jacques Rancière elaborates with his concept of “the distribution of the sensible”. The non hierarchical and random organisation of the sensible world, its transpersonal flow of particles, atoms, is the aesthetic measure of what he calls a demotic power: this aesthetic régime, breaking away from a representative régime of art ruled by

25 My translation from G. Agamben, *Moyens sans fins*, 14.

laws of befittingness presiding over the relation between topics and genres²⁶, is at the very heart of the poetics of expression of modernity. We find numerous allusions in Virginia Woolf's essays about "Modern Fiction", or about the demotic power of language (as in her essay *Craftsmanship*) which could be read as echoing the change of paradigm as expressed by Jacques Rancière.

30. Yet it is the insistence of a Woolfian specificity that I would like to touch on. Indeed the outsiders' profaning of society's rules opens onto a redefinition in favour of what might be shared in common. The rejection of the rites of patriarchy is not to be ascribed to the forces of Nietzschean resentment but rather to a desire for the forces which are for Virginia Woolf at one with a creative experimenting with modes of being. Beauty is not a Freudian sublimation which compensates for and as such expresses the "discontent of culture" but a form of life as a calling for being: "it will be one of their aims to increase private beauty; the beauty of spring, summer, autumn; the beauty which brims not only every field and wood but every barrow in Oxford street; the scattered beauty which needs only to be combined by artists in order to be visible to all" (213). Likewise, the exercise of thought is not to be located in the separate spheres of ideas, but is very close to Nietzsche's elaboration of the concept of life in *The Gay Science* as a mode of being, the shaping of forms of life (161). That *aesthesis* as unbounded and multiple being is for Virginia Woolf a demotic principle in its calling for an immanent plane of being can be seen in that other quote: "if some love of England dropped into a child's ears by the cawing of the rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world" (207). The sentence has often been quoted as an example of the many contradictions studding the essay, or of their tentative resolution as in the last part of the sentence. Yet what is left out is the summoning up of the sensible world in the sentence itself and in its context, as if it were only an ancillary predicate of England. There is yet more to it. What the sentence summons up is a web of voices, voices of the sensible world woven into rising rhythmical beats, the musical meta-voice of a multi-layered tongue. Voices whose property is to undo the distinction between the inside and the outside (where is the voice?) and to testify to the random multiplicity of the modes of being, as a Woolfian figure of her sense of community. The evocation of the sensible does not have to do with a "nature" that could be essentialized into the identity of a nation or the model-object of its community. It is its uniqueness, or its singularity which is to be treasured, a singularity which becomes the standard of value and an initiation into the pleasures of alterity and the reciprocity of

26 See J. Rancière, *Politique de la littérature*, 30.

giving: “[...] *serve* her to *give* [...] what she *desires* of peace and freedom *for* the whole world”. What the voices of the sensible stand for is a “community of existence” which, as Jean-Luc Nancy states, does not pose the existence of a community but is the community of being exposed on the very limit of “singularity/community”. My contention is that Virginia Woolf’s writing of the sensible is akin to this liminal summoning together or convoking of singularities; she shapes her vision of community after her experimenting with modes of being through writing. Jean-Luc Nancy writes: “On this extreme and difficult line, what is shared is not communion, it is not the completed identity of all into one, and it is no completed identity. What is shared is not that nullification of sharing, but sharing itself, and thus the non identity of each, of every one with himself, and with others²⁷”. Singularity is an initiation into its other modes not as enclosed identities but as the variegated forms of their co-exposure, their being-in-common.

Community in becoming: how is the “we” to be understood?

31. The question of community cannot be dissociated from the conditions of enunciation as performed through the pragmatic locus defined by the form of the essay as letter. It also reverberates in the question of the ethical responsibility as the responsibility to answer for a “collective we”. The question of “in whose name?, on behalf of whom?” had always been a harrowing one for Virginia Woolf as attested by her finding it impossible to write about the soldiers’ war experience, to fictionalize it, to be the relay between spectral voices other than by giving voice to spectrality as in *Jacob’s Room*.
32. How does *Three Guineas* address this issue? What of “voices” in the political sense in an essay which chooses not to place itself under the historic day of enfranchisement, and which is unsigned? What form does the conflict over what is meant by “to speak” (which for Jacques Rancière is part of the dispute) take? What about spectrality? It is as if the essay invited us to approach these questions from three perspectives:
33. - *interrupting a mythical “we”*: Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that the mythical “we” is the “we” of “several into one”, founding community through a diction which would be the revelation of a world meeting its audience’s expectations. “Myth meets expectations” Jean-Luc Nancy writes. Roland Barthes, for himself, suggests that the mythical voice is “interpellative” calling for

27 My translation from J-L Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée*, 164.

identification and participation. At the beginning of her letter, Virginia Woolf sketches the portrait of her addressee who might stand for the embodiment of a mythical “we”: a figure of the establishment, of urban gentility with a touch of the Edwardian gentleman farmer, the body of an undivided identity. His initial question (“how in your opinion are we to prevent war?”) might well invite a mythic “we” awaiting the reiteration of its foundation. Yet the deferral strategies, the transformation of an expectation into an unrelenting questioning, the multiplied fictions of the pragmatic “we”, the ironic ventriloquizings of a mythical “we”, all put this very “we” to the test of questioning, thus radically displacing and interrupting the mythical processes. “We” is never an organic body, nor a sum of parts, not the consequence of an opus, but it is disseminated, provisional.

34. - *a protean “we”*: the political condition for a “we” is paradoxically the transformation of an exclusive appropriation of one given name into the site of potential names. Enunciation is thus both effective, actual and at the same time potential. Thus there is no mis-appropriation as delegation, the appropriation of a “we” as a way to speak on the others’ behalf: any collective enunciation has to be recognized as provisional and conditional just as Virginia Woolf recognises the limitations of her own effective enunciation (as the “we” of the “daughters of educated men”) but also invites a constant re-appropriation by others. “We” is sharing a voice rather than claiming a voice. Hence Virginia Woolf’s debated rejection of the name “feminism”, as the provisional name for a “we” claiming for “the right to earn a living”, which in turn turns into the mediation of others’ rights: “You shall swear that you do all in your power to insist that any woman who enters any profession shall in no way hinder any other human being, whether man or woman, white or black provided that he is or she is qualified to enter that profession, from entering it; but shall do all in her power to help them” (164). When she extends the “we” of enunciation to the whole world (“as a woman I want no country, as a woman my country is the whole world” 206) she invites an infinity of re-appropriations, a multiplicity of subjectivizations if we give this word the ring suggested by Jacques Rancière as that of a “dis-identification, the wrenching from the naturalness of place²⁸”. Sharing a voice is not the expression of a self or a group, not the claiming of a proper place but the stating of a wrong that divides the community, the disappropriation of the naturalness of place, and the calling for another mode of existence: “politics is not a matter of relations between powers, but a matter of relations between worlds²⁹”, Jacques Rancière writes.

35. - *a non-essentialized “we”*: while critics, feminist critics such as Spivak reinstate the idea of a

28 My translation from J. Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 60.

29 My translation from J. Rancière, *La Méésentente*, 67.

centered “we”, an essentialized “we”³⁰ as the enunciative locus of ethical or political responsibility, Virginia Woolf’s discourse oscillates between moments when identity seems to be returned to nature and proposals attesting to its being the site of division, of conflict and of the unknown (“our still unknown psychology” 204): the ambiguity seems to me to lie in discourse (there is an oscillation between the discourse of natural sciences and the discourse of metapsychology) rather than in the approach of this collective “we”. This collective “we” inhabited by an irreducible alterity, cannot be essentialized: “but the human figure [she is speaking of the tyrant] suggests that we cannot dissociate ourselves from that figure but are ourselves that figure” (240). She thus invites us to consider the possibility of a “we” which is reflexive, aware of its own division and of its ethical and political responsibilities — a “we” that assumes the risk of its un-founding, that exposes the myths of its founding, that requires that in the very act of elaborating the common there should be a consciousness of its discursive nature, of its precariousness, of the risk and the chance it runs. The society of outsiders is then the name for a linguistic condition: the necessary reflexive attention to the conditions of production of the community, to their poetics.

36. What about the return of spectrality then? For Benjamin the spectre is not only the haunting presence of the past in the present but the potential awaiting, biding its time in the present³¹. In Virginia Woolf’s essay this potentiality of time within the present is consistently expressed as the spiritual: the exercise of the mind, the yearning for creativity, the poets’ lending voice to the modes of being and their other-than-sensible reverberations, the zone of extension and exchange between the self and the other, of their mutual hosting, a power within immanence in search of hidden connections. This spirituality is no transcendent realm that would reveal a mythical community to itself but rather the name given by Virginia Woolf to its ever re-created becoming, its dream flowing through its dispersed actual expressions.

Works cited

AGAMBEN, GIORGIO. *Moyens sans fins*. Paris: Rivages, 1995.

AGAMBEN, GIORGIO. *Profanations*. Paris: Payot, 2005.

BARTHES. ROLAND, “Qu’est-ce qu’un mythe aujourd’hui ?”. 1956. *Oeuvres complètes*. Tome I. Paris:

30 G. Spivak, “Practical Politics of the Open End”, *Deconstruction: A Reader*, 402.

31 F. Proust, *L’Histoire à contretemps*, 25, 61.

Seuil, 1993.

BERMAN, JESSICA. *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

BUTLER, JUDITH. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

FROULA, CHRISTINE. *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant garde: War, Civilization, Modernity*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2004.

HIGGINSON, CAROLYN. *The Concept of Civilisation in the Works of Leonard and Virginia Woolf*. PhD. University of Sussex. 1986.

LEE, HERMIONE. *Virginia Woolf*. London: Vintage, 1997.

NANCY, JEAN-LUC. *La Communauté désœuvrée*. Paris: Bourgois, 1999.

PROUST, FRANÇOISE, *L'Histoire à contretemps*, Paris : Editions du cerf, 1994.

RANCIÈRE, JACQUES. *La Méésentente*. Paris: Galilée, 1995.

RANCIÈRE, JACQUES. *Politique de la littérature*. Paris: Galilée, 2007.

ROSENFELD, NATANIA. *Outsiders Together*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

SPIVAK, GAYATRI. "Practical Politics of the Open End". *Deconstruction: A Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000.

WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *Three Guineas*. 1938. London: Vintage, 2001.