# Poetic effects in prose: Virginia Woolf and Emilio Cecchi

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## Abstract

This thesis in comparative literature explores the meanings of poetry beyond verse and the ways they influenced the creation of poetic effects in the prose of two early twentieth-century writers: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and the Italian essayist Emilio Cecchi (1884-1966). Both authors believe that poetry, as a quality independent from verse, can be conveyed through prose, but they explicitly distance themselves from the kind of writing referred to as prose poetry or poetic prose. By addressing the question of poetry in prose from the perspectives of these two writers, who worked in different languages, genres and contexts, this study proposes a new method to approach the elusive category of poetic style, without reducing it to a set of techniques and devices borrowed from verse, or to a generic quest for beauty and emotional suggestiveness. I reconstruct Woolf's and Cecchi's notions of poetic quality as timebound and culturally specific ideas, emerging at the crossing between intellectual influences, the reception of older literary traditions, and personal creative associations. By analysing the two authors' prose through these lenses, I argue that for both of them engaging with poetry involves experimenting with multiple styles, where poetic and prosaic qualities are closely tied together and set in contrast in order to offer a double perspective on the topics treated or narrated. I identify different categories of poetic effects, classified according to their literary sources and/or their features: 'Romantic-lyrical' and 'dramatic-choral' in Woolf's novels, 'of contrast' in Cecchi's essays, and 'of pure form' in both authors. The thesis shows how Woolf's and Cecchi's ideas of poetry in prose strikingly overlap, particularly in associating poetry with an epiphanic feeling and an abstract design, but also stress different aspects of its broad spectrum, concluding that, to bring these specificities into focus, poetic effects in prose are best understood through cross-cultural enquiries.

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## Introduction

> 'What's the essential difference between prose and poetry –
> It cracks my poor brain to consider.'
>
> Virginia Woolf to Vita Sackville-West, 1926

This study in comparative literature explores the meanings of poetry beyond verse and the ways they influenced the creation of poetic effects in the prose of two early twentieth-century writers: Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) and the Italian essayist Emilio Cecchi (1884-1966). Both authors believe that poetry, as a quality independent from verse, can be conveyed through prose, but in two core essays they explicitly distance themselves from the kind of writing commonly referred to as prose poetry or poetic prose. Woolf, in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' (1927) states that 'one has always a feeling of discomfort in the presence of the purple patch of the prose poem', and instead envisions a novel that performs some of the tasks of poetry, with 'poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry' (*E* 4: 437-38). Similarly Cecchi, in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' (1949), carefully distinguishes the type of lyrical expression achieved by the essay, the genre he practises, from the artificial style of poetic prose: 'un amalgama di poesia ed eloquenza, del quale in realtà la prima fa le spese' (*SV* 332).[1] By suggesting that exploring poetry through prose involves something other than a quest for beauty, these two authors open up fresh ways to look at the issue in terms that transcend the surface level of stylistic refinement, to embrace broader questions of knowledge and worldview.

Woolf and Cecchi chose to write in genres, the novel and the essay (published as newspaper article), that in the wake of positivist culture were associated, both in England and in Italy, with a realistic and rational – particularly 'prosaic' – outlook, a kind of writing

[1] 'a blend of poetry and eloquence, where in fact the former suffers'. All the English translations from Italian sources, unless otherwise indicated, are my own.

expected to give detailed accounts of factual problems and events. Woolf's and Cecchi's determination to explore poetic modes of expression from within these genres, therefore, reflects a desire to offer two levels of representation simultaneously: on the one hand, they wanted their works to remain close to the everyday aspects of modern life, but on the other hand, they also wanted to reach beyond realism in order to bring ordinary experience in touch with an extra-ordinary, more essential dimension. This stylistic dualism can be interpreted as motivated by the need to unify a reality perceived as fragmented and incoherent: an attitude which corresponds to one of the manifold definitions of modernism as traced by Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, who point out that a 'tension between unity and fragmentation was […] essential to the work of many artists and writers who were first labelled "modernist"'.[2] Considered in this light, the interplay between poetry and prose proves especially meaningful when both aspects of the text interact closely, becoming at times so inextricably tied together as to appear almost inseparable. Woolf disliked the 'purple patch' precisely because she deemed it to be a too easily quotable passage of beautiful prose not organically sewn into the rest of the work, whose beauty should be diffused and evanescent, while Cecchi developed an idea of lyricism completely dependent upon its violent, fleeting intrusions into the prosaic level of the mundane, without which the poetic effect would lose all its force and disappear. As a consequence, looking for and analysing 'poetry' in Woolf's and Cecchi's works involves, rather than identifying patterns of poetic style in isolation, uncovering the dynamics of texts that are not uniformly poetic but are traversed by contrasting impulses, constantly divided between a 'poetic' and a 'prosaic' perspective on the world.

The question of how to address afresh texts of such a hybrid nature has been newly brought to the fore by two recent studies of, respectively, British and anglophone prose poetry: *British Prose Poetry: The Poems Without Lines*, edited by Jane Monson (2018), and *Prose*

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[2] Sean Latham and Gayle Rogers, *Modernism: Evolution of an Idea* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 5.

*Poetry: An Introduction*, by Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton (2020). These studies aim to define and trace a history of the prose poem, which is not the object of my enquiry, but in doing so they touch upon the problem of how (and whether or not) to consider passages with poetic qualities embedded in larger prose works, especially novels. While both books privilege, for their definition of prose poetry, relatively short and self-contained forms, Monson does not exclude that 'found prose poetry' could in fact be included in the genre, leaving open the question of 'whether the prose poem is a form that opens up more opportunities for new forms within other genres. Can it exist, for example, as embedded and waiting to be found within larger works of fiction as much as be created according to its own rules?'.[3] One of the volume's contributors, Alan Wall, after quoting a passage from Dickens' *Bleak House* and acknowledging its poetic qualities ('fastidiousness in regard to lexis'; 'vigour and coherence of rhythm'), concludes that it cannot be classified as a prose poem only because it is part of a 'coherent and unified narrative', but for no intrinsic reasons: far from settling the issue, he actually (rightly) complicates it by mentioning authors, such as Flaubert and Joyce, who do not imitate poets, but write in such a way that poetry and prose have become unified, to the extent that no 'self-contained prose poem' can be pointed out 'worth isolating from the rest'.[4] Another contributor, Jane Goldman, includes Virginia Woolf among the prose poets, but addresses Woolf's aversion to the purple patch by arguing that she extended the prose poem 'to book length form (in at least every novel from *Jacob's Room* to *Between the Acts*), a form of unpatching the purple patch'.[5]

Hetherington and Atherton draw a much more definite line between prose poems and prose with poetic qualities, strictly narrowing their focus to compressed forms and especially

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[3] Jane Monson, 'Introduction', in *British Prose Poetry: The Poems Without Lines*, ed. by Jane Monson (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 1-16 (p. 6).

[4] Alan Wall, 'Questioning the Prose Poem: Thoughts on Geoffrey Hill's *Mercian Hymns*', in *British Prose Poetry*, ed. by Jane Monson, pp. 167-76 (pp. 167-71).

[5] Jane Goldman, '"I Grow More & More Poetic": Virginia Woolf and Prose Poetry', in *British Prose Poetry*, ed. by Jane Monson, pp. 91-115 (pp. 104-105).

emphasising the difference between the prose poem as a genre and poetic prose as a style, which 'often features an explicit use of elaborate literary figures and an expressively meandering way of moving – often across many pages'. Beyond the strict boundaries of the independent prose poem, which they classify as a particular type of poetry, what can be observed, they argue, is simply prose using 'some of the devices often associated with poetry': a phenomenon natural enough since, 'if poetry may make profitable use of "prosaic" effects, so a great deal of prose may be characterized as musical or rhythmical and thus, at least to some extent, "poetic"'.[6] In the process of delimiting the territory of the prose poem, these studies reveal that just outside its (equivocal) boundaries we lack a satisfactory method to approach and understand the interplay between poetry and prose in works that undeniably belong to prose genres, such as the novel and the essay. The categories proposed so far do not adequately account for texts whose poetic qualities are not obviously noticeable or separable: the 'found prose poem' excludes the possibility that poetry can be organically integrated into prose; the 'extended prose poem' flattens the interesting dynamics of works where poetry is in dialogue with other aspects; finally 'poetic prose', besides carrying negative connotations of elaborate verbosity, reduces the question to a matter of borrowed techniques or devices, which are of little interest beyond formalist analyses.

Against this framework, Woolf's and Cecchi's explicit rejections of the purple patch and poetic prose are eye-opening because they compel us to approach the issue differently, and to ask: what did poetry in prose mean to them, then, as individuals and authors working in different languages and contexts, if not poetic prose? How did their views of poetry as independent of verse affect their prose style in order to generate poetic effects? Hetherington and Atherton in their discussion of formal boundary lines illuminate just how elusive the

[6] Paul Hetherington and Cassandra Atherton, *Prose Poetry: An Introduction* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 6; 8; 12.

concepts of poetry and prose can be: 'if there are no firm zones of exclusion separating "poetry" and "prose", then the more important distinction is between what is poetic (whether it occurs in poetry or prose) and what is prosaic (whether it occurs in prose or poetry)'.[7] Put this way, the distinction appears very subjective and relative, but precisely for this reason it proves extremely interesting to cross-cultural enquiries, which can show the various turns the idea of poetic quality may take in different authors, at the crossing between external influences (intellectual environments, literary contexts), the reception of older literary traditions, and personal creative associations.

The authors I have chosen as case studies, Woolf and Cecchi, offer a particularly attractive comparative combination because their ideas of poetry present some striking similarities, but also play out very differently across their respective genres. Heirs of Romanticism, they both identified poetry with an epiphanic experience or feeling that exists independently of its expression in writing, and they both sought to re-enact this experience in the text as an event that provokes a perspective shift on the topic treated or narrated. They both equally exploited the instantaneous power of images and metaphors to express moments of sudden clarity, insight, and emotional intensity, but while Woolf wanted her epiphanies to build up gradually, Cecchi inserted them abruptly and incongruously in the course of his discussions in order to underline their revolutionary impact on human logic and experience. An important cultural difference is evident in the fact that Woolf's perception of poetry was equally shaped by traditions of lyric poetry and poetic drama (with its choral expressions), while Cecchi was formed in an intellectual environment where the lyrical, subjective and visual, aspect of poetry had become so prominent that it encompassed the whole poetry category, and was even identified with the essence of art itself. Cecchi's effort to fuse lyrical intuition with rationality as two complementary as well as antagonistic modes of knowledge, being specifically relevant

[7] Hetherington and Atherton, p. 24.

to the essay genre, have no counterpart in Woolf, but both authors, in their endeavour to overcome the boundaries of individuality and self-expression, accompanied their conceptions of intimate epiphanic lyricism with a parallel notion of poetry as the totality of the work of art's abstract design.

The several points of convergence highlighted above are unlikely to be the result of direct influence: Cecchi knew and appreciated Woolf's work, but developed his ideas of lyricism independently, while there is no evidence that Woolf ever read or was aware of Cecchi. However, since Cecchi was an expert in English literature – together with Mario Praz and Carlo Linati, one of the few critics who made anglophone authors known in Italy between the 1920s and the 1940s [8] – and a friend of Bernard Berenson, who was in turn close to Woolf's friend Roger Fry, the two writers partly shared a common literary and intellectual background. For instance, both Woolf and Cecchi considered De Quincey as an important point of reference for reflections about the poetic potential of prose, although they both diverged from his style as a model of poetic prose. The English Romantic poets were as present to Woolf as to Cecchi, and both were aware of being indebted to a long tradition of essay writing (chiefly English, but including Montaigne) for having expanded the dominions of prose and made it capable of encroaching on some of poetry's themes and styles. Finally, through Berenson and Fry both authors were in touch with contemporary theories in the visual arts that inspired them to see poetry as pure form, an ideal category transcending language and the divisions between the arts.

Cecchi lived for a few months in London between 1918 and 1919 and later travelled back to the city on various occasions, so he had the chance to meet some members of the Bloomsbury group (Lytton Strachey, T. S. Eliot, and the widower Leonard Woolf). He closely

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[8] For the situation of English and American literary studies in Italy in the first half of the century, see Arturo Cattaneo, 'Chi stramalediva gli inglesi: La diffusione della letteratura inglese e americana in Italia tra le due guerre', in *Chi stramalediva gli inglesi: La diffusione della letteratura inglese e americana in Italia tra le due guerre*, ed. by Arturo Cattaneo (Milano: Vita e Pensiero, 2007), pp. 17-61 (p. 31).

followed the work of many modernist authors, and devoted to Virginia Woolf in particular some critical essays now part of the collection *Scrittori inglesi e americani*. In addition to two pieces on *To the Lighthouse*, '«Gita al faro» di Virginia Woolf'' (1946) and 'La «Gita al faro» tradotta' (1934), he wrote a review of her collection of essays *The death of the Moth* ('«La morte della tignuola»', 1945), an article on Woolf's treatment of character ('La Woolf e il «personaggio»', 1950) and also translated her humorous essay 'Dr. Burney's Evening Party' ('«Serata in casa del Dott. Burney» di Virginia Woolf', 1945). Although Cecchi never related aspects of Woolf's work to his own, he remarked on the poetic qualities of *To the Lighthouse* at various points in his articles.

Despite Cecchi's familiarity with English literature, the fact that the two authors published their works in completely different literary contexts gave their partly overlapping ideas very distinctive flavours. Woolf's and Cecchi's choice to create poetic effects in their prose was largely developed in response to different literary trends that were mainstream in their respective countries at the beginning of the century. Woolf turned to poetic models for inspiration to modernise the novel as a reaction to the strict conventions dominating Victorian realist fiction, whose popular authors she famously defined, in her 1919 essay 'Modern Novels', as 'materialists' (*E* 3: 32). Interestingly, the poetic effects in her prose, which are responsible for many of her novels' starkly experimental traits, were in fact inspired by older poetic traditions, rather than contemporary poets: chiefly Romantic lyrics, ancient Greek tragedies, and Elizabethan poetic drama. Cecchi, on the other hand, started his career in Florence in an intellectual environment which, instead of pursuing realism, prized the opposite value of 'pure lyricism': free, imaginative and intuitive expression. Before World War I, Italian writers were mostly gathered around literary reviews that published short and unstructured emotional pieces, which aimed at breaking with all previous literary and grammatical conventions. Cecchi's original move to make lyricism part of the rational, structured, factually

grounded form of the essay, inspired by Leopardi's *Operette morali* and some English essayists, began as a reaction to these movements; it also belonged to the wider spirit of 'Return to Order' and tradition that arose in many Italian intellectuals after the disruptions brought about by the avant-gardes and the war. The distinct contexts to which Woolf and Cecchi related led them to foreground their own work as, respectively, 'modern' and 'classical': a relative distinction that should not prevent us from noticing that Cecchi too, despite his championship of traditional values, made the creation of poetic effects a pivot of innovation, for by publishing imaginative essays of English inspiration in Italian newspapers he created a completely new genre, the *elzeviro*.

A crucial aspect of my methodology for reconstructing Woolf's and Cecchi's ideas of poetry was to take into account that the Italian words *poesia* and *liricità* (with the variant *lirismo* and the adjectives *poetico* and *lirico*) encompass a wider range of meanings than their English equivalents. While in English, according to the *OED*, the meanings of 'poetry', 'lyricism' and 'lyric(al)' are all related, literally or figuratively, to the compositions in verse they originally designate (lyrical expression being a specific type of poetic utterance, centred on the self), the Italian versions are used much more loosely to encompass also notions of art, artistic quality and inspiration, (irrational) feeling, and fantastic or emotional suggestiveness.[9] This was particularly the case in the first half of the twentieth century, due to the vast influence of the idealistic philosopher Benedetto Croce, who had made the term *poesia* coincide with 'il valore estetico nella sua assoluta purezza, in quanto del tutto estraneo a ogni contatto con il mondo della prassi'.[10] Likewise, *liricità* and *lirismo* were often used as synonyms of artistic inspiration – which for Croce was essentially sentimental and intuitive and therefore *always*

[9] See 'Poesia' and 'Poetico', in Salvatore Battaglia and Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana* (Turin: Unione Tipografico-Editrice Torinese, 1961-2009), XIII, pp. 708-709; 713-14. See 'Liricità', 'Lirico', and 'Lirismo', in *GDLI*, IX, pp. 136-38.

[10] 'the aesthetic value in its absolute purity, as completely extraneous to any contact with the world of praxis'. 'Poesia', in *GDLI*, XIII, p. 708.

lyrical – and to describe any work of art, including prose, with marked subjective traits. In many cases, therefore, Cecchi uses *poesia* and *liricità* (more frequently the latter) as equivalent categories to designate the essential principle of art and not the quality of a particular genre.[11] However, a latent comparison with poetry proper is often still implicit in these uses, for the form continued to be considered as a standard of high artistic value.

Keeping in mind the difference between the English and Italian meanings of the words, I looked at their appearances in Woolf's and Cecchi's writings in order to trace or infer their personal definitions and patterns of associations.[12] To reconstruct their ideas of poetry as independent of verse in the absence of a systematic theory, I have considered different kinds of writings: not only critical (their essays), but also personal (letters, Woolf's diary, Cecchi's notebooks) and creative (which, in Cecchi's case, are still in essay form, not clearly distinguishable from his critical work). For each author, what has emerged is not a univocal idea of poetry but a range of interrelated concepts, sometimes expressed through critical statements, sometimes through imagery and narrative. For this reason, I have treated the creative side of Woolf's and Cecchi's work as complementary to their criticism, contributing to the development of their aesthetic principles as well as being an outcome of them: a platform where issues of literary criticism are discussed in a metaphorical way.

While the close interaction between criticism and literature emerges starkly in Cecchi's case, as he himself did not draw a boundary between his scholarly and his imaginative essays (with most texts combining features of both), it is less evident but equally true for Woolf, who in her own essays conveys many critical ideas figuratively, and in her novels reflects on poetry

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[11] Assunta De Crescenzo, *La forma gordiana: Classicismo e romanticismo in Emilio Cecchi* (Napoli: Giannini, 1988), p. 102.

[12] My method, without aiming at the scientific precision of linguistics, bears some affinity with that employed by Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) and William Empson, *The Structure of Complex Words* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951). Williams studies the negotiations occurring between the available meanings of a word and specific usages that arise in social settings as people make their own implicit connections. Empson, on the other hand, unpacks the different senses implied in individual words and draws patterns of relations among them, based on the words' historical meanings and appearances in the literary texts analysed.

through the thoughts and experience of her characters. Thus, in both authors the categories of 'poetry' and 'lyricism' not only serve to define certain aesthetic principles or to refer to a particular kind of writing: they also cover, thanks to a vast array of metaphors and fictional situations, the psychological states associated with it, the type of knowledge they bring about, and the manner in which these special modes of feeling and understanding manifest themselves in the course of ordinary experience. However, despite these similarities, I refer only to Woolf's conceptual frameworks as a theory, for she reflects upon the essence of poetry beyond verse quite prominently and explicitly, though imaginatively and unsystematically, whereas Cecchi's ideas mostly emerge indirectly from his uses of the words *poesia* and *lirico* and his criticism of other authors.

Approaching the analysis of Woolf's and Cecchi's engagement with poetry according to their own, timebound categories allows me to assess and describe their poetic effects in a more detailed, nuanced and culturally specific way than usually sought by stylistic enquiries of this kind. A widespread tendency of investigations on the poetic qualities of Woolf's and Cecchi's styles is to recognise in their prose certain features (such as imagery, musicality, emotional suggestiveness) that are perceived as intrinsic to poetic expression in general, considered a-historically. The scholarship on Woolf's side of the question is more extensive: among the most recent examples, Emily Kopley argues that Woolf had been experimenting with 'incorporating the techniques of verse into prose' since *Jacob's Room*; while Jane Goldman describes Woolf's lyricism in various ways, from subjective emotional expression to transcendence and affinity to an undefined 'pastoral tradition', but she considers all these qualities as absolutes and not linked, in Woolf's creative process, to specific poetic models.[13]

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[13] Emily Kopley, 'Virginia Woolf's Conversations with George Rylands: Context for *A Room of One's Own* and "Craftmanship"', *The Review of English Studies*, 67 (2016), 946-69 (p. 959); Jane Goldman, 'From *Mrs Dalloway* to *The Waves*: New Elegy and Lyric Experimentalism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 49-69. More critical views will be discussed in the relevant chapters on Woolf.

Cecchi's proximity to poetry, on the other hand, is generally viewed from a technical and linguistic perspective due to the fact that his essays are considered – as in Carla Gubert's thorough study of creative short prose production in twentieth-century Italy – as a model of stylised *prosa d'arte*.[14] While these methods are valuable for formalist analyses, and for defining broader literary genres, they may overlook some of the complexity the question of poetry in prose assumes when considered from the perspective of the authors themselves. Specifically, focusing on what poetry meant to Woolf and Cecchi in the context they lived in reveals not only that what can be considered as a poetic effect expands in surprising and unfamiliar ways, but also that for each author engaging with poetry involves experimenting with multiple styles.

Accordingly, as a result of my analysis, I have identified different classes of poetic effects, beginning with those peculiar to each author – though all related to the idea of poetry as epiphany – and concluding with the stylistic principle both of them explored, namely the ideal of poetry as pure form. Chapter 1 introduces Virginia Woolf's theory of the difference between poetry and prose as developed in her essays and first two novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919). It examines her core definition of poetry as a universal perspective on the world, which can also be conveyed through novels, and recognises its Romantic roots, especially in the close association of poetry and the sublime experience. Chapter 2 analyses the first category of Woolf's poetic effects, which I classify as 'Romantic-lyrical' because based on a Romantic view of poetic inspiration, according to which the poetic (universal) perspective is achieved via a solitary epiphanic experience that leads to self-transcendence. *Orlando* (1928) is analysed as a fictional exploration of this idea, while selected passages of *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) provide examples of two

[14] Carla Gubert, *Un mondo di cartone: Nascita e poetica della prosa d'arte nel Novecento* (Pesaro: Metauro, 2003).

Romantic-lyrical stylistic patterns, the climactic and the rhythmical, which originate in the novels' interior monologues as expressions of intimate moments of understanding. Chapter 3 examines Woolf's second class of poetic effects, which I call 'dramatic-choral' because inspired by her reading of Greek tragedies, Elizabethan plays and Shakespeare. These effects are based on the idea that the poetic perspective can be achieved not only by a solitary individual but also by a collective consciousness, or when the poet expresses a communal point of view. *Jacob's Room* (1922) is analysed for its choral narrator, while *The Waves* (1931) demonstrates how, through the novel's succession of dramatic soliloquies, Woolf manages to combine Romantic-lyrical and dramatic-choral poetic effects in an encompassing play-poem.

Moving to the section of the thesis devoted to Emilio Cecchi, Chapter 4 explores his personal interpretation of lyricism in prose by examining his choice to practise the essay genre, following the English tradition, in the context of early twentieth-century Italian intellectual culture. It defines Cecchi's conception of lyricism as a wide spectrum of ideas related to inner life, imagination and transcendence, which gain significance only when contrasted with the opposite values of rationality, ordinary reality and humour. Chapter 5 proceeds to the stylistic analysis of Cecchi's poetic effects 'of contrast', which see a lyrical element surprisingly intruding into a non-lyrical framework. I examine essays from Cecchi's four main collections (excluding those gathering his travel narratives) – *Pesci rossi* [Goldfish] (1920), *L'osteria del cattivo tempo* [The inn of bad weather] (1927), *Qualche cosa* [Something] (1931) and *Corse al trotto* [Trot races] (1936) – uncovering stylistic patterns of rupture and dissonance aimed at intensifying the epiphanic power of the lyrical elements. Finally, Chapter 6 considers the last class of poetic effects, 'of pure form', which interest both authors due to the influence of aesthetic theories in idealistic philosophy and the visual arts. These poetic effects consist in constructing the novel or the essay according to an abstract design of purely formal relations which, independent of content, are meant to reflect the profound structure of reality hidden

behind the chaotic surface of ordinary perceptions. As examples of this style, I analyse the abstract design of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and the architecture of a selected group of Cecchi's essays which enact his own concept of *decorativo-lirico*.

Focusing on Woolf' and Cecchi's creative careers, this research follows the trajectories of an idea which, disembodied, still acts as a shaping force and is directive of style outside of its usual medium. Stripped of verse and of the other formal features that make it immediately recognisable, poetry becomes defined by immaterial attributes which vary, or are stressed differently, according to subjective interpretation, cultural background, and context. These immaterial attributes – universality, for instance, or surprise – conceived by the authors as poetic qualities, do affect the language and style of their prose, but in ways that not necessarily, and not straightforwardly, reproduce the formal characteristics of verse poetry. The comparative analysis that follows attempts to illuminate precisely how notions of poetic quality are conceived and transformed into poetic effects in prose.

# I. Virginia Woolf's theory of poetry and prose in her essays and early novels

After Virginia Woolf completed *Jacob's Room* in 1922, Lytton Strachey wrote her a letter of praise which constitutes the first review of the novel. It begins as follows: 'I finished Jacob last night – a most wonderful achievement – more like poetry, it seems to me, than anything else, and as such I prophesy immortal'.[1] The exact meaning of Strachey's comment that *Jacob's Room* reads 'like poetry' is hard to define: what poetry, or what features of poetry, did he have in mind in making this comparison? What did it mean to write a novel 'like poetry' in 1922? Since then, generations of readers have likewise found Woolf's novels poetic, interpreting this quality in different ways, or just referring to certain sensations inspired by the text. Thus, though everybody seems to agree that Woolf's prose affects us as poetry, the precise nature of this poetic effect is a matter of personal judgement and cultural background.

Woolf herself, throughout her career, repeatedly pondered over the difference between poetry and prose beyond form and her reflections took different shapes, influenced by the authors and literary traditions she was studying. The question of how prose could perform some qualities of poetry was central to the development of her writing, which explored several paths to achieve poetic effects, taking inspiration from different poetic models. The variety of her approaches, encompassing many aspects of fiction (from theme to character, narrative voice, style and structure), is therefore better appreciated and contextualised by focusing on Woolf's own associations with the category 'poetry', which are culturally specific, than by applying to her work external, comprehensive definitions of genre.

[1] *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (London: Routledge, 1975), p. 93.

This chapter introduces the core concepts of Woolf's theory of poetry as she elaborated them unsystematically in her essays and early fiction. It traces the development of her ideas about the essential difference between poetry and prose from considerations of form to independent, though related, matters of point of view, which ultimately led her to define poetry as a universal and general, as opposed to an individual and particular, perspective on the world. Interested, like Cecchi, in the point of contact between poetry and prose as alternative worldviews, Woolf enquired whether the poetic or generalised perspective could be included in novels, focusing in particular on the creation of characters that would convey, alongside the concrete and psychological circumstances of individuals, universal aspects of human nature.

The second part of the chapter analyses Woolf's first two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, which by addressing poetry as a theme complement, in fictional form, the theory developed in the essays. Both novels express the incongruity between traditional verse poetry and modern life, but also point to a timeless mood or feeling, connected to poetry but preceding the act of writing, which needs to find a new form of expression suitable for the modern age. This feeling closely resembles the Romantic sublime experience and allows the characters to transcend their individual perspectives to gain a broader view of human life and the world. In these early novels, the question of what modern literary form this poetic feeling should take is left unanswered: in fact, the narratives underline the protagonists' inarticulacy in expressing their poetic conceptions, which they experience as a rhythm without words or an abstract design.

### I.1. Poetry in novels: a matter of perspective

In recent decades, few critics have been interested in the interplay between poetry and prose in Woolf's fiction. Most likely, this is due to the fact that this type of investigation can easily lead either to purely formalist analyses, or to impressionistic definitions of non-formal poetic

qualities instinctively perceived in Woolf's novels. An example of the formalist type of study is a 2015 article by Amy Kahrmann Huseby, who analyses 'poetry's impact on the development of Woolf's style' and finds it in the 'virtuosic use of Anglo-Saxon alliterative meters in her euphonic prose'.[2] Huseby's analysis is very precise but is limited to only one aspect of poetry – musicality – and does not reach beyond language to explore broader cultural issues. On the other hand, an example of the impressionistic type of investigation is Harvena Richter's article on 'The Hidden Poetry of Virginia Woolf' (2001), which argues that 'Sections of prose that read like poetry run throughout the novels of Virginia Woolf': these sections can be recognised because they blend 'the emotional with the pictorial'.[3] Similarly elusive, but with greater scope, is an older study by Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (1990). This book contains many important insights into Woolf's modes of poetic writing: in order to overcome the limits of Woolf's reputation as a psychological novelist, McNichol interprets each of her novels according to a 'specific poetic quality or aspect', ranging from a 'visionary dimension that is shot through the mundane', to the presence of an 'elegiac authorial narrative', to 'rhythmic movement', unity of conception, universal perspective, mysticism, symbolism and abstract design or pattern.[4] While all of these aspects, especially universality, are indeed very relevant to Woolf's conception of poetry, McNichol does not analyse them in the context of Woolf's cultural background because she takes them for granted as obviously poetic qualities,[5] in the same way as Huseby identifies poetry with musicality and Richter with the blending of emotions and images.

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[2] Amy Kahrmann Huseby, 'The Reconciliations of Poetry in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*; or, Why it's "perfectly ridiculous to call it a novel"', in *Virginia Woolf: Writing the World*, ed. by Pamela L. Caughie and Diana L. Swanson (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 191-95 (pp. 191-92).

[3] Harvena Richter, 'The Hidden Poetry of Virginia Woolf', *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 57 (2001), 3-4 (p. 3).

[4] Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. xi, xiii, 16, 61, 65, 93, 118-19, 123.

[5] For instance, regarding *To the Lighthouse*, McNichol affirms that Woolf's 'density of writing' as she explores the reality embodied in the image of Mrs Ramsay at the window is 'of course, more typical of poetry than fiction' (p. 98); regarding *The Waves*, she states that the 'shift in focus' required to understand 'the individual in terms of the universal and mysterious nature of human existence' allows Woolf to create 'what is her most obviously 'poetic' novel' (p. 118).

By contrast, an approach which defines with accuracy what poetry meant to Woolf in her own writing and in the cultural context she lived in is more productive. It shows that she had a complex relationship with past and contemporary poetry, torn between criticism, admiration, and mockery. It reveals the particular poetic traditions that mattered to her most, how they influenced her view of genres, and how she found in them useful tools to express her own time, making the poetry of the past participate in her stylistic innovation. My enquiry builds upon Ralph Freedman's perceptive book on *The Lyrical Novel* (1963), which describes the qualities of Woolf's lyricism based on the ideas she expresses in her theoretical writings, focusing on the overall *effects* that her fiction shares with the lyric rather than on surface resemblances. Since Freedman's analysis aims at circumscribing a genre of fiction, he proposes a unified interpretation of Woolf's approach to poetry in prose centred on a specific type of poetry, the lyric: Freedman argues that Virginia Woolf's 'lyrical manner' consists in the 'conversion of character and scene into symbolic imagery' in order to provide a depersonalised, '*formal* rendering of consciousness'.[6] While a more detailed examination of Woolf's reception of different poetic genres offers a more variegated, less consistent picture, Freedman's affirmation that poetry, for Woolf, 'is firmly identified with impersonality' and that, therefore, her 'view of poetry appears to be one of increasing abstraction' illuminates what indeed is the unifying principle of Woolf's multifaceted theory, namely, that poetry is in essence a way of looking that implies detachment and distance.[7]

This emerges clearly from one of the definitions of poetry in prose she writes in her diary in 1925:[8]

> I think I will find some theory about fiction. I shall read six novels, & start some hares. The one I have in view, is about *perspective*. […] I don't think it is a matter

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[6] Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, André Gide, and Virginia Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 187; 270.

[7] Freedman, p. 189.

[8] In all quotations from Woolf's diary and letters, I followed closely her spelling, including inaccuracies and abbreviations.

> of 'development' but something to do with prose & poetry, in novels. For instance Defoe at one hand: E. Brontë at the other. Reality something they put at different distances. (*D* 3: 50)

This definition challenges common assumptions about prose being poetic simply because musical, ornate or metaphorical, as it implies an understanding of prose and poetry not only as forms but also as different '*perspectives*' on reality. As perspective, poetry can survive independently of poetic form, embraced by 'That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art' (*E* 4: 435). This 'cannibal' novel is precisely the genre that Woolf was attempting to create herself in a process of experimentation with modes of poetic writing culminating in the composition of her novel-play-poem *The Waves* (1931). However, in order to fully comprehend Woolf's conception of poetry, it is necessary go back a few years to follow the evolution of her theory of genres step by step, as it is unsystematically developed in her essays and first two novels.

Woolf's considerations upon the differences between prose and poetry beyond form are, in fact, originally inspired by aspects of their traditional forms and corresponding effects. In 1916 she writes that, since a prose text is made of long sentences, while a poem is made of short lines, 'The form of prose produces prolonged and cumulative effects; the form of poetry produces instant and intense effects' (*E* 2: 70). The fragmentary character of poetry is recalled in an essay of the following year, in which she argues that the 'moments of insight or experience' expressed in poems are intense but not connected to each other (2: 119). Two years later, in the essay 'Reading' (1919), Woolf defines poetry figuratively as 'something that has been shaped and clarified, cut to catch the light, hard as gem or rock with the seal of human experience in it' (3: 153). A similar metaphor is used to describe the poetic style of Emerson's prose in the *Journals*: 'He had the poet's gift of turning far, abstract thoughts […] into something firm and glittering' (1: 338). Notably, though, Woolf does not favour a prose that

reproduces the fragmentariness of poetry. Out of her criticism of Emerson, she defines her ideal sentence:

> Emerson did not see that one can write with phrases as well as with words. His sentences are made up of hard fragments each of which has been matched separately with the vision in his head. It is far rarer to find sentences which, lacking emphasis because the joins are perfect and the words common, yet grow together so that you cannot dismember them, and are steeped in meaning and suggestion. (1: 338)

In 1920, in an essay titled 'English prose', Woolf objects to the kind of prose that is collected in anthologies, in which single passages of beautiful style can be separated from their context. If emphasis and concentration are appropriate to poetry – which is easily quotable because 'some metaphor suddenly flowers; some passage breaks off from the rest' (4: 33) – they are misplaced in prose, especially in novels. In fact, Woolf says, 'the greatest of novelists […] writes badly', for novels should not aim at stylistic refinement but at a 'wild and fleeting' kind of beauty which is scattered over their whole body (3: 173-75). In 1925, she finally summarises the formal features and relative effects of prose and poetry in a review of an Elizabethan poetic play, *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, by John Ford. In this essay, 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play', she highlights that the novel is 'long leisurely accumulated', while the poetic play is 'little' and 'contracted'; in the novel emotion is 'all split up, dissipated and then woven together', while in the poetic play it is 'concentrated' and 'heightened'; if the novel 'suggest[s] by description', the poetic play 'reveal[s] by illumination' (4: 66).

The most evident consequence of the concentration of poetry as opposed to the extensiveness of prose is that while the first form is naturally selective, the second is inclusive. Therefore, in order to present a succession of rigorously high and intense emotions, poetry has to avoid everything that is ugly or dull, and only be concerned with beauty. Woolf reiterates this view of poetry in 1918 in reviewing, interestingly, the novels of George Meredith. Some qualities of his writing, namely the fact that 'He avoids ugliness as he avoids dullness' and that

he 'lives from one high moment to the next', make him resemble more a poetic dramatist who writes novels craving 'the relief of blank verse', rather than a proper novelist (2: 275-76). This is undoubtedly a weakness to Woolf, as in her opinion the strength of the prose form resides precisely in its comprehensiveness. In the essay 'English Prose' (1920) mentioned above, she praises prose's ability to convey everything, not only intense emotions but also the details of ordinary life, getting in return 'the priceless privilege of living with human beings' (3: 174). Most importantly, already in 1916 Woolf declares that this versatility is the quality which makes prose the form of modernity: since 'there is a form to be found in literature for the life of the present day', encompassing 'the whole pageant of life without concealment of its ugly surface', the cumulative power of prose is one of the reasons why 'what we have to say now seems to shape itself more easily in the form of prose than in the form of poetry' (2: 70).

From the point of view of form, therefore, Woolf's preference goes decidedly to prose. She has chosen to write novels because the poetic form has too many constraints to be sincere in conveying reality. But are novels necessarily sincere? Woolf's assessment of the most popular English novels at her time proves the contrary: despite their efforts to imitate life, they actually distort reality. This recognition is the reason why Woolf, despite rejecting the poetic form, will continue throughout her career to look at poetry as an important model. Poetry figures prominently as an object of reflection in *The Voyage Out* and in *Night and Day*, while it is also a recurrent topic in the essays. In order to understand exactly what role poetry plays in Woolf's style, though, it is necessary to analyse first the essays that define what she considers to be 'true reality' as opposed to the deceptive 'likeness to life' conveyed by English realist novels (3: 33). The primary material I am about to discuss is obviously well known to literary critics, as it is central to the familiar debate about Woolf's representation of reality and character. Building on recent scholarship which explains Woolf's mode of representation as a

shift from materialism to consciousness,[9] or from materialism to idealism,[10] I propose to consider these shifts as intimately related to her efforts to convey poetry in prose.

The first essay dealing with the issue of the representation of reality in fiction is, of course, 'Modern Novels' (1919), with its well-known criticism of the works of H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and John Galsworthy. According to Woolf, these writers are 'materialists': they try to reproduce reality in terms of 'solidity' – objects, environment, plot – but in so doing they fail to convey 'life itself', which resides in the reality of the mind and is as unsubstantial as a 'semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo' (*E* 3: 32-33). In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' (1923), Woolf explains how character – here a hypothetical Mrs Brown – has consequently become a 'flying spirit', difficult to grasp and define (3: 387-88). Yet, despite the elusive nature of this character, modern novelists should not renounce concreteness but try to recreate, on the contrary, 'solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown' (388).

The tension between these two possible versions of character, one that is material and one that is immaterial, proves very fruitful in the development of Woolf's style. In *Night and Day*, for instance, she explores both possibilities, as in the episode in which Katharine perceives the crowds walking the streets of London first as 'semi-transparent', undifferentiated people, then as solid, separate individuals. It should be noted that in this passage the crowd's ghost-like appearance is presented as a *visual* effect – the result of the 'blend of daylight and of lamplight' – which erases differences in favour of a more comprehensive view (*ND* 462-63). In *Jacob's Room* (1922), Woolf privileges decidedly this immaterial and generalised rendering of character, for Jacob is an ungraspable entity: 'Nobody sees any one as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole – they see all sorts of things – they see themselves…' (*JR* 25). Here, Jacob's

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[9] See Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 2nd edn (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), pp. 24-25.
[10] See Michael H. Whitworth, *Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 118-19.

individuality is so weak that any observer/reader can see in him, as in a mirror, his own reflection. Accordingly, Woolf writes in 'Character in Fiction' (1924) that a character can either be a specific individual with a peculiar personality, or else an abstract, 'more general *view* of human nature' (*E* 3: 426, my italics). It is a matter of perspective. In 'Character in Fiction' (1924), Woolf states that the quality of this perspective depends on national literary traditions, but more often elsewhere she affirms that it depends on the difference between prose and poetry.

Speaking of perspective in prose and in poetry we have abandoned the realm of form to enter the realm of vision. Of course, the ways poetry and prose see characters is rooted in their original forms – the concise verse being fit to convey the general, the long sentence to communicate the particular – but they are in no way restricted to them and can easily travel across formal boundaries. In delineating her theory of literature, Woolf repeatedly traces a history of perspectives, focusing in particular upon the presentation of character as the most closely related to her main centre of interest, the expression of the human mind. The first character to be dealt with in literature is the writer him/herself; hence, it is to the way the author makes him/herself felt in prose and in poetry that Woolf devotes her historical observations. These are found for the first time in an essay written in 1919 and titled 'Reading'.

In 'Reading', Woolf begins by relating her own impressions in reading Elizabethan prose, especially family memoirs and travel narratives. She notices that this ancient prose fails to satisfy 'the intruding modern spirit' (3: 144) because it does not communicate thoughts and emotions; in other words, it lacks the presence of a human mind reacting to the events narrated. The authors of these travel narratives 'make no mention of oneself' (149). Woolf explains this absence with the fact that the material world was still so largely unknown to the Elizabethans and survival so difficult that they were not yet interested in introspection. Woolf makes this point clearer by drawing a parallel between sixteenth-century travellers and a group of children

– Woolf herself and her siblings – setting out on a night expedition moth hunting in the forest. For both explorers and children, dark and unknown surroundings are responsible for submerging the voice of the mind: ‘Not only has the dark the power to extinguish light, but it also buries under it a great part of the human spirit. We hardly spoke, and then only in low voices which made little headway against the thoughts that filled us’ (150). Woolf places considerations of form alongside considerations of subject matter: the chaotic, cumulative prose of the Elizabethan age which describes the material world is opposed to the sharp definition of poetry (period unspecified), which bears ‘the seal of human experience’, and contains ‘as in a clear gem the flame which burns now so high and now sinks so low in our own hearts’ (153). According to Woolf, the subject of the human mind falls entirely under the domain of poetry until a seventeenth-century prose writer, Sir Thomas Browne, ‘brings in the whole question, which is afterwards to become of such importance, of knowing one’s author’ so that in his works finally ‘is the form of a human being’ (156). This human being – in this case the writer himself – that is expressed in prose is very different from the one delineated in poetry, for ‘The poet gives us his essence, but prose takes the mould of the body and mind entire’ (157).

This sentence is another statement of Woolf's theory of prose and poetry not as forms, but as perspectives on human beings – author and characters – and on the fictional world they inhabit. Conceiving a character as an individual, that is a ‘particular man, whom we can love’ (4: 59), as Sir Thomas Browne emerges from his essays, means adopting a prosaic or particular point of view; by contrast, conceiving a character as an essence, an abstract aspect of human nature, means adopting a poetic or general point of view. According to Woolf, the particular perspective is typical of modern sensibility and its origin coincides with the birth of personality in prose. Before then, prose would only deal with the external world and interiority would only be communicated in verse, though not in the form of introspection, but by making human

passions abstract and universal. Woolf considers the issue of perspective in fiction historically in the essay 'Anon' (1939-1941), a draft for the first chapter of a history of English literature that she began to write in the last years of her life and never completed. Anon is the name with which Woolf calls the anonymous lyric poet or playwright at the beginning of English literature, whose role was to express 'what every one feels', the passions shared by the whole community, and not his own experience or that of other individuals:

> Anonymity was a great possession. It gave the early writing an impersonality, a generality. It gave us the ballads; it gave us the songs. It allowed us to know nothing of the writer: and so to concentrate upon his song. (*Anon* 397)

Even when, in the sixteenth century, printed books began to display the authors' names, the perspective of literature, the emotion conveyed was still general and its natural vehicle verse, for fixed forms are impersonal, and easily shared:

> Music moved beneath the words. No grammar bound them tightly together. They could be read aloud; danced to or sung to; but they could not […] follow the pace of the speaking voice. They could not enter into the private world. (389)

It was once again an essayist, this time not Sir Thomas Browne but Francis Bacon, who first brought personality into literature: 'He was bringing the prose of the mind into being. And thus by increasing the range of the poet, by making it possible for him to express more, he was making an end of anonymity' (397).

'Anon' is not the only historicised account of the use of poetic and prosaic perspectives in literature that Woolf proposes in her essays: there are in fact several accounts which are not entirely consistent with each other. If in 'Anon' the impersonal perspective of poetry is presented as closely tied to its form, in 'On Not Knowing Greek' (1925), after pondering 'the insoluble question of poetry and its nature', especially when it is translated from a foreign language, Woolf suggests a definition which is totally independent of form:

> For they are Greek; we cannot tell how they sounded; they ignore the obvious sources of excitement; they owe nothing of their effect to any extravagance of

> expression, and certainly they throw no light upon the speaker's character or the writer's. But they remain, something that has been stated and must eternally endure. (4: 43)

What, then, is the source of their poetry and of their universal significance? The fact, says Woolf, that they convey 'the stable, the permanent, the original human being' and not the feelings of separate individuals (42). Therefore, poetry is precisely 'this lapse from the particular to the general' (43), here exemplified by ancient Greek literature as opposed to the detailed and dissecting prose of modern novels. From these premises, Woolf does not conclude that the poetic and general perspective is forever lost in modern literature and in novels; on the contrary, and this is crucial to Woolf's theory of poetry into prose, the poetic point of view can be retained and indeed it is – at least in some works.

Once again, a historical distinction has to be made. In 'How It Strikes a Contemporary' (1923), Woolf makes another 'comparison between past and present' (3: 357), but this time starting from Romanticism. The literature of the past is thus represented by Wordsworth, Scott and Jane Austen – poets as well as novelists – while the literature of the present remains unspecified, simply marked as 'our contemporaries' (358). Their difference stands in the fact that past authors adopt a poetic perspective, whereas contemporary authors give 'the sense of personality vibrating with perceptions' and cannot generalise because they do not believe in any truth or any world which exists beyond their own particular experience (357-58). This trait, while it helps to create 'vivid' characters, is also to Woolf a great limitation of contemporary literature. For this reason, frequently in her essays she turns to analyse those nineteenth-century novelists who manage to provide a larger view on human nature, the so-called 'poet-novelists'.[11]

[11] The term 'poet-novelist' appears in a 1928 essay reviewing 'The Novels of George Meredith', in which Woolf declares that Meredith 'was not a poet-novelist wholly and completely as Emily Brontë was a poet-novelist' (5: 549).

The poet-novelists that Woolf particularly admires are Emily Brontë and Thomas Hardy. The poetic style of Emily Brontë is analysed in an essay titled '"Jane Eyre" and "Wuthering Heights"' (1925). According to Woolf, what makes Emily Brontë a poet in *Wuthering Heights* is 'That gigantic ambition [...] to say something through the mouths of her characters which is not merely 'I love' or 'I hate', but 'we, the whole human race' and 'you, the eternal powers...'' (4: 169). Further, 'It is this suggestion of power underlying the apparitions of human nature and lifting them up into the presence of greatness that gives the book its huge stature among other novels' (169). This image of a solitary human being shown in his encounter with great forces – Nature, destiny – makes apparent that Woolf is here referring to a very specific type of poetry, namely Romantic poetry. The same analogy is found in the essay 'How Should One Read a Book?' (1926) in relation to the novels of Thomas Hardy, whose characters 'in their solitude are directly at the mercy of the gods' (5: 392). Comparing Hardy to Jane Austen, Woolf states that 'Where she is matter of fact, he is romantic and poetical', presenting the adjectives 'romantic' and 'poetical' as a couple of quasi-synonyms (392). The reason for this is not just the fact that Brontë and Hardy are Romantic authors, but that the legacy of Romanticism has left such a powerful mark on Woolf that her whole theory of poetry is largely based on the Romantic model. There is clear evidence of this in an essay called 'Romance and the Heart' (1923), in which Woolf, reviewing the novelist Romer Wilson, remarks that 'she has the romantic power of making us feel the stir and tumult of life as a whole. She gives us a general, not a particular, sense of excitement' (3: 366).

The generalised perspective of Romanticism, however, is not deprived of the sense of individuality, which is so important to the sensibility of the moderns. On the contrary, it comes from such an intense sense of individuality that its contours grow large until they are lost: as Woolf notes in 'Byron and Mr Briggs' (1922), 'a poet thinks of life in general, or so intensely of his own in particular as to include the general life' (3: 481). The Romantic poet Woolf

mainly has in mind is Wordsworth, especially when, in 'The Sublime and the Beautiful', he says: 'To talk of an object as being sublime or beautiful in itself, without references to some subject by whom that sublimity or beauty is perceived, is absurd […]'; therefore 'The true province of the philosopher is […] to look into his own mind & determine the law by which he is affected' (357).[12] Woolf echoes this statement in 1917, when she writes that the main feature of Romantic poetry is that 'the writer is thinking more of the effect of the thing upon his mind than of the thing itself. And up to a point there is nothing more real than the effect of things upon one's mind.' (*E* 2: 75). This remark brings us back to Woolf's original concern – expressing the reality of the mind – which has led her to reject the materialism of realist English novels in order to adopt, in prose, the perspective of (Romantic) poetry. Being able to see the reality of the mind alongside material reality is again a matter of vision, because it depends on the distance at which the writer positions him/herself in relation to the fictional world:

> To sit cheek by jowl with our fellows cramped up together is distasteful, indeed repulsive. But draw a little apart, see people in groups, as outlines, and they become at once memorable and full of beauty. Then it is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds. (4: 367)

This passage comes from a key essay on the style of Thomas De Quincey, significantly titled 'Impassioned Prose', in which Woolf argues that it is indeed possible to widen the domain of the prose form to make it express what poetry used to express. It is dated 1926; in 1927, she publishes 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', giving voice to her own programme for the novel of the modern age.

The main argument of 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' is that, given the failure of the poetic form to express the contrasting emotions of the modern mind, 'It may be possible that prose is going to take over – has, indeed, already taken over – some of the duties which were

[12] *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), II, p. 357.

once discharged by poetry' (4: 434). By seeing things from a distance – as 'it will stand further back from life' – the novel of the future will give 'the outline rather than the detail' and 'will make little use of the marvellous fact-recording power' (435). Its characters will be shown not only in relation to each other but also in their 'soliloquy in solitude' (436), so that the task of the modern novel will be double: 'It will give the relations of man to Nature, to fate; his imagination; his dreams. But it will also give the sneer, the contrast, the question, the closeness and complexity of life' (436). Stylistically, the perspectives of poetry and prose will be interconnected, as Lawrence Sterne has accomplished in his Tristram Shandy: 'There, one sees, is poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry' (438). Virginia Woolf experimented with this fluid alternation of perspectives in different ways in her creative work, starting with her earliest fiction.

## I.2. The question of poetry in the modern age: *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*

Scholars who have enquired into the poetic aspects of Virginia Woolf's style have generally focused on her experimental works, without examining how the question of poetry is addressed in her more conventional first two novels, *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*. Thus, while Huseby analyses the musicality of *Between the Acts*, Freedman and Richter see the beginning of Virginia Woolf's poetic method in *Jacob's Room*, with some anticipations in 'Kew Gardens'.[13] If it is true that Woolf's theory of poetry does not yet disrupt the traditional form of the novel in *The Voyage Out* (1915) and in *Night and Day* (1919), these two works are nevertheless a crucial medium, alongside the essays, through which Woolf reflected on the question of poetry in relation to tradition and modernity. Since they echo and enrich her idea of poetry as expressed in the essays, it can be said that Woolf's theory of poetry is partly

[13] See Huseby, pp. 191-95; Freedman, p. 206; Richter, p. 3.

developed in fictional form in these two novels; and further, that this theory is not entirely without stylistic impact.

First of all, poetry is a very important element in the plots of both novels, because it plays a prominent role in the lives of their characters. In *The Voyage Out* poetry is frequently a topic of conversation and is read aloud as entertainment. Many classics of the English tradition are quoted, giving us a picture of what Woolf's society commonly referred to as poetry. The poets mentioned are Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, Cowper, Kingsley, Wordsworth, Shelley, Keats, Swinburne, Meredith, Hardy, and Whitman. From this list, it can be seen that the most frequently read poets who constituted the standard of good poetry were mainly, in addition to Shakespeare and Milton, the Romantics and the Victorians. Very important in the novel are also some ancient Greek poets (Sophocles, Sappho, Pindar), but these belong to the domain of specialised scholarship rather than common knowledge. The characters who read Greek poetry, in addition to the English, are Ridley Ambrose, a scholar who spends almost the whole novel editing Pindar shut up in his room, St John Hirst, a self-conscious Cambridge student who struggles to communicate with people outside the University, and the pedantic Mr Pepper, who was also educated at Cambridge. Already, it is apparent that poetry belonged, in different ways, to two kinds of public within the upper class: a society of non-specialised men and women and a restricted group of highly-educated men. The latter would not share their knowledge, as this quotation makes clear:

> Unfortunately, as age puts one barrier between human beings, and learning another, and sex a third, Mr Ambrose in his study was some thousand miles distant from the nearest human being, who in this household was inevitably a woman. He sat hour after hour among white-leaved books, alone like an idol in an empty church […]. (*VO* 191)

The figure of Mr Ambrose is built on the memory of Woolf's father, Leslie Stephen, who was a scholar himself and represented to her the 'paternal custodianship of literature'.[14] His influence on her encounter with literature was so strong that she eventually 'identified her father with the great writers',[15] especially the poets, because poetry at the time was considered the province of serious literature.[16] Outside this stronghold of learned men, the rest of society, especially the poorly educated women (the scholar Miss Allan in the novel is an exception), still read or listened to poetry by habit: but what did it really mean to them? In *The Voyage Out*, Virginia Woolf is asking precisely this question, registering all the various reactions that poetry provokes in different people: of course, these depend on taste and temperament, but, in general, it can be said that the non-specialised characters consider poetry beautiful more for its sounds, or suggestive single words, than for its meaning, which they can hardly follow. A good example is Mrs Dalloway, who after quoting Shelley exclaims: 'How divine! – and yet what nonsense!' (*VO* 60). Further, there are all the pressures of modern life: to the characters who are involved or interested in public engagement, poetry sounds meaningless, as it does to the politician Mr Dalloway: 'Now your artists *find* things in a mess, shrug their shoulders, turn aside to their visions – which I grant may be very beautiful – and *leave* things in a mess' (43). Of the younger generation, Hirst is the only one who writes a poem, but as a mere intellectual exercise: it is a poem in which he manages to demonstrate the existence of God, in whom he does not believe. Rachel, the main character, is not very interested in poetry, while her lover Terence wants to write a novel.

The question of poetry in *The Voyage Out*, however, is not reduced to this picture of a venerated tradition out of touch with modern life. In parallel with the actual poetry in verse that the characters read and discuss – and that Woolf admired but also uncomfortably identified

[14] Jane de Gay, *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 20-21.

[15] De Gay, p. 13.

[16] Whitworth, p. 92.

with male dominance[17] – the novel introduces another aspect of poetry, which is less obviously defined as such. In the process of falling in love with each other, Rachel and Terence discover a special mood which, in the light of Woolf's essays, I will define as poetic or preparative to poetry. Stella McNichol has identified as poetic Woolf's ability, in *The Voyage Out*, to intersperse the conventional realist plot, the comedy of manners, with events that have deeper symbolic significance and are also marked by suggestive language and intense use of imagery.[18] Hence, she describes Virginia Woolf's poetic style in this novel as a particular way of handling language and scenes so as to convey the transition from ordinary life to 'a different mode of experience', consisting in a 'moment of transcendence'.[19] The poetic quality of these moments can be defined with greater accuracy if considered alongside Woolf's view of poetry as the conception and communication of a general, as opposed to a particular, perspective on the world. According to this idea, poetry is first and foremost a mental attitude, before it is put into words: Woolf herself speaks of a 'mood, intense and generalised, unaware of detail, but stressed by some regular, recurrent beat, whose natural expression is poetry; and that is the time to read poetry when we are almost able to write it' (*E* 5: 577). Here, Woolf identifies a moment antecedent to the writing and reading of verbal poetry, characterised by a mood which can be felt by poets and readers alike and that makes both the creation and the enjoyment of poetry possible. This is the feeling experienced by the main characters of *The Voyage Out* in a series of episodes which counterpoint the explicit quotations and discussions of poetry throughout the novel.

The first of these experiences comes to Rachel when she is alone in her room after a morning spent reading, paradoxically, prose (Ibsen's *The Doll's House* and a novel):

> The morning was hot, and the exercise of reading left her mind contracting and expanding like the mainspring of a clock. The sounds in the garden outside joined

[17] De Gay, pp. 20-21.
[18] McNichol, pp. 1-15.
[19] McNichol, pp. 13; 6.

> with the clock, and the small noises of midday, which one can ascribe to no definite cause, in a regular rhythm. It was all very real, very big, very impersonal, and after a moment or two she began to raise her first finger and to let it fall on the arm of her chair so as to bring back to herself some consciousness of her own existence. […] Who were the people moving in the house – moving things from one place to another? And life, what was that? It was only a light passing over the surface and vanishing, as in time she would vanish, though the furniture in the room would remain. (*VO* 138)

In this passage, no explicit reference to poetry is given, but various elements signal that a poetic mood is the object of these lines. The most obvious of these elements is the 'regular rhythm' that Rachel feels in her mind and that unifies all the surrounding noises under a single beat. There is no doubt that Woolf is here describing the rhythm of poetry, because she refers to exactly the same kind of universal rhythm in a much later essay, 'Letter to a Young Poet' (1932). Woolf's suggestions as to how modern poetry should be conceived are highly reminiscent of the above passage:

> Then let your rhythmical sense wind itself in and out among men and women, omnibuses, sparrows – whatever come along the street – until it has strung them together in one harmonious whole. That perhaps is your task – to find the relation between things that seem incompatible yet have a mysterious affinity […]. (*E* 5: 316)

The second element, tightly connected to the unifying rhythm, is universality: the tick of Rachel's mental clock makes all the different noises join together 'in the midst of the universal silence' (*VO* 139). What Rachel is experiencing is a sudden change of perspective, thanks to which she feels able to perceive the world as a harmonious whole, while she is at the same time losing consciousness of herself. As we have seen throughout the above survey of Woolf's essays, universality and impersonality are precisely the characteristics of the perspective of poetry, 'this lapse from the particular to the general' (*E* 4: 43).

The change of perspective also alters Rachel's perception of human beings, whose life suddenly appears to her as unsubstantial as a light 'passing over the surface and vanishing': this remark noticeably matches Woolf's definition of modern character in 'Mr Bennett and Mrs

Brown', who similarly seems 'a dancing light, an illumination gliding up the wall and out of the window [...]' (*E* 3: 387). As a consequence of her vision, later in the novel Rachel will ask Terence: 'Does it ever seem to you, Terence, that the world is composed entirely of vast blocks of matter, and that we're nothing but patches of light –' she looked at the soft spots of sun wavering over the carpet and up the wall – 'like that?' (*VO* 341). Although Rachel does not write a line of poetry in the entire novel, she is clearly capable, at times, of achieving that state of mind which is essential to write and to appreciate poetry, and which allows her to transcend her individual perspective in order to comprehend the nature of universal life.

The poetic state of mind is experienced by both Rachel and Terence several times in the novel, all instances having very similar features and getting more and more frequent as the couple participates in an expedition along the Amazon River. There, they fall in a dream-like state induced by the wild natural environment, the emotion of falling in love with each other, and, often, the darkness of the night. This feeling finally overcomes them when they separate from the other travellers to go for a walk in the forest. During the walk the lovers perceive an unreal silence, which recalls the 'universal silence' felt by Rachel in her room (138): 'Silence seemed to have fallen upon the world' (316). The word 'silence' is insistently repeated throughout the episode: although this time the peace is not broken by any regular rhythm, another important element makes the couple's state of mind analogous to Rachel's first poetic experience. It is the quasi-annihilation of consciousness: 'Not only did the silence weigh upon them, but they were both unable to frame any thoughts' (316); and further, 'They walked on in silence as people walking in their sleep, and were oddly conscious now and again of the mass of their bodies' (318). The lovers find themselves suddenly inarticulate: they communicate only in short broken sentences, Rachel repeating Terence's words because unable to compose her own. The similarity between their experience and those of the Elizabethan travellers and moth-hunting children described in the essay 'Reading' (1919), makes it clear that the lovers

are reliving an ancient, poetic stage of human expression, when the wonders of the unexplored world bewildered the private thoughts of individuals to the point that they could not be communicated. As we have seen, at that stage human consciousness could only find shared, abstract expression in verse. Significantly, the Elizabethan explorers are mentioned at the beginning of the novel's chapter on the expedition ('nothing had been done to change [the river's] appearance from what it was to the eyes of the Elizabethan voyagers', *VO* 308) suggesting that the sight of the virgin forest will trigger in the lovers a change of perspective, from a modern and prosaic perspective to an ancient, poetic perspective.[20]

Indeed, the night after their walk in the forest, while standing together on the deck of the boat, Rachel and Terence are able to see things differently. First of all, they can see the world as a whole: 'The great black world lay round them. As they were drawn smoothly along it seemed possessed of immense thickness and endurance' (337). They see it bigger, measuring infinite distances, and also very solid compared to their own bodies, of which once again they almost lose consciousness. Terence even accuses Rachel, for whom the feeling of impersonality is stronger, of forgetting about his presence altogether. What she replies is very revealing about the poetic experience:

> 'Oh, no,' she whispered, she had not forgotten, only the stars – the night – the dark –
> 'You're like a bird half asleep in its nest, Rachel. You're asleep. You're talking in your sleep.'
> Half asleep, and murmuring broken words, they stood in the angle made by the bow of the boat. […]. Now a bell struck on the bridge […], and once a bird startled in its sleep creaked, flew on to the next tree, and was silent again. The darkness poured down profusely, and left them with scarcely any feeling of life, except that they were standing there together in the darkness. (337)

[20] The historical notion of poetry as an ancient perspective is, of course, only one side of Woolf's theory, because she considers the poetic perspective as being both ancient and timeless. On the one hand, seeing the world as the Elizabethans saw it means to go back to an earlier stage of consciousness, but, on the other hand, adopting the poetic perspective in prose is a progress that will mark the novel of the future. Woolf always appreciates the difference between poetry and prose both diachronically and synchronically.

It is poetry which, according to Woolf in 'How Should One read a Book?' (1926), expresses the feelings of human beings 'in contact with silence, solitude' (*E* 4: 395), and it is a poet-novelist like Thomas Hardy who makes his characters come 'in contact with moors, sheep, the sky and the stars' (4: 392). Furthermore, the presence in this scene of a singing bird, likened to Rachel herself 'murmuring broken words', almost inevitably leads the reader to make an association with the poetic bird par excellence, the nightingale.

As we are beginning to see, poetry in Woolf's early novels is marked not only by direct reference or imitation but by the presence of a thick fabric of imagery and by the description of a precise mode of experience that, in her essays, she connects with poetry. The duplicity of poetry – that which is written and that which is felt – illuminates the complexity of Woolf's reflection on the topic in *The Voyage Out*. As Jane de Gay has demonstrated by interpreting the Miltonic quotations and allusions permeating the novel,[21] references to written poetry are often based on thematic connections, but their interaction with the second, unwritten type of poetry also raises questions about the role of poetry as such, regardless of the content of specific poems. Thus, poetry is presented both as a historical phenomenon, a piece of heritage from past poets, and as a timeless human feeling that can affect the characters' way of seeing the world around them. In this respect it is meaningful, also in relation to the interplay between prose and poetry, that the renovated (poetic) perspective on the world that Terence acquires during the river expedition turns out to affect the writing of his novel on *Silence*:

> The book called *Silence* would not now be the same book that it would have been. He would then put down his pencil and stare in front of him, and wonder in what respects the world was different – it had, perhaps, more solidity, more coherence, more importance, greater depth. Why, even the earth sometimes seemed to him very deep; not carved into hills and cities and fields, but heaped in great masses. (*VO* 339)

[21] De Gay, pp. 33-41.

In this passage, it is important to note that the poetic perspective makes the earth appear robbed of its details ('not carved into hills and cities and fields') and showing instead its more general outline ('heaped in great masses'). A description of the night which is found earlier in the novel similarly points to the beauty of the earth when its features become indistinct: 'The wind at night blowing over the hills and woods was purer and fresher than the wind by day, and the earth, robbed of detail, more mysterious than the earth coloured and divided by roads and fields' (122). Visually, two elements have the power to change our perspective on things so that we can see the outline rather than the detail, and these are distance and darkness. In *The Voyage Out* and in *Night and Day* – even the titles are telling in this sense – Woolf makes use of both to mark the shift from the prosaic to the poetic perspective. Indeed, in these two novels darkness and distance often transform the world of conventional fiction, full of details about material objects and relationships, to make it appear as beautiful and mysterious as the universe described in traditional poetry. This double perspective is especially evident in *Night and Day*, in which the issue of poetry and modernity is an important ingredient of the plot.

If the poetry of tradition is present in the daily lives of the characters of *The Voyage Out*, in *Night and Day* the legacy of the past is felt much more heavily. Katharine Hilbery, like Woolf herself, comes from a family of intellectuals which includes a great poet-ancestor, Katharine's grandfather Richard Alardyce. Katharine and her mother, Mrs Hilbery, spend their days trying to write his biography and showing his portrait and objects to visitors. Mrs Hilbery is not only obsessed by her illustrious father but by all poetry, especially Shakespeare, and her head is full of fantasies she draws from literature. She is a comic character who does not manage to accomplish anything practical. As a result, Katharine associates poetry on the one hand with a cumbersome past, which limits her freedom and prevents her from living the present, and on the other with a naïve and visionary approach to life. The man she is engaged to marry, Rodney, is also a poet of traditional verse poetry and drama. He is a tragicomic

character who much resembles Hirst in *The Voyage Out*: upper-class, highly-educated, self-conscious and vain, he arouses in Katharine a mixture of affection and pity. Mrs Hilbery and Rodney are the characters through whom traditional poetry is satirised in the novel, in order to show its weakness and artificiality in the context of modern life. This is evident in the following ironical passage about Rodney:

> His theory was that every mood has its metre. His mastery of metres was very great; and, if the beauty of a drama depended upon the variety of measures in which the personages speak, Rodney's plays must have challenged the works of Shakespeare. (*ND* 143)

In fact, Rodney's poetic play produces in Katharine only a 'chill stupor' (143) and clearly fails to convey its meaning. If this was the only kind of poetry described in the novel, its death in the modern age would be presented as certain. However, as in *The Voyage Out*, alongside this more evident, read-aloud poetry runs another, silent kind of poetry that the younger generation still manages to feel. Its presence suggests that if some aspects of the poetic tradition should be dismissed, others instead can be retained.

*Night and Day* expresses even more clearly than *The Voyage Out* the idea that poetry, before being a mode of writing, is a feeling, the experience of a shift in perspective from the particular to the general. The main characters of *Night and Day*, Katharine Hilbery, Ralph Denham and Mary Datchet, several times in the novel go through the same poetic experience as felt by Rachel and Terence in *The Voyage Out*. This experience is characterised by the encounter with infinity in the form of a vast landscape, a cityscape, or the sky, followed by a vision of the world as a whole, and finally by a feeling of self-loss.

One of the most revealing examples is the succession of visions Katharine has during her Christmas holiday at Stogdon House, when looking at the starlit sky alone in the garden. This episode is, visually and metaphorically, a study in perspective. Katharine is feeling upset as she has just realised that she is unhappy about her engagement with Rodney. Therefore she

feels entangled in her 'purely terrestrial discontents', from which she hopes to 'shake herself free' by looking at the stars (*ND* 199). The opposition between the earth and the sky, and the different perspectives they imply, is immediately set up visually through a suggestive description of what Katharine can see:

> She was walking up and down a gravel path in the garden of Stogdon House, her sight of the heavens being partially intercepted by the light leafless hoops of a pergola. Thus a spray of clematis would completely obscure Cassiopeia, or blot out with its black pattern myriads of miles of the Milky Way. At the end of the pergola, however, there was a stone seat, from which the sky could be seen completely swept clear of any earthly interruption […]. (199)

Katharine's initial point of view is, literally and figuratively, 'purely terrestrial'. From her particular position in the garden under a pergola her vision is so distorted that something as small as 'a spray of clematis' looks bigger than Cassiopeia. However, as she finds a spot from which she can look straight at the sky without any obstacles, a totally different view is laid open to her. The lines that follow explain this metaphor: before looking at the stars, Katharine can only think about her relationship with Rodney and the reasons of her unhappiness (199-202) which, though small like clematis compared to the universe, prevents her from seeing it. Sometime later, however, her point of view changes: 'she changed the focus of her eyes, and saw nothing but the stars' (202). This is the beginning of her poetic vision of the universe, which the narrator describes stage by stage as Katharine imagines seeing the earth at an increasing distance. Katharine's imagination allows her own point of view to widen so as to encompass the point of view of the stars. At the first stage, it seems to her that the Heavens are observing 'the [Christmas] procession of kings and wise men' (202) who, despite being distant, still appear as recognisable and respectable human beings. The second stage, however, transforms the human body into 'an ape-like, furry form' (203) until, in the last stage, humans become completely invisible. This phase brings Katharine to the highest form of detachment, which also involves the loss of her own individuality:

> [T]here was nothing in the universe save stars and the light of stars; as she looked up the pupils of her eyes so dilated with starlight that the whole of her seemed dissolved in silver and spilt over the ledges of the stars for ever and ever indefinitely through space. (203)

This passage is reminiscent of a scene in *The Voyage Out* in which Rachel contemplates a vast mountain landscape in South America, 'the great size of the view seeming to enlarge her eyes beyond their natural limit' (*VO* 157), to the point that she has to lower her gaze and look at the ground. In both cases, the encounter with infinity, whether the view of the mountains or the night sky, is overwhelming and threatening for the characters: while Rachel protects herself by looking away, Katharine surrenders to self-dissolution. The close resemblance between this feeling and the Romantic sublime, especially Wordsworth's sublime, suggests that the mood that Woolf describes so often in the early novels, far from being universally poetic and timeless, is in fact the creative product of a precise literary tradition.

As Wordsworth explains in his essay 'The Sublime and the Beautiful', a sensation of sublimity affects the mind when it contemplates a vast natural landscape and perceives its power without any 'feeling of self' or 'self-consideration'. It follows a sense of 'intense unity' between the mind and the natural power, which is analogous to a sense of infinity: 'the absolute crown of the impression is infinity, which is a modification of unity'.[22] Similarly, Katharine's dissolved self becomes one with the infinite sky she is observing, as she becomes silver 'spilt over the ledges of the stars for ever and ever indefinitely through space' (*ND* 203). Steven Vine notes the contradictory nature of the Romantic sublime experience, which implies both the affirmation of the individual – whose mind is able to conceive ideas such as infinity and unity – and his diminishment to the point of self-loss.[23] Virginia Woolf, who by 1906 had read and admiringly reviewed Wordsworth's *Guide through the District of the Lakes*, containing 'The

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[22] *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, ed. by W. J. B. Owen and Jane Worthington Smyser, II, pp. 350, 354, 357.

[23] Steven Vine, *Reinventing the Sublime: Post-Romantic Literature and Theory* (Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), pp. 1-5.

Sublime and the Beautiful', reproduces the same tension between self-affirmation and self-extinction in her first two novels. If her main characters almost lose self-consciousness when confronted with a vision of the universe, this impersonal, detached state is always achieved within their own minds through the imaginative faculty: the narrator always makes clear that the characters are having a dream. This Romantic contradiction also informs Woolf's theoretical writings, as in her essays she associates the poetic or generalised perspective, which is supposed to be impersonal, with imagination and dreams.

The analogies between the Romantic experience of the sublime and the 'poetic' visions of the world described in *The Voyage Out* and in *Night and Day* suggest that the idea according to which Woolf rejects the aesthetic of the sublime because masculinist and individualist, in favour of a feminist 'impersonality and collective consciousness', should be taken with caution.[24] Not only do both female and male characters equally experience the sublime or poetic emotion in Woolf's novels, but she was also aware of the ambivalence of Romantic aesthetics, whose intense individualism is actually a vehicle to impersonality. As explained by Freedman in his study of the legacy of Romantic lyricism in modern novels, 'poetry begins with the self but leads to its *depersonalization*. A similar process takes place in lyrical prose narrative'.[25] In her 'Letter to a Young Poet', published in 1932, Woolf criticises contemporary poets for their tendency to individualism and solipsism, precisely *in opposition to* Romantic poets:[26]

> [I]t is apparently easier to write a poem about oneself than about any other subject. But what does one mean by 'oneself'? Not the self that Wordsworth, Keats, and Shelley have described – not the self that loves a woman, or that hates a tyrant, or that broods over the mystery of the world. No, the self that you are engaged in describing is shut out from all that. […] In other words the poet is much less interested in what we have in common than in what he has apart. The poet is trying

[24] Vine, pp. 87-88.
[25] Freedman, p. 188.
[26] See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), p. 619.

> […] to describe a world that has perhaps no existence except for one particular person at one particular moment. (*E* 5: 313-14)

That poetry should describe the feelings of all human beings is a crucial point of Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*, which Woolf was reading and annotating while writing *Night and Day*.[27] One quotation suffices to bring out the overlap between Wordsworth's and Woolf's theories of poetry: 'the Poet is chiefly distinguished from other men by a greater promptness to think and feel […]. *But these passions and thoughts and feelings are the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men*' (my italics).[28] An echo of these lines is in the series of annotations titled 'Byron and Mr Briggs' (1922), in which Woolf reflects: 'It is a greater effort to feel for all lovers and for all partings than to feel for your own or a friends. […] Yet it is these general emotions […] that prevail in Homer Virgil Dante and Shakespeare' (*E* 3: 488). Therefore, Woolf concludes, 'it seems that ~~its~~ <the> emotions <of poetry> are not our private emotions, and that they are brought into conformity with some abstract principle […]' (490). If Woolf saw impersonality/universality as the ultimate aim of all good poetry, she also knew – as 'Anon' makes clear – that this could be achieved by a collective consciousness as well as individual, and that the Romantic type of lyricism was not the only path. As we shall see later in this study, in Woolf's thought the two models do not exclude each other, but should rather be considered as complementary and in dialogue.

On the whole, however, the legacy of Romanticism prevails, especially as it inspires Woolf's overarching idea that poetry's role is to bring human beings in touch with absolute and universal truth – a view which affects her reading of all poems. It is interesting to note how Woolf's theory of poetry, which she makes the point of departure for innovation in her fiction, is in fact little inspired by the innovations of contemporary modernist poets, but heavily

[27] De Gay, p. 64.

[28] William Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, and Other Poems, 1797-1800, ed. by James Butler and Karen Green (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 753.

influenced, on the contrary, by traditional literary models. Jane de Gay makes a compelling argument that *Night and Day* 'can be seen as a stage in [Woolf's] process of revolutionising the novel by drawing on the literature of the past'. Indeed, the novel's references to Romantic ideas about the importance of the mind and the imagination, as well as to the Shakespearean theme of the affirmation of dream over reality, provide an escape from the social orientation of the traditional courtship plot. The characters' reveries offer Woolf the opportunity to interrupt the narrative flow in order to explore the workings of the mind, thus 'reaching beyond plot, personality and emotion which she attacked in "Modern Novels"' and opening the way to her later experimental work.[29] Another outcome of the impact of Romantic and idealistic aesthetic theories, which at the time were also being revisited in the field of the visual arts, is Woolf's understanding of poetry as a purely formal conception: either a rhythm, as already mentioned in the analysis of *The Voyage Out*, or an abstract design, both of which are extreme realisations of the impersonal, universal and unifying poetic perspective.

In *Night and Day*, the abstract design appears for the first time in connection with other metaphors that Woolf associates with poetic thinking. The episode describes the vision Mary Datchet has while walking in the crowded streets of London, deeply suffering after realising that Ralph Denham does not love her. As happened to Katharine looking at the stars, though, her perspective on her own suffering suddenly changes in the course of a reverie:

> From an acute consciousness of herself as an individual, Mary passed to a conception of the scheme of things in which, as a human being, she must have her share. She half held a vision; the vision shaped and dwindled. She wished she had a pencil and a piece of paper to help her to give a form to this conception which composed itself as she walked down the Charing Cross Road. (*ND* 271)

Here universality – the condition shared by all human beings – is initially not visualised through a view of the entire world seen from the sky (distant perspective), but through a shape, a form. The lexicon is that of drawing. But the metaphor of the distant perspective immediately

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[29] De Gay, pp. 61-65.

returns, as to Mary the process of giving form to her vision resembles climbing 'the crest of existence and see it all laid out once and forever' (271). The (related) images of the design and the mountain-top view are in turn linked to the metaphor of the stone or fragment, which in Woolf's essays is often associated with poetic expression:

> Of this process, […] which comprised infinitely swift passages of thought, leading from one crest to another, as she shaped her conception of life in this world, only two articulate words escaped her, muttered beneath her breath – 'Not happiness – not happiness.' […] To her they represented the rare flower or splinter of rock brought down by a climber in proof that he had stood for a moment, at least, upon the highest peak of the mountain. (271)

That this passage is describing the very process of poetic creation, even without poetry being explicitly mentioned, becomes apparent if we compare it to an essay Woolf published in 1917, while in the midst of writing *Night and Day*. Reviewing 'Mr Sassoon's Poems', she writes:

> As it is the poet's gift to give expression to the moments of insight or experience that come to him now and then, so in following him we have to sketch for ourselves a map of those submerged lands which lie between one pinnacle and the next. (2: 119)

As Mary manages to articulate only 'little fragmentary phrases' out of her long 'soliloquy' (*ND* 272), so the poet gives expression only to his 'moments of insight' about human existence, leaving the thoughts that lead to them submerged. With regard to this process of poetic selection it is important to remember that Woolf is actually in favour of prosaic accumulation: she wants to convey moments of intense experience, as with Mary Datchet's vision, but also the chain of ordinary events that sustains them. The prose form and the genre of the novel allow her to move smoothly from the poetic to the prosaic mode, which is what is described humorously in the following sentence: 'While Mary Datchet was undergoing this curious transformation from the particular to the universal, Mrs Seal remembered her duties with regard to the kettle and the gas-fire' (273). As John Parras rightly points out, Woolf's intention is never a straightforward imitation of Romantic poetry, of which she is as critical in the context

of modernity as she is of realist prose;[30] on the contrary, her fiction develops in the tension between the two modes, without privileging one or the other.

Keeping this perpetual oscillation between 'night' and 'day' in mind, let us recapitulate the network of metaphors that Woolf uses in her novels to describe poetry, in order to come to a better understanding of the concept. Poetry is experienced by the characters first of all as a state of mind, very close to the Romantic sublime, during which they adopt a generalised perspective on the world and understand some universal principles about the human condition. This leads to all the metaphors related to the concept of distance, from the world seen from the sky to the peak of the mountain. To communicate the perspective shift Woolf also uses the metaphor of the night, because darkness by erasing details allows the world to be seen in outline, wrapped in beauty and romance. Then Woolf raises the problem of expression: communicating this heightened state of mind, this new perspective, to all the characters of *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day* – as probably to herself – seems to be very difficult. When they try to speak, or to write, they seem inarticulate and able to utter only broken words or sentences. The episode of *Night and Day* in which Ralph Denham tries unsuccessfully to write a poem to Katharine – self-referentially, about human communication – highlights this difficulty. First, Ralph feels a regular rhythm beating in his mind and begins to write a draft poem lacking many words; then he remembers that Katharine hates poetry – the traditional poetry worshipped by her family – and attempts to write her a letter, but this also proves useless ('It was difficult matter to put into words; poetry would have done it better justice, but he must abstain from poetry', *ND* 512); finally, he renounces words altogether and starts drawing 'blots fringed with flames meant to represent – perhaps the entire universe' (513). Significantly, when later he shows his writings and figures to Katharine, this abstract design representing the universe is

[30] John Parras, 'The Dangerous Gift of Poetry: Woolf's Critique of the Lyric', *Virginia Woolf Miscellany*, 51 (1998), 5-6 (p. 5).

the only thing that manages to communicate his meaning to her, better than the poem and the letter.

The fact that so many of Woolf's characters – it is also the case with Bernard in *The Waves* – who attempt to write are either dissatisfied with their medium, or utterly unable to express their meaning, indicates that she partly saw this problem of communication, and the consequent recourse to abstraction, as a specifically modern issue. Michael Whitworth indeed highlights that for Woolf '"pattern" is a keyword' that she uses to refer to a 'vital and vibrant form, emerging from the chaos of perception and modern life'.[31] Similarly, for Won Jung Park the urge to abstraction, both visual and literary, is a modern response to the need to find permanence and stability in the flux of experience, an attempt to 'fill the spiritual void'.[32] On the other hand, Woolf sometimes locates the source of poetry in difficulty of expression also when she discusses past literature. In 'Anon' (1939-1941), for instance, she writes that for the Elizabethan author, 'There is a barrier between the sayable and the unsayable. If he cannot talk, he must sing' (*Anon* 389). Spenser 'is still unrealised for he cannot confine emotions within himself. He must symbolise, exteriorise. Jealousy is not a passion to issue on actual lips. He must float it outwards; make it abstract; give it a symbolical shape' (391). The Elizabethans could only convey their thoughts and emotions through poetry precisely because they were otherwise inarticulate regarding the chaotic 'tumult of their perceptions' (*E* 4: 56), which could only find expression once turned into depersonalised, abstract symbols. In this sense, Ralph's design could be a metaphor of poetry's typical process of abstraction and symbolisation of emotions, since, let us remember, according to Woolf the details of the inner life of an individual falls under the dominion of prose. Given all these similarities between past poets and modern poets, an important difference remains: that while Spenser *did* write poetry, Ralph

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[31] Whitworth, p. 115.
[32] Won Jung Park, 'The Aesthetics of Abstraction and the Romantic Sublime in Modern Poetry and Prose' (doctoral dissertation, Yale University, 2005), p. 6, in *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global* <https://search.proquest.com/docview/305391344?accountid=13042>.

Denham writes neither poetry, nor prose (although he means to). Therefore, a crucial question imposes itself: is Ralph Denham a poet after all?

The novel seems to suggest that he is a poet, in the larger sense that Woolf has repeatedly and variously defined throughout her essays and early fiction. The evidence of this is to be found in some comments that Mrs Hilbery, Katharine's mother, addresses to Ralph towards the end of the novel. Considering that Mrs Hilbery is the character that is most obsessed with the classics of English poetry, what she says is unexpected:

> 'I'm sure I should like your poetry better than I like Lord Byron's,' said Mrs Hilbery, addressing Ralph Denham.
> 'Mr Denham doesn't write poetry; he has written articles for father, for the Review,' Katharine said, as if prompting her memory. (*ND* 447-448)

Despite Katharine's remark, Mrs Hilbery continues stubbornly:

> 'But I'm sure you read poetry at night. […]' 'I don't know much about the law,' she went on, '[…] But I think I do know a little about poetry,' she added. 'And all the things that aren't written down, but – but –' she waved her hand, as if to indicate the wealth of unwritten poetry all about them. 'The night and the stars, the dawn coming up, the barges swimming past, the sun setting. Ah dear,' she sighed, 'well, the sunset is very lovely too. *I sometimes think that poetry is not so much what we write as what we feel, Mr Denham*.' (448, my italics)

Mrs Hilbery is a comic character and what she says could be dismissed as a parody showing that poetry with its sunsets and starry nights could not possibly survive in the modern age, because it would sound ridiculous as in this case. Perhaps Woolf, after demonstrating the importance of 'The night and the stars' for the development of her characters, still feels uncomfortable in using poetic imagery and must undermine it, seeing the irremediable clash between that beauty and modern life. In 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', Woolf significantly recognises that 'There trips along by the side of our modern beauty some mocking spirit which sneers at beauty for being beautiful […]. It is as if the modern mind, wishing always to verify its emotions, had lost the power of accepting anything simply for what it is' (*E* 4: 433). However, considering that Mrs Hilbery is 'the nexus for many of the Shakespearean references

in *Night and Day*' and that she plays the role of guardian of the young lovers in a courtship plot which 'draw[s] on the genre of the Shakespearean comedy',[33] it can reasonably be assumed – and without weakening the irony of the passage – that she speaks wisely. As the Shakespearean fool, who is laughed at but tells the truth, Mrs Hilbery is right to imply that since poetry is first of all a human experience, a perspective on the world, it cannot become outdated and die.[34] The tone of what follows, in fact, is very serious:

> He [Ralph] felt curiously encouraged and heartened by the beam in her eye rather than by her actual words. From the distance of her age and sex she seemed to be waving to him, hailing him as a ship sinking beneath the horizon might wave its flag of greeting to another setting out upon the same voyage. (*ND* 448)

This passage marks in the novel the consecration of Ralph as the new poet, the poet of the modern age. He is given the task of expressing the timeless perspective and feeling of poetry – that also Katharine feels, although she is a mathematician, and that Mary Datchet feels, although she is a suffragette – in a form compatible with modern life. As to what form the modern poet should use, in the novel the question is left unanswered. *Night and Day* ends with Katharine and Ralph, now engaged, going out into the London night and imagining their future, vaguely aware that 'Books were to be written' (534).

Woolf, of course, chooses the prose form of the novel, but a prose which, as she remarks in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', 'has many of the characteristics of poetry': 'something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose' (*E* 4: 434). For, while verse 'has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty' (434), prose is supple enough to express both the prosaic and the poetic points of view: thanks to the extreme inclusivity of its lexicon, and also due to its ability to alternate long, detailed, cumulative sentences, with short, intense and general insights. Woolf wants to create a fluid movement from one mode (or

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[33] De Gay, p. 57; McNichol, p. 22.

[34] For the argument that Mrs Hilbery performs the function of the Shakespearian Fool, see Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 122.

'mood', as she calls it) to the other, avoiding 'the purple patch of the prose poem', which forces prose to abruptly rise to a lofty tone without preparing the reader to believe in the new perspective offered (437).

The above examination of the essays has shown that the poetic perspective is for Woolf closely connected with the life of the mind as opposed to the narration of facts: with inner life, however, she does not mean 'the psychology of personal intercourse' (the focus of realist novels), but rather 'some more impersonal relationship' of the mind with general ideas such as life, death and love (436). The characters of Woolf's early novels are able to reach the necessary detachment to engage with these general questions only when they get into a specific mood, which triggers in them a perspective shift and allows them to gain insight into the nature of universal life. As we shall see in the next chapter, the description of this emotional experience, which is very similar to the Romantic sublime as it follows a climactic pattern culminating in a feeling of self-loss, will affect Woolf's stylistic rendering of the poetic perspective in her later work.

## II. The impact of the Romantic-lyrical model of poetry on Woolf's poetic effects

Virginia Woolf's development as a writer was affected by different poetic traditions, but most of the ideas and imagery she associated with the figure of the poet and the process of poetic creation are drawn from Romanticism, which often informed her understanding of other poetic models. A crucial aspect of the Romantic view of poetry is that it is centred on self-expression: as suggested by Wordsworth's 'Preface' to the *Lyrical Ballads*, in order to gain a universal perspective the poet has to look within himself and experience intensely his own emotions.[1] This model, which I will call 'Romantic-lyrical' because it locates the sources of poetry in the thoughts of a solitary self, profoundly impacted the style of some of Woolf's interior monologues, making them the site where prose is made to rise to peaks or strands of poetic writing.

The first part of this chapter analyses the Romantic-lyrical model of poetry as Woolf describes it in *Orlando*. In narrating the vicissitudes of the poet Orlando from the Renaissance to the twentieth century, Woolf makes a humorous portrait of romanticism as a generically modern temperament and attitude to poetic writing, laying particular emphasis on inwardness and ecstasy as the conditions for grasping universal truths and expressing them in poetry. A Romantic approach to poetry, seen as a solitary quest for the meaning of life, is also reflected in Woolf's diary and letters, proving this model to be highly influential throughout her life. Equally, however, these writings expose the limitations of this approach to poetry, for it implies that human beings are isolated and can only truly communicate through writing. Solipsism,

[1] Wordsworth, *Lyrical Ballads*, p. 753.

indeed, was for Woolf the biggest flaw of modern – and contemporary – lyricism, which made her sensitive, as we shall see, to the influence of other poetic traditions.

The second part of the chapter argues that Woolf's reinterpretation of the sublime experience, her characteristic 'moments of being' (a type of emotion that inspires poetry and is also generated by the reading of it) affects the style of some of the interior monologues of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. A poetic effect is produced when the text weaves together a prosaic and a poetic voice, the latter gradually rising to a climax or series of climaxes corresponding to 'moments of being'. On these occasions, Woolf's long sentences break into small fragments that, for their generalisation, intensity and memorability, function like poetic lines. Sometimes this climactic pattern is substituted by a rhythmic pattern that places multiple poetic fragments in succession, recreating the quasi-regular beat that, in Woolf's metaphorical theory, represents the gathering of all things under a single universal conception.

### II.1. The poetic perspective as solitary in Woolf's *Orlando*, diary and letters

Woolf's Romantic-lyrical poetic outlook emerges most vividly in *Orlando*. Indeed this novel, by Woolf's own admission, is a parody of her romantic disposition – 'My own lyric vein is to be satirised' (*D* 3: 131) – and as such represents romanticism in its stereotypical features, with clear and exaggerated strokes. Orlando is a poet who lives through four centuries and for all this time, regardless of historical period, s/he is labelled as 'romantic': in its uncapitalised version, the adjective is used anachronistically, to describe Orlando's temperament and approach to writing since his boyhood in the sixteenth century. This suggests that Woolf's portrayal of romanticism in *Orlando* is not limited to a set of literary conventions attached to a specific movement, but also corresponds to a generically modern attitude to poetic creation. For instance the narrator, who acts as Orlando's biographer, in reporting the protagonist's early passion for literature and for writing, reckons Orlando has written in his Elizabethan youth

'some forty-seven plays, histories, romances, poems; some in prose, some in verse; some in French, some in Italian; *all romantic*, and all long' (*O* 47; my italics). Indeed, even though Orlando is influenced by different authors and experiments with the styles typical of each of the periods spanned by his/her long life – the Elizabethan age, the Restoration, the eighteenth century, and the Victorian age – still there are some traits of his/her identity as a poet that remain unchanged regardless of the literary styles s/he adopts. These are aspects of his/her character which unquestionably match the Romantic stereotype of the poet: a solitary and brooding disposition, a tendency to dream and soliloquise, the love of nature, and a predilection for climbing the summits of hills and mountains.

A most telling example of this romantic aura is the following description of Orlando's charm during his appointment as an ambassador in Constantinople, in the seventeenth century. His character acquires poetic suggestiveness, as Woolf often points out in her essays, from being left indistinct, due to absence or distance:

> He became the adored of many women and some men. It was not necessary that they should speak to him or even that they should see him; they conjured up before them especially when the scenery was romantic, or the sun was setting, the figure of a noble gentleman in silk stockings. […] But this romantic power, it is well known, is often associated with a nature of extreme reserve. Orlando seems to have made no friends. (*O* 76)

A romantic nature is thus associated with a love of solitude which is propitious to reading and to writing. It is indeed Orlando's 'unfitness for the life of society' which proves that he is 'by birth a writer' (51). Orlando's moments of solitude recur throughout the novel and present consistent features. Orlando spends time alone either in his/her room thinking and writing, or immersed in nature, preferably under a tree on a high ground from which s/he can behold a vast view. Always during these moments, s/he enters into conversation with Nature and with him/herself.

This pattern is best delineated in the account of Orlando's excursions in the Turkish countryside after she has turned into a woman and begun her life with the gipsies, still in the seventeenth century. Here, the biographer says that Orlando 'climbed the mountains; roamed the valleys; sat on the banks of the streams' and as in the Romantic sublime experience, ' when, from the mountain-top, she beheld far off, across the Sea of Marmara, the plains of Greece, and made out […] the Acropolis […], her soul expanded with her eyeballs' (86). Her dialogue with Nature is described thus: 'Returning home, she saluted each star, each peak, and each watchfire as if they signalled to her alone'; whereas her soliloquies are about general ideas:

> She began to think, was Nature beautiful or cruel, and then she asked herself what this beauty was; whether it was in things themselves, or only in herself; so she went on to the nature of reality, which led her to truth, which in its turn led to Love, Friendship, Poetry (as in the days on the high mound at home); which meditations, since she could impart no word of them, made her long, as she had never longed before, for pen and ink. (87)

Orlando's solitary meditations immediately arouse in her the desire to write: 'Oh! If only I could write!' she cried (for she had the odd conceit of those who write that words written are shared)' (87). Indeed, in the Romantic model Woolf playfully describes in *Orlando* the object of poetry, the abstract thoughts of a self in soliloquy, cannot be communicated in the course of ordinary human interactions but only in writing: and even as s/he writes, Orlando has to overcome all sorts of difficulties and social pressures.

Orlando is author of many works but his/her lifetime effort is a poem titled 'The Oak Tree'. Written over many centuries, 'The Oak Tree' is a composite work that reflects the changes of fashion literature has undergone from the early modern period to Woolf's time. As well summarised by Jane de Gay, this poem is 'the product of a complex interplay of literary-historical processes […] and as a result it has acquired accretions of the disparate styles of the

different ages'.[2] Analogously, the narrator-biographer changes style as the story moves forward through the years, so that 'an air of period flavour' hangs over its chapters (*O* xxxiv). It follows that Orlando's soliloquies, while always trying to describe nature and to solve the same general questions about life, love, literature etc., take each time a different form, according to the literary conventions the poem has to comply to. Thus, for instance, if in the Elizabethan age Orlando is compelled to write in a circuitous and repetitive way, rich in far-fetched metaphors ('And if literature is not the Bride and Bedfellow of Truth, what is she? Confound it all,' he cried, 'why say Bedfellow when one's already said Bride? Why not simply say what one means and leave it?'; 60-61), in the Victorian age she is obliged to be indirect and censorious ('As she wrote she felt some power […] reading over her shoulder, and when she had written 'Egyptian girls', the power told her to stop'; 154). On all these occasions, Orlando sees style as an impediment to her attempts to reverence 'the austere spirit of poetry' (61), rather than a tool: as Michael Whitworth rightly points out, Orlando always grows sceptical and mocks the stylistic devices s/he herself employs, and this self-consciousness 'sensitizes the reader […] to the artificiality of style' (*O* xxxiv-xxxv).

The same effect of artificiality is produced by the sections in which the narrator takes leave from Orlando and independently bursts into caricatures of poetic style, as in the following parody which echoes T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, sung to the beat of a 'frail, reedy, fluty, jerky, old-fashioned' barrel-organ:

> I will show you today (the second of March) under the plum tree, a grape hyacinth, and a crocus, and a bud, too, on the almond tree; so that to walk there is to be thinking of bulbs, hairy and red, thrust into the earth in October; flowering now; and to be dreaming of more than can rightly be said, and to be taking from its case a cigarette or cigar even, and to be flinging a cloak under (as the rhyme requires) an oak, and there to sit, waiting the kingfisher, which, it is said, was seen once to cross in the evening from bank to bank. (*O* 170)

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[2] Jane de Gay, 'Rhythms of Revision and Revisiting: Unpicking the Past in Orlando', in *Sentencing Orlando: Virginia Woolf and the Morphology of the Modernist Sentence*, ed. by Elsa Högberg and Amy Bromley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 56-66 (p.62).

This passage and the following paragraphs that mention ‘city clerks’, ‘a rat in a ditch’, and ‘the blind land’ (170-71) string together various images imperfectly transposed from *The Waste Land*: among others, the sprouting roots, the hyacinths, the city directors, the bank, the rat, and of course the figure of the Fisher King, echoed in the word ‘kingfisher’. As noticed by Sanja Bahun, Woolf mockingly turns Eliot’s imagery, which is supposed to represent a condition of lost fecundity, into a prefiguration of birth, especially as the function of the whole poetic interlude is to entertain the reader while Orlando gives birth to her son.[3] Not only the sound of the barrel-organ, ‘with all its gasps and groans’, is awkward in itself (in the essays Woolf does not hide her discomfort in front of contemporary attempts to fit the unattractive details of modern life into rhyming verse, which she compares precisely to a barrel-organ)[4] but it also provides an awkward cover to the truthful rendering of Orlando’s story, in order to avoid a supposedly immodest – by Victorian standards – childbirth scene.

Woolf’s use of intertextuality and pastiche in *Orlando* has, of course, different meanings according to each case, but overall the novel associates style, which changes with the fashions and the requirements of society, with inauthenticity and disguise. Reading some Victorian articles on literary criticism, Orlando despairs to realise that ‘one must always, always write like somebody else’ and that these conventions make it difficult to transpose ‘life’ into ‘literature’ (*O* 166). From this point of view, we can see a continuity, observed by Whitworth, between ‘the novel’s concerns with sexuality and its concerns with writing’ (*O* xxx). Like gender identity, style is presented as a performance, an act of constraint and concealment to which Orlando superficially adapts, out of necessity, but without undergoing

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[3] Sanja Bahun, ‘“Let us go, then, exploring”: Intertextual Conversations on the Meaning of Life’, in *Sentencing Orlando*, pp. 68-77 (p. 76).

[4] In ‘English Prose’ (1920), Woolf expresses her ‘wonder and amazement that when there is prose before us with its capacities and possibilities, […] young people should still be dancing to a barrel organ and choosing words because they rhyme’ (*E* 3: 175). In ‘A Letter to a Young Poet’ (1932), she expresses her ‘distaste’ noticing that often the contemporary poet ‘has strained himself to include an emotion that is not domesticated and acclimatised to poetry; the effort has thrown him off his balance; he rights himself, as I am sure I shall find if I turn the page, by a violent recourse to the poetical – he invokes the moon or the nightingale’ (*E* 5: 311-12).

any essential transformation. Whitworth notes that Woolf's interpretation of performativity in *Orlando*, while recognising that the self is capable of acting multiple roles, does not in effect imply that 'the self is a performance to its very depths', as 'for Woolf there is some sort of true self beneath the façade' (xxxi). When Orlando in the nineteenth century rereads her poem 'The Oak Tree', begun in 1586, the different phases of his/her writing do not prevent her from noticing 'how very little she had changed all these years':

> She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then she had been amorous and florid; and then she had been sprightly and satirical; and sometimes she had tried prose and sometimes she had tried drama. Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons. (137)

In this passage, instances of identity and literary form are similarly presented as the superficial and mutable historical varieties of the one and essential spirit of, respectively, consciousness and poetry. According to this idealistic perspective, which sees history as the unfolding of the different manifestations of a single spirit, Orlando can live for centuries both as a man and as a woman without fundamentally changing nature, while his/her experimentations with prose, drama and different poetic styles can be considered as adding up to a single poem. In *Orlando*, Woolf describes the fundamental self who writes poetry – a Romantic and idealistic idea *per se* – in Romantic terms, significantly stressing his/her 'brooding meditative temper' and love of nature.

Conceived as a series of lectures given at Cambridge in the same year *Orlando* was published, *A Room of One's Own* (1929) expresses some ideas about what state of mind favours poetic inspiration which help to better qualify the view of poetic creativity Orlando represents. In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf depicts the poet's mind as an ideal mind, that is, abstracted as much as possible from the concrete predicaments of the poet's life and personality. Shakespeare's 'state of mind', for instance, is such that he has managed to efface his

individuality from the creative process, so that 'his poetry flows from him free and unimpeded' (*ROO* 58). Considering gender as an aspect of individuality, Woolf specifies that the mind of the true poet is also 'androgynous' and 'undivided' (97). Given that poetry must convey a generalised perspective, a 'marriage of opposites' is necessary for 'the whole of the mind' to 'lie wide open' and communicate experience 'with perfect fullness' (103). The means to access this universal dimension of the mind is solitary, undisturbed contemplation.

Interestingly, in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf points to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the time when this unselfconscious state is most difficult for writers to reach, due to their excessively developed self-consciousness – it is the age of confessions and autobiographies – and to the pressure of material circumstances, such as money, health, and continuous interruptions (53). While it is hard to believe that these material issues would have affected modern writers more than others, what Woolf probably means with this humorous account is that around this time literature's focus has shifted too heavily towards individual and practical concerns. When Orlando reaches the nineteenth century, her already conspicuous difficulties of writing and communication dramatically increase, also due to Victorian society's moral preoccupations: for instance, Orlando's conversations with Bonthrop, her husband, must happen through mental intuition because they live in an age 'when words are growing daily so scanty in comparison with ideas that 'the biscuits ran out' has to stand for kissing a negress in the dark' (*O* 150). Once again, Woolf in *Orlando* restates the theme, already explored in *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, of modern inarticulacy and words' inadequacy:

> For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. (147)

Orlando noticeably fails to capture the true spirit of poetry in her poem, because she is unable to achieve the necessary unselfconscious state of mind until after 'The Oak Tree' is published:

as in the early novels, then, poetry in *Orlando* is an event that takes place, paradoxically, outside the boundaries of the written poem.

Indeed, it is only after 'The Oak Tree' has been consigned to the publisher, when Orlando is at the peak of her frustration with the literary critics' dictates to always imitate the style of someone else, that finally she realises that, in fact, none of their precepts are important, but rather, 'it's ecstasy that matters' (167). In other words, Orlando eventually comes to understand that the source of poetry is a heightened state of emotion that can bring her in touch with the whole, undivided dimension of the mind described in *A Room of One's Own* (*ROO* 103). Orlando's poetic quest for the meaning of life therefore culminates at the end of the novel, after a long climactic account of the different states of mind that lead her to achieve her final ecstatic vision. The transition from the particular to the general perspective occurs as Orlando is meditating on her own, first in her house and garden, then in the park and up the hill under the oak tree. Both perspectives are shown at their extreme because Orlando undergoes an extraordinary empowerment of vision. Initially, in the garden, she is able to detect every detail of her surroundings with painful precision:

> Here the shadows of the plants were miraculously distinct. She noticed the separate grains of earth in the flower beds as if she had a microscope stuck to her eye. She saw the intricacy of the twigs of every tree. Each blade of grass was distinct and the marking of veins and petals. (185)

Orlando finds no pleasure in this sharp, close-distance sight, especially because it is accompanied by an acute and distasteful sense of the materiality of things and of the passing of time, accentuated by the violent strokes of the clock. The liberation from 'the pressure of the present' comes as Orlando faints for a moment and closes her eyes, disgusted by the vivid sight of her gardener's thumb without a fingernail (187). When she opens them again, a shadow has robbed the world of substance making it more beautiful and comprehensible, though so indistinct that one thing is easily mistaken for another, thus facilitating the creation of

metaphors (‘everything was partly something else’, 187). With this change of vision, Orlando has the feeling that she is ‘about to understand’ and begins to climb the hill in her park (187). Her view from the top is extraordinarily vast, reaching as far as the Scottish hills and the Hebrides, but as opposed to the microscopic perspective experienced in the garden it encompasses ‘nothing detailed, nothing small, but only misty fields’ (189).

It is noteworthy that at this point, precisely as the external world loses vividness, Orlando turns her eyes inwards:

> Whether it had struck nine, ten, or eleven, she could not say. Night had come – night that she loved of all times, night in which the reflections in the dark pool of the mind shine more clearly than by day. It was not necessary to faint now in order to look deep into the mind where things shape themselves […]. (189)

There, within her own mind, Orlando has her ecstatic vision, the vision of her husband, who had gone sailing around Cape Horn, coming back safely by airplane (time has suddenly jumped to 1928), and of a wild goose springing up over his head (190-91). The wild goose is a metaphor for the meaning of life that Orlando had been trying to capture all his/her life in poetry, but that continued to escape. In an earlier soliloquy, she had in fact lamented that the wild goose always ‘flies out to sea’ evading her attempts to ‘fling after it words like nets’ (181). In the end, the success of Orlando’s quest is due to her ability to distance herself from the external world and look inside ‘the dark pool of the mind’, precisely as, in *A Room of One’s Own*, the process of poetic creation requires that ‘The curtains must be close drawn. […] The writer, […] once his experience is over, must lie back and let his mind celebrate its nuptials in darkness’ (*ROO* 103). In the Romantic-lyrical model of poetry *Orlando* represents, this inwardness is essential to the poet because ‘writing poetry’ is fundamentally ‘a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice’, ‘like the intercourse of lovers’, although the relationship is not, as in conventional realist novels, between two individuals but between Nature and the poet responding to ‘the old crooning song of the woods’ (188).

Given the humour which pervades *Orlando* we may ask how far this idea of poetry is to be taken seriously, as the novel's fairy-tale tone suggests that Woolf was playing with a certain familiar rhetoric for fun, partly to tease Vita, the figure behind Orlando, who was also a poet. Certainly, Woolf was aware of the limitations of the Romantic-lyrical model of poetry and knew that it was not exhaustive. On the other hand, the consistency with which Romantic imagery appears in her work in relation to poetry demonstrates that it was really meaningful to her. In *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*, the Romantic model had been already dissected via the characters' imaginative journeys and a little laughed at. A decade later, in 1928, that model is still alive in *Orlando*. But what is even more remarkable is that many aspects of the Romantic-lyrical approach to poetry are also found in Woolf's diary and letters: the way Woolf speaks about her own writing recalls some features of the character Orlando. Among these aspects, solitary contemplation in connection to writing is prominent.

As for Orlando, solitude is for Woolf the condition of poetic inspiration – though not of prosaic or novelistic inspiration, the other aspect of her fiction – and the circumstance which makes the act of writing possible. The different requirements of being a poet and being a novelist are well expressed in a 1931 letter to Vita, with whom a lot of Romantic rhetoric is associated:

> And you, being a poet – O how I wish I were! – you being a poet have no use for the odds and ends, the husks, the fragments, the general confusion and vibration which I can make myself believe I find in London. If I were you, I would lie on a bank all day and make one phrase – for Virginia. (*L* 4: 365-66)

While writing a novel requires a profound knowledge of human interactions, poetry or poetic novels in the manner of Thomas Hardy are more interested in the thoughts that cross a mind when it is far from society. As a 1937 letter to the poet Stephen Spender makes clear, the life of the mind provides access to a superior kind of reality: 'I think action generally unreal. Its the thing we do in the dark that is more real; the thing we do because peoples eyes are on us

seems to me histrionic, small boyish […]' (*L* 6: 122). It is very interesting here that Woolf uses the adjective 'histrionic' in connection to the gaze of an audience in such a negative way, because, as I shall explain in Chapter 3, poetic drama, especially in its relationship with the public, is another relevant influence on Woolf's poetic style. For now, it is sufficient to note the attraction of Woolf the poet-novelist towards 'the dark side' of the mind (*E* 4: 392), behind which stands the conviction that 'our souls are so creased and soured in meaning we can only unfold them when we are alone' (*L* 3: 358).

Several significant moments of solitude are described by Woolf throughout her diary: they resemble Orlando's meditations in that they are invariably expressed through Romantic imagery and are also felt to be highly revelatory. Using a well-known Romantic trope frequently found in her writing, in 1938 she calls them 'mountain summit moments' (*D* 5: 187). These are the times when she asks herself existential questions about the human condition, as during a night walk in Russell Square, in 1926:

> A sense of my own strangeness, walking on the earth is there too: of the infinite oddity of the human position; trotting along Russell Sqre with the moon up there, & those mountain clouds. Who am I, what am I, & so on: these questions are always floating about in me […]. (*D* 3: 62-63)

Alongside the urge of asking these questions is the feeling of being on the verge of a discovery, since loneliness, though fearful, allows Woolf to see 'to the bottom of the vessel':

> That is one of the experiences I have had here in some Augusts; & got then to a consciousness of what I call 'reality': a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest & continue to exist. (*D* 3: 196)

Like Orlando trying desperately to catch the wild goose, Woolf also feels she is engaged in an existential quest that, though concerning universal life, is entirely carried out inside herself. The nature of the loneliness which infuses this quest is specified in a diary entry of 1929 as being 'not physical silence' due to the absence of other people but rather 'some inner loneliness', a sense of being alone in suffering. Once again Woolf mentions her solitary

encounter with ‘reality’: ‘If I could catch the feeling, I would; the feeling of the singing of the real world, as one is driven by loneliness & silence from the habitable world’ (*D* 3: 259-60). A unified and ideal reality, therefore, confronts the abstracted and undivided state of mind of the poet who sets out to discover it. Solitude inspires poetry not only because it makes the experience of poetry possible but also because, once written, poetry is self-referentially *about* that solitary experience. ‘One’s mind’, writes Virginia to Vita in 1927, ‘wants to lie under the leaves and let them rot on top. Solitude is the one thing I want to write about’ (*L* 3: 347). Poetry in Woolf’s theory is an encompassing concept which covers the poetic state of mind or mood, the climax of the discovery, and the embodiment of that discovery in a concise line or sentence. The process of writing poetry is also, predictably, a solitary activity.

Woolf expresses the idea that solitude is a necessary condition for writing when, in her diary, she complains that someone has interrupted her ‘swimming in the highest ether’ while trying to finish *Mrs Dalloway* in 1924. Romantically declaring the supremacy of the imagination when it comes to literary creation, she describes her annoyance using a poetic inversion: ‘More & more am I solitary; the pain of these upheavals is incalculable […]. But how entirely I live in my imagination; how completely depend upon spurts of thought’ (*D* 2: 314-15). It is probably a genuine feeling, but filtered through the lens of a literary tradition, which often modulates the accent of Woolf’s statements about writing especially in her letters to Vita (who published an entire poem on *Solitude* in 1938), such as the following: ‘I am […] intoxicated by what is something like your night, your solitude, in which, as I maintain we writers – oh but I cannot find the image. So come and catch it. Its a question of being alone, in writing’ (*L* 3: 220). The same idea emerges from the diary account of her meeting with Thomas Hardy in 1926:

> Do you think one can’t write poetry if one sees people? I asked. “One might be able to – I dont [sic] see why not. Its a question of physical strength” said Hardy. But clearly he preferred solitude himself. (*D* 3: 99)

Much later in the diary, in 1939, Woolf still auspicates a poetry of pure contemplation, and she assumes that Wordsworth used to write in a state of complete aloofness, disregarding his audience and potential detractors. Hence, the 'unconsciousness', the 'lack of distraction', the 'concentration & the resulting "beauty"' of his poetry, 'As if the mind must be allowed to settle undisturbed over the object in order to secrete the pearl' (*D* 5: 229). In this extract, written during the stressful period immediately preceding the start of World War II, Woolf confides how she finds it difficult, on the contrary, to ignore the world around her, especially the pressing problems faced by society: now, in comparison with the age of Wordsworth, 'all the surroundings of the mind have come much closer' (230).

The principle that the poet should avoid society has implications for character creation. Woolf's essays, diary and letters show her conviction that in order to create believable, living characters, a profound knowledge of human beings other than oneself is necessary. However, aiming to enter the 'human soul' (*L* 2: 598), she was not satisfied with the type of knowledge that can be gathered in conventional social settings. In a letter to Vita of 1925, Woolf seems to believe that, paradoxically, a higher level of intimacy is achieved when people are distant from each other:

> Now if we could be dispersed a little – could we visit St Pauls, or the Tower or Ken Wood, where the scenery or the noble buildings would intervene between us, then we should sail gradually and calmly into latitudes of intimacy which in drawing rooms are never reached. (*L* 3: 215)

Behind this idea that human beings can truly get to know each other only in a metaphorical, imagined setting, which is to say through literature alone, is the feeling that successful communication in life is seriously impeded. For Woolf, as for Orlando, isolation is both a desired state and a sad human condition:

> I am only scribbling, more to amuse myself than you, who may never read, or understand: for I am doubtful whether people, the best disposed towards each other, are capable of more than an intermittent signal as they forge past – a sentimental

> metaphor, leading obviously to ships, and night and storm and reefs and rocks, and the obscure, uncompassionate moon. (*L* 2: 598)

This letter, addressed to the writer Gerald Brenan, was written in 1922, just after the publication of *Jacob's Room*. In response to the various criticisms she received for her ghost-like protagonist, Woolf admits that for the modern writer it is particularly hard to access other people's inner selves, not denying her own struggles in expressing character. In the above letter extract, even Romantic poetry, or poetry inspired by Romanticism, is reduced to a set of highly conventional 'intermittent signals', incapable of creating a real bond of understanding between humans.

The extreme difficulty of knowing the other is a problem that torments Woolf all through her career, especially since solipsism is the aspect of contemporary literature that she most despises. This preoccupation is what makes her ask Vita in 1926: 'Do we then know nobody? – only our own versions of them, which, as likely as not, are emanations from ourselves' (*L* 3: 245). The doubt of not being able to know the other also casts a shadow on Woolf's quest for 'true reality'; the supposed failure of Jacob as a character makes her wonder in her diary: 'Have I the power of conveying the true reality? Or do I write essays about myself?' (*D* 2: 248). It is a lifelong concern that shows through the most passing comments, such as this description of spring in the countryside: 'Yesterday at Rodmell we saw a magpie & heard the first spring birds: sharp egotistical, like [*illegible*]' (*D* 4: 7). Egotistical birds populate the interludes of *The Waves* and, though without any conscious reference, sound like a caricature of the poet-nightingale portrayed by Shelley in his *Defence of Poetry*, when he says:

> A Poet is a nightingale, who sits in darkness and sings to cheer its own solitude with sweet sounds; his auditors are as men entranced by the melody of an unseen

> musician, who feel that they are moved and softened, yet know not whence or why.[5]

The separation between the poet described by Shelley and his audience is almost complete, in the sense that his song is communicated but is not in any way affected by his listeners. In the Romantic model, the lyric poet is a remote figure whose pursuit of absolute reality is conducted away from other human beings. Woolf saw this aloofness as a limitation, but also as a necessity and an opportunity to realise poetic effects: as she spun her characters' innermost meditations in the form of interior monologues, she devised a style that would allow some passages of her prose to culminate in lyrical insights of perceived universal value.

### II.2. Romantic-lyrical poetic effects in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*

The novels analysed so far – *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *Orlando* – have been treated more as integral part of Virginia Woolf's theory of poetry than as proper instances of her experimentation with poetic effects in prose. The aim of this section is to explore how the Romantic side of her theory is embodied in her style: in other words, how Woolf technically manages the transitions between the prosaic and the poetic modes in the text of some of her novels. My analysis will focus on extracts from *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, because in these works Woolf perfected the form of the interior monologue as a tool to convey 'the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude' (*E* 4: 436). In fact, 'soliloquy' is precisely the word used by Woolf to indicate what we now call interior monologue. In these novels, the interior monologue is also the site where Woolf expresses her own version of the sublime experience or ecstasy, the so-called 'moments of being'.

[5] *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, ed. by Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck, 10 vols (London: Ernest Benn, 1965), VII, p.116.

Woolf's philosophy of the moment is well known and best explained in her autobiographical writing *Sketch of the Past*, where she defines as 'moments of being' the sudden shocks that allow her to see 'that behind the cotton wool [of daily life] is hidden a pattern' (*MB* 85). However, a less quoted passage of the *Sketch* implies that 'moments of being' are also generated by the reading of poetry, which Woolf describes as an epiphanic experience delivering sudden shocks of understanding:

> I had taken *The Golden Treasury* with me. I opened it and began to read some poem. And instantly and for the first time I understood the poem (which it was I forget). It was as if it became altogether intelligible; I had a feeling of transparency in words when they cease to be words and become so intensified that one seems to experience them; to foretell them as if they developed what one is already feeling. I was so astonished that I tried to explain the feeling. "One seems to understand what it's about", I said awkwardly. I suppose Nessa has forgotten; no one could have understood from what I said the queer feeling I had in the hot grass, that poetry was coming true. (*MB* 103)

If a 'moment of being' is the epiphanic feeling that life has come together into a coherent, significant order, the reading of a poem can give the same impression, for poetry's task is to encapsulate essential meaning in an ordered form. This analogy is best expressed in *To the Lighthouse*, when Mrs Ramsay experiences a 'moment of being' while reading one of Shakespeare's sonnets: 'And then there it was, suddenly entire shaped in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here – the sonnet' (*TL* 131). Rachel Bowlby rightly notes that for Woolf the different processes of reading prose and poetry are comparable to the distinction between experiencing life as chaos or as shape: accordingly, in 'How Should One Read a Book?' poetry symbolises the form that, through a process of selection and judgement, gives enduring shape to fleeting impressions.[6]

Given the intrinsic poetical value of 'moments of being', it follows that the expression of this emotion is central to Woolf's experimentation with poetic effects in prose. As we shall

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[6] Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), pp. 249-50.

see in Chapter 5, Cecchi similarly identifies poetry with a feeling of instantaneous revelation, which exists independently of its expression in writing but can be triggered, or re-enacted, as well as in verse, through elements of prose style. In order to emphasise the link between emotional experience and style in Woolf, Ellen Tremper argues that her 'moments of being', which are analogous to the Romantic sublime, are 'translatable into a "textual" sublime, a re-creation of emotion on the page that works similarly for both writer and reader'.[7] Elaborating on M. H. Abrams' observation that the 'Romantic Moment', defined as a feeling of 'abrupt illumination in an arrest of time', has survived in modern authors such as Virginia Woolf,[8] Tremper highlights the significance of the 'arrested moment' in Woolf's fiction. Quoting Abrams, she describes this emotion as 'a threefold episode of consciousness, in which a state of radical disequilibrium intervenes between a prior state of ordinary awareness and a final state of transcendent exaltation'.[9] These three stages faithfully correspond to Orlando's succession of mental states at the end of the novel: first her sharp awareness of the physical world around her, then her confusion caused by fainting, and finally her ecstasy. Tremper does not go into more detail regarding how exactly Woolf translates the experience of the sublime into a textual sublime so as to recreate poetic effects in prose. However, in analysing Woolf's interest in consciousness and her use of the arrested moment, she provides an initial clue: Woolf's poetic writing fills a gap in time when the narrative stops and a character plunges into self-reflection.

Introspection in an arrest of time provides the occasion for poetry to be imbedded in the narrative, yet in order to achieve a poetic effect the character's soliloquy needs to be combined with a generalised perspective. What, therefore, are the stylistic devices through

[7] Ellen Tremper, *"Who Lived at Alfoxton?": Virginia Woolf and English Romanticism* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1998), p.141.
[8] M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1971), pp.418-19.
[9] Abrams qtd. in Tremper, pp.18-19.

which Woolf performs the 'lapse from the particular to the general' (*E* 4: 43) in her interior monologues? The final pages of *Orlando* indirectly draw attention to the crucial role played by figurative language. When Orlando fights with the stylistic requirements of different historical periods in the process of writing poetry, the narrator often mocks his/her clumsy attempts at finding ever new and absurd similes and metaphors ('Trees were withered hags, and sheep were grey boulders. Everything, in fact, was something else'; *O* 86). Nevertheless, Orlando's comparing efforts appear to be inseparable from his/her poetic activity regardless of style, and are also mentioned as part of her most authentic, extra-textual poetic experience at the end of the novel. Indeed, as Orlando undergoes her change of vision from proximity to distance, this transition is accompanied by her mind's increased capacity to make associations:

> [E]verything was partly something else, as if her mind had become a forest with glades branching here and there; things came nearer, and further, and mingled and separated and made the strangest alliances and combinations in an incessant chequer of light and shade. (*O* 187)

This creative process helps Orlando to envision the world as a whole, as things that are usually separate come together to form a unity. The role of similes and metaphors implicit in this passage is to make the writer/reader see unexpected connections, enlarging his perspective outside the boundaries of a specific object in order to uncover a general truth. Moreover, as observed by Tremper, this associative power corresponds to the Romantic view of the imagination as the mind's faculty to mirror and, at the same time, transform the external world.[10] Similes and metaphors therefore illuminate with particular vividness the activity of the imagination, shifting the focus away from 'the actual sight or sound' to lay it on 'the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds' (*E* 4: 367).

Metaphors, in particular, are intrinsically poetic also due to their conciseness. In the essay 'The Pastons and Chaucer' (1925) Woolf highlights two important qualities of

[10] Tremper, p. 120.

metaphors, which can be gathered from the following statement: ‘From most poets quotation is easy and obvious; some metaphor suddenly flowers; some passage breaks off from the rest’ (*E* 4: 33). First, metaphors are sudden – they instantly and unexpectedly appropriate an image – and second, they can easily be singled out and remembered apart from their context, filled with new meaning and associations. These qualities not only mean that metaphors are particularly well suited to the short form of the poetic line, but also that, even when located in a prose text, they still generate poetic effects of instantaneity and generalisation. They thus enable prose to hold, within its slow and cumulative folds, shots of intense and concentrated emotion: those ‘moments of intensity’ and ‘phrases of astonishing beauty’ that Woolf found so striking while reading poetry (*E* 4: 66). Alongside metaphors, Woolf also conveys ‘moments of being’ through other forms of rapid expression that similarly break up the flow of the narrative and have a broadly applicable meaning: exclamations, for instance, or fragments of longer sentences that, delimited by punctuation, rhythmically and visually stand out.

Remarkably, Woolf conceives of ‘moments of intensity’ as corresponding exactly to ‘phrases of astonishing beauty’, thus joining the two dimensions – experience and text – tightly together. She sees life and literature as so directly connected that, in her opinion, the poet’s sublime experience, which culminates in a moment of revelation, materialises in a concise written statement that refracts the same emotion back to the reader, who also at that instant has a ‘flash of understanding’ (3: 338). In reviewing Logan Pearsall Smith’s *Trivia*, she interprets his brief aphorisms as attempts to express short-lived epiphanies analogous to her own ‘moments of being’:

> If we are not mistaken, it is his purpose to catch and enclose certain moments which break off from the mass, in which without bidding things come together in a combination of inexplicable significance, to arrest those thoughts which suddenly, to the thinker at least, are almost menacing with meaning. (*E* 2: 250)

In this passage, we can observe that the statement 'certain moments […] break off from the mass' (2: 250) strikingly resembles in structure and vocabulary the sentence from 'The Pastons and Chaucer' which reads 'some metaphor suddenly flowers; some passage breaks off from the rest' (4: 33). Once again, Woolf appears to associate 'moments of being' to metaphors and other short statements that function as their textual counterpart.

Generalised or metaphorical fragments constitute the peak of Woolf's poetic writing because they reproduce the instantaneous effect of poetic lines. As I will show in Chapter 5, Cecchi lays a remarkably similar emphasis on the intrinsic poetic quality of metaphors and images, precisely due to their ability to carry sudden revelations and intuitive knowledge. While Cecchi, however, introduces his visions sharply and unexpectedly, in Woolf the effect is gradually prepared: most of Woolf's lyrical sentences are effortlessly integrated into the rest of the narrative, in order not to cause the reader's disbelief with an abrupt change of perspective. Woolf accomplishes this by smoothly alternating a prosaic and a poetic voice, until the latter, like a wave rising, slowly reaches to a climax. The following extract from *Mrs Dalloway*, encompassing Rezia's interior monologue, shows particularly well how Woolf dives in and out of the poetic mode. The passage begins with a poetic inversion:

> Far was Italy and the white houses and the room where her sister sat making hats, and the streets crowded every evening with people walking, laughing out loud, not half alive like people here, huddled up in Bath chairs, looking at a few ugly flowers stuck in pots!
> 'For you should see the Milan gardens,' she said aloud. But to whom?
> There was nobody. Her words faded. So a rocket fades. Its sparks, having grazed their way into the night, surrender to it, dark descends, pours over the outlines of houses and towers; bleak hill-sides soften and fall in. But though they are gone, the night is full of them; robbed of colour, blank of windows, they exist more ponderously, give out what the frank daylight fails to transmit – the trouble and suspense of things conglomerated there in the darkness; huddled together in the darkness; reft of the relief which dawn brings when, washing the walls white and grey, spotting each window-pane, lifting the mist from the fields, showing the red-brown cows peacefully grazing, all is once more decked out to the eye; exists again.
> I am alone; I am alone! She cried, by the fountain in Regent's Park (staring at the Indian and his cross), as perhaps at midnight, when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape, as the Romans saw it, lying cloudy, when they landed, and the hills had no names and rivers wound they knew not where – such

> was her darkness; when suddenly, as if a shelf were shot forth and she stood on it, she said how she was his wife, married years ago in Milan, his wife, and would never, never tell that he was mad! (*MD* 26-27)

In this scene, Rezia has momentarily left Septimus sitting on a bench in Regent's Park to have a walk by herself. Initially, her thoughts revolve around her memories of home in Milan: the narrator adopts a prosaic perspective in order to provide information about Rezia's past and her feelings of loneliness, directly related to the plot of the novel. Rezia's solitude, emphasised by the fact that there is nobody listening to the words she speaks aloud, prepares the terrain for the narrator to open a lyrical parenthesis. The lapse from the particular to the general is gradually introduced via a simile (similes make a smoother transition into figurative language compared to metaphors, because they display the link between the *comparanda*): 'Her words faded. So a rocket fades'. Through the simile, Rezia's loneliness is generalised: it becomes the universal loneliness of all things when the darkness of the night pours around them. The landscape portrayed in the lines that follow has extremely indeterminate features, encompassing both city and country and expanding the moment of Rezia's walk in Regent's Park into a timeless description of the night and the coming of dawn. As the narration's perspective is both temporally and spatially enlarged, the progress of the plot is suspended, and the moment in June when Rezia is thinking in the park, arrested.

Indeed, this new perspective exceeds Rezia's interior monologue. Another voice has come in, to transform the discussion of Rezia's feelings into a poetic, general comment on loneliness itself. This comment is also consistent with the reflections on poetry and prose Woolf makes elsewhere, because it suggests metaphorically that human existence in the dark, that is, in solitude, might be more real (as things 'exist more ponderously' during the night) than in daylight, that is, when exposed to other people's eyes. In the course of this reflection, which involves the description of sunrise, the poetic voice builds up to its climax. From the dash introducing 'the trouble and suspense of things conglomerated there in the darkness;

huddled together in the darkness', the voice accumulates a series of clauses punctuated by a regular rhythm, which accelerates in the succession of present participles ('washing', 'spotting', 'lifting', 'showing'), becomes distinctly audible in 'all is once more decked out to the eye', until it comes to an abrupt stop. After the pause, finally the climax and dawn: 'exists again' – two words break off from the rest, delimited by a semicolon and a full stop. The dawn reveals the existence of all things, at the same time as Rezia suddenly becomes aware of her loneliness: 'I am alone; I am alone! She cried, by the fountain in Regent's Park (staring at the Indian and his cross)'. Her individual, prosaic voice thus returns, and together with it, a specification of her precise position in the park; however, not for long. With a very smooth transition – in fact, within the same sentence – the poetic voice prevails once more via the simile 'as perhaps at midnight, when all boundaries are lost, the country reverts to its ancient shape, as the Romans saw it […]', so that the perspective is enlarged again, stretching back in time as far as the Romans, and preparing for another climax. The second climax is more significant and final than the first, because it sums up the meaning of all the previous similes into one concise metaphor: 'such was her darkness'. These words too 'break off from the rest', clearly separated by a dash and a semicolon; moreover, they ring memorable like a line of poetry, because the word 'darkness' has been already repeated twice in the passage. As the climax is over, the poetic voice definitively subdues, and the narrator withdraws back inside Rezia's consciousness of herself as an individual, focusing on her desperate condition of being the wife of a mad man.

The close reading of the above passage shows that the poetic and the prosaic modes interweave in *Mrs Dalloway*, with one voice taking over where the other has left off. Thus, while it is possible to identify passages where the poetic mode is prevalent, these are sewn and made organic to the plot by threads of narrative in the prosaic mode passing through them. This method is consistent with the remarks Woolf makes on De Quincey's style in 'Impassioned

Prose' (1926). Here, she appreciates De Quincey's effort to 'stand obstinately across the boundary lines' and 'write like a poet' (*E* 4: 361-62) but points out that his visionary passages are too often incongruous with the rest:

> A prose writer may dream dreams and see visions, but they cannot be allowed to lie scattered, single, solitary upon the page. So spaced out they die. For prose has neither the intensity nor the self-sufficiency of poetry. It rises slowly off the ground; it reaches its heights by a series of gradual steps; it must be connected on this side and on that. There must be some medium in which its ardours and ecstasies can float without incongruity, from which they receive support and impetus. Here was a difficulty which De Quincey often faced and often failed to solve. (363-64)

The following year, in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' (1927), Woolf declares again her 'discomfort in the presence of the purple patch of the prose poem' and expresses the hope that the novel of the future will display 'poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry' (*E* 4: 437-38). To fulfil this aspiration, she trusts that prose 'will show itself capable of rising high from the ground, not in one dart, but in sweeps and circles, and of keeping at the same time in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life' (438). Gently alternating sentences that offer a particular perspective on character and events, with sentences that open up a larger view on emotion considered apart from the individual who feels it, is one of the methods Woolf devises to write poetically without disrupting the integrity of the novel. We can picture this style, which keeps the writing attached to the prosaic level that it also rises away from, as describing a circular, wave-like movement: each successive crest gradually rising higher and higher, while also cyclically returning to the ground.

Despite Woolf's reservations about De Quincey's sense of cohesion and architecture, it has been noted that her 'climactic' style, which alternates poetic rises and prosaic falls, owes much to De Quincey's impassioned prose.[11] Indeed, in the essay 'De Quincey's Autobiography' (1935), which focuses on his *Autobiographic Sketches*, Woolf draws attention

[11] Elsa Högberg, 'Woolf, De Quincey and the Legacy of "Impassioned Prose"', in *Sentencing Orlando*, pp. 44-52 (pp. 51-52).

to the way De Quincey manages poetic climaxes and appreciates how, in this work, he in fact succeeds at performing slow, gradual transitions. Many of her descriptions of De Quincey's style are relevant to her own; for instance, the use of rhythm as a means to enter and express a poetic, generalising mood: 'The rise and fall of the sentence immediately soothes us to a mood and removes us to a distance in which the near fades and detail is extinguished' (*E* 5: 453). Accordingly, Woolf's climaxes too are often preceded by a quasi-regular beat, like the rhythmical flow of sentences that lead up to the break of dawn in Rezia's passage. Woolf also observes that De Quincey's rhythm and sound measures are, compared to poetry, 'diluted to a lower degree of strength', their force 'spread over a much greater space, so that the transition from the lowest compass to the highest is by a gradation of shallow steps and we reach the utmost heights without violence' (454). Finally, De Quincey's exploration of a sensation without 'any consciousness of who is hearing, seeing, and feeling', his suggestions of 'large and generalised visions; landscapes in which nothing is seen in detail; faces without features', 'the slow opening up', in the narrative, 'of single and solemn moments of concentrated emotion', and eventually the revelation of 'something for ever flying, for ever escaping' in an arrest of time (454-55; 457-58), are all features that Woolf recreated in her own writing and that we have already begun to recognise in the extract from *Mrs Dalloway* analysed above.

Another passage, drawn from one of Clarissa's interior monologues, shows a similar movement from novelistic detail to poetic abstraction during a pause in the narrative. This lyrical passage is also, self-referentially, the description of a 'moment of being'. Clarissa, alone in her attic room, is reflecting about the fact that, though unable to feel the warmth of a man's contact, she is sometimes able to enjoy that feeling in the presence of another woman:

> [S]he could not resist sometimes yielding to the charm of a woman, not a girl, of a woman confessing, as to her they often did, some scrape, some folly. And whether it was pity, or their beauty, or that she was older, or some accident […], she did undoubtedly then feel what men felt. Only for a moment; but it was enough. It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there

> quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores! Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed. But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment. Against such moments (with women too) there contrasted (as she laid her hat down) the bed and Baron Marbot [the book of memoirs Clarissa is reading] and the candle half-burnt. (*MD* 34-35)

In this extract, the prosaic and the poetic modes do not present themselves as two distinct voices as in Rezia's passage: the change of perspective happens entirely within Clarissa's soliloquy. She is initially focused on dissecting the precise circumstances and traits that make her sensitive to a woman's charm, but in the process of describing to herself the exact quality of her feeling she uses a simile – 'It was a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check […]' – and by this means the 'lapse from the particular to the general' (*E* 4: 43) is accomplished. In the lines that follow, Clarissa's feeling of sexual attraction towards a woman is assimilated into a more general experience of sublime-like revelation which could be related to love, but could also be detached from it altogether.

The abstract and metaphorical language of these lines contributes to rendering Clarissa's emotion less definite and therefore more broadly relatable. Correspondingly, the narrator substitutes the pronoun 'she', which would unmistakeably refer to Clarissa, with the impersonal pronoun 'one' ('one yielded to its expansion […]'), so that Clarissa's feeling is transformed into a universal experience. As the emotion intensifies and rushes to reach its climax, so does the text through a long chain of coordinated clauses succeeding each other in a quick, hastening rhythm. After the exclamation mark, the rhythm slows down significantly as the text disintegrates into short fragments separated by strong pauses, such as the two semicolons that cut off the metaphor for the moment of ecstatic revelation: 'a match burning in a crocus'. Two more metaphors 'break off from the rest', indicating the end of the climax: 'But the close withdrew; the hard softened. It was over – the moment.' The last fragment, 'the moment', stands in prominent position at the end of the poetic lapse, isolated by a dash,

summarising what all the previous description has been about, besides Clarissa's recognition of her own desire: the arrest and isolation of one moment of understanding out of the mystery of daily existence. After the moment is over, the prosaic perspective is resumed as Clarissa's refocuses on her lonely, narrow bed and book of memoirs, representing the reality of her married life.

In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf not only breaks up some of her own sentences into segments to express poetic climaxes: she also incorporates a fragment of actual verse into her style so as to re-enact the process through which poetry, thanks to its universal validity, is able to summarise human experience in different contexts. At the beginning of the novel, Woolf indeed quotes two lines of the song 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun', from Shakespeare's *Cymbeline*; then, she breaks off the segment 'Fear no more' and makes it repeatedly resurface in the minds of both Clarissa and Septimus as channel and revelation of their own emotions. Woolf describes this way of engaging with poetry, absorbing its meaning through fragments, in a letter to Vita of 1926: 'I read a bit of your poem the other night – it must be good, I think: one can break off crumbs and suck them. […] Like a rich cake, I can break crumbs off your poem' (*L* 3: 244-45). In *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf shows precisely how a 'crumb' of a Shakespearean song is able to produce meaning autonomously, as well as how it can be seamlessly incorporated in prose to generate new poetic effects.

Clarissa reads the relevant two lines of the play from a book spread open in a bookshop's window: 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun | Nor the furious winter's rages' (*MD* 10). Clarissa is probably acquainted with *Cymbeline* and thus likely to remember that the lines come from a funereal song encouraging to stop worrying about worldly cares, as everyone 'must […] | come to dust'.[12] In this light, it is not surprising that the words strike her and linger

[12] William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. by John Dover Wilson and J. C. Maxwell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), IV. 2. 258-63.

in her head, as she had just been wondering, while doing errands for her party, precisely whether she found the idea of death painful or consoling (*MD* 9). Remarkably then, and consistently with poetry's ability to make widely relatable statements, Shakespeare's lines happen to match her own thoughts, and Clarissa also finds them relevant to 'This late age of the world's experience', since she considers that the war just over has made society brave and stoical (10). From this moment onwards, the words 'Fear no more' become inextricably tied with Clarissa's, and later Septimus', thoughts of death, and therefore become one with their experience of dealing with its fear.

For instance, when Clarissa goes back home and finds out that her husband has been invited to a lunch party without her, it is with Shakespeare's words that she addresses her fear of aging:

> 'Fear no more,' said Clarissa. Fear no more the heat o' the sun; for the shock of Lady Bruton asking Richard to lunch without her made the moment in which she had stood shiver, as a plant on the river-bed feels the shock of a passing oar and shivers: so she rocked: so she shivered.
> Millicent Bruton, whose lunch parties were said to be extraordinarily amusing, had not asked her. No vulgar jealousy could separate her from Richard. But she feared time itself, and read on Lady Bruton's face, as if it had been a dial cut in impassive stone, the dwindling of life […]. (32)

Even in this short extract, it is possible to observe the elegant exchange of voices between the poetic and the prosaic perspective. Shakespeare's universal exhortation not to fear is followed by Clarissa's particular reason for the shock, which in turn changes back into poetry through the simile of the shivering plant on the river-bed – an image that may embrace all shocks – and climactically ends with two short fragments, emphasised by the anaphora 'so she': 'so she rocked: so she shivered'. In the subsequent paragraph, the specific reference to 'Millicent Bruton' and Richard brings the reader's attention back to the relations between the novel's characters, but Clarissa's perspective, which keeps contracting and expanding, again reaches out to encompass larger issues, such as 'time itself' and 'the dwindling of life'.

The last passage from *Mrs Dalloway* I shall discuss also recites Shakespeare's refrain, but this time as part of a more sustained piece of poetic writing. Clarissa is mending her dress for the party, and her fear of getting old finally subsides:

> Quiet descended on her, calm, content, as her needle, drawing the silk smoothly to its gentle pause, collected the green folds together and attached them, very lightly, to the belt. So on a summer's day waves collect, overbalance, and fall; collect and fall; and the whole world seems to be saying 'that is all' more and more ponderously, until even the heart in the body which lies in the sun on the beach says too, That is all. Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart, committing its burden to some sea, which sighs collectively for all sorrows, and renews, begins, collects, lets fall. And the body alone listens to the passing bee; the wave breaking; the dog barking, far away barking and barking. (43)

Many characteristics of Woolf's poetic style figure in this passage, such as the simile that generalises Clarissa's calm sewing by comparing it to the soothing effect of 'some sea' ('So on a summer's day waves collect […]'), and the frequent fragmentation of the sentences. The universalisation of Clarissa's feeling of calm is further accentuated by the fact that, after the simile, she fades as an individual character, substituted by a vague and featureless 'heart in the body' who savours the comfort of Shakespeare's words, while no less than 'the whole world' speaks through the voice of the sea, 'which sighs collectively for all sorrows'. As in Rezia's passage, it is hard to establish whether this poetic voice still belongs to Clarissa: if undoubtedly the line 'Fear no more' is in Clarissa's mind, the narrator's voice seems to have gradually become independent from her, commenting on her feelings from an omniscient point of view.

The poetic fragments are easily recognisable not only because, as in the previous extracts, they are clearly marked by punctuation, but also because they are intensified by rhyme and repetition. Thus, they succeed and echo each other creating regular waves of sound, as in the series 'collect and fall', 'that is all', 'That is all', 'collects, lets fall', and the pairings 'Fear no more, says the heart. Fear no more, says the heart' and 'the wave breaking; the dog barking'. Due to these reiterations, however, the overall effect is different from that of the fragments discussed in the previous passages. Here, there is no reaching to a climax: the detached pieces

seem not to constitute the culmination of a process of revelation, but they all sound transported by the same, even rhythmic flow. It is again the generalising, unifying rhythm that Woolf associates with the poetic mood and that, though apparently produced by the choice of words, actually precedes them. This Woolf explains in a letter to Vita of 1926:

> Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it […]. (*L* 3: 247)

The rhythmic mode of passages such as the above description of Clarissa sewing constitutes the other noticeable stylistic pattern, besides the climactic mode, through which Woolf expresses the poetic perspective in her prose. Although their overall effect is different, the two patterns have in fact much in common: first, both of them trace a wave-like movement, which in the climactic mode is dilated so as to emphasise the slow rising to pinnacles of understanding, and in the rhythmic mode is compressed so as to stress regularity and flow; second, rhythm also features in the climactic mode, as a distinct beat often marks the approaching of a climax.

Both patterns can be found again in *To the Lighthouse*. The climactic pattern, for instance, is used to describe three successive moments of ecstasy Mrs Ramsay experiences while knitting by the window, looking at the strokes of the lighthouse. Being alone, she manages to reach a poetic state of mind, which allows her to lose sense of her own personality and puts her in touch with the abstract essence of her being, ‘a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others’ (*TL* 69). In the course of her interior monologue, she comes to identify with the light of the lighthouse, as expressed in the second climax of the series:

> It was odd, she thought, how if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one; felt an irrational tenderness thus (she looked at that long steady light) as for oneself. There rose, and she looked and looked with her

> needles suspended, there curled up off the floor of the mind, rose from the lake of one's being, a mist, a bride to meet her lover. (70-71)

In this passage, Mrs Ramsay's train of thoughts before the climax is expressed through a succession of sentences of even length and sustained cadence, many of them unified by the repetition of the verb 'felt': the rhythm accelerates with 'felt an irrational tenderness thus', then slows down and pauses at the full stop, before picking up again for a second, more rapid wave. In the second part starting with 'There rose', Mrs Ramsay's reflections give way to pure vision: the language becomes extremely abstract and metaphorical, until her epiphany finally manifests itself in the form of two distinct metaphors: 'a mist, a bride to meet her lover'. The metaphor of the encounter between two lovers expresses, in an extremely rarefied manner, Mrs Ramsay's feelings of self-love, which she experiences through her admiration for the light of the lighthouse ('like her own eyes meeting her own eyes'; 70). In this love she finds fulfilment, as indicated by the final and most intense climax, caused by the light 'stroking with its silver fingers some sealed vessel in her brain whose bursting would flood her with delight': a long, almost uninterrupted sentence rushes towards this climax, metaphorically describing the ecstatic revelation of satisfaction and happiness with an image of the sunset light spreading over the waves, and culminating in the (fragmented) exclamation 'It is enough! It is enough!' (72).

If the effect of a poetic climax is instantaneous, it must be remembered that in a novel its intensity is also the result of a series of subtler impressions slowly accumulated in the course of the long narrative. This is another means, besides interweaving perspectives, by which the prosaic and the poetic modes are assimilated to each other and made to work together to avoid the purple patch. In the passage just quoted, for instance, Mrs Ramsay's interval of solitude in the midst of a bustling family, her realisation that she has in fact experienced happiness (although she had considered herself pessimistic in the preceding pages), and the symbolic light of the lighthouse are all elements that, by this point in the novel, have acquired full

significance and numerous associations. Woolf describes this technique of exploiting prose's cumulative powers to increase the strength of poetic effects in *A Room of One's Own*, as she envisions the creative act of the woman poet-novelist of the future:

> Now is the time, she would say to herself at a certain moment, when without doing anything violent I can show the meaning of all this. And she would begin – how unmistakable that quickening is! – beckoning and summoning, and there would rise up in memory, half forgotten, perhaps quite trivial things in other chapters dropped by the way. And she would make their presence felt while someone sewed or smoked a pipe as naturally as possible, and one would feel, as she went on writing, as if one had gone to the top of the world and seen it laid out, very majestically, beneath. (*ROO* 92-93)

Interestingly, as much as Woolf valued this free interchange between poetry and prose, in *To the Lighthouse* the poetic perspective is interspersed in the narrative less frequently than in *Mrs Dalloway*. Woolf makes this observation herself in the diary, as she notes that 'The lyric portions of *To the Lighthouse* are collected in the 10-year lapse and don't interfere with the text so much as usual' (*D* 3: 106-7). Indeed, in the section 'Time Passes', the poetic voice or perspective, which in passages such as those analysed above blends with the voice of the characters in interior monologue, or separately gives generalised comments on their feelings while they are lost in reverie, becomes fully independent, disembodied, and impersonal. Plot details are confined to a few bare statements in square brackets, while more general questions about the passing of time, the corruption of beauty, and the shocks brought about by death and war are pondered over by a rhythmical, wandering voice, disengaged from character introspection.

What notably emerges from a close analysis of the style of Woolf's lyrical passages is that her theory of poetry as a perspective, which transcends the form of the poetic line in order to be expressed in novels, ultimately reproduces some aspects of that form. Woolf incorporates in her prose fragments that are either actual poetic lines, like 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun', or resemble them for being concise, metaphorical, and/or intensely evocative even when set

apart from their context. Moreover, Woolf often accompanies the expression of the poetic perspective with rhythm, another typical formal element of poetry, although her rhythm does not consist in a fixed cadence but in an ideal, unifying beat which the reader can instinctively perceive but not measure. In *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, these are tools used to convey a mood connected to the sublime emotion, which allows a solitary mind to overcome personality and reconnect to its essential, universal state. For this reason, in these novels Romantic-lyrical poetic effects tend to arise as part of the interior monologue technique, even though they are not at all limited to contexts of solitary self-expression and can also be found, as in 'Time Passes', realised by a depersonalised, omniscient voice.

Indeed, in line with poetry's ultimate task to transcend the individual self, Woolf was constantly exploring different forms of poetic expression that would allow her to exceed the boundaries of personality in novels: for this reason, alongside and in combination with the Romantic-lyrical model of poetry, she also experimented with another, in some ways opposed, poetic approach, which provided an antidote to solipsism by conveying the universal point of view as generated by multiple, interconnected selves. Inspired by poetic drama, in the forms passed on by the ancient Greek and Elizabethan traditions, Woolf therefore created another class of poetic effects, which for their theatrical source I have defined as 'dramatic-choral'.

## III. The influence of poetic drama on Woolf's dramatic-choral poetic effects

In her work as a literary critic, Virginia Woolf showed a special interest in how social practices of literary production and reception changed throughout history. She therefore considered that the individualistic view of poetic inspiration, according to which a literary work is a solitary rather than a social product, is typical of modernity and developed with the printing press and the habit of private reading. Conversely, she was aware that older poetic traditions do not make such a clear-cut distinction between author and audience: the models she had in mind were, on the one hand, the anonymous oral tradition of early English lyrics, which expressed the feelings shared by a whole community and encouraged listeners to join in choral refrains; on the other, ancient Greek and Elizabethan poetic drama, whose authors despite not being anonymous had still a direct relationship with their audience, which by being physically present at the theatre could exert enormous pressure. Inspired by the study of these traditions, where the poetic perspective is universal because it conveys communal emotion as opposed to exalted subjective emotion, Woolf developed interesting creative responses to what she saw as the modern problems of extreme self-consciousness and difficulty of communication.

This chapter first defines the 'dramatic-choral' model of poetry by tracing Woolf's critical interpretation of early English anonymous poetry and Elizabethan poetic drama in her draft essay 'Anon' (1940-41), and of ancient Greek poetic drama in her essay 'On Not Knowing Greek' (1925). Woolf's initial experimentation with dramatic-choral poetic effects, based on the Greek model, is then examined in *Jacob's Room*, where the poetic point of view is expressed through a shifting, choral narrator. The last part of the chapter analyses Woolf's play-poem *The Waves*, where a succession of dramatic soliloquies modelled on the Shakespearean soliloquy realises a synthesis between Romantic-lyrical and dramatic-choral

poetic effects. Situated at the crossing between thought and speech, and uttered by characters whose identities are simultaneously divided and interconnected, *The Waves*' soliloquies can be read both as silent interior monologues and as voice parts in a chorus, responding to each other or speaking on behalf of all. In this way, Woolf manages to free the sublime emotion of the 'moments of being' from the confinement of the solitary individual, opening the way for this experience to be shared through a live act of communication between human beings.

### III.1. The dramatic-choral poetic model: the expression of shared emotion

The most fundamental principle of Woolf's theory of poetry as a universal perspective is, as we have seen, that poetic inspiration can only originate from an unselfconscious state of mind. In the Romantic-lyrical model of poetry, from which the very idea of an absolute consciousness is drawn, this state of mind is achieved through a solitary, inward-looking process which culminates in the sublime emotion and thereby in a self-transcendent vision. Woolf's various depictions of this approach to poetry in her novels and essays show it to be extremely powerful, yet also symptomatic of a modern problem of communication: in this model, the poet's insights can only be shared in writing because his emotion is otherwise incommunicable. Even though the poet uncovers traits of common humanity, a great distance separates him from his audience in the process of creation: De Quincey, for instance, conceived his own impassioned prose as a style especially devoted to express what is most intimate and unutterable – dreams, memories, and 'a sorrow without a voice'.[1] As Woolf studied older, more participatory poetic traditions, however, she began to integrate this view with another interpretation of unselfconsciousness, considered as a feeling of deep connection and continuity between human beings. In this light,

[1] Thomas De Quincey, *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. by David Masson, 14 vols (London: A. & C. Black, 1896-97), I (1896), p. 9. On De Quincey's reflections on the relationship between the poet and his public, see D. D. Devlin, *De Quincey, Wordsworth and the Art of Prose* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 67-68; 101; 103.

she saw that the whole and undivided state of mind necessary to write poetry may be achieved not only through private exaltation but also by absorbing and channelling collective, shared emotion.

Woolf was interested in questions of individual and communal identity in literary expression all through her career, but she began to systematise her thoughts only towards the end of her life, for a history of English literature that she started drafting in 1940 and never completed. As pointed out by Brenda Silver, by that time 'the importance of the audience to the writer became poignantly clear to her as her own sense of isolation increased': significantly, in the notes and two draft essays that make up the project, 'Woolf contrasts the communal aspects of early literature with the isolation of the individual writer who emerged in the Renaissance, and who was struggling in 1940 and 1941 to remain creative' (*Anon* 360). Specifically, Woolf noticed how in the course of literary history the perception of the author's and the audience's identities had changed considerably, from being undifferentiated members of the same community to becoming increasingly conscious of themselves as separate individuals. Woolf deemed this change to be partly a matter of historical evolution, which saw the transition from orality to print culture, and partly a matter of literary genre.

In the draft essay 'Anon' (1940-41), for instance, Woolf claims that Elizabethan poetic drama descends directly from the voice of the anonymous singer found at the origins of English literature, who is not yet separate from his audience nor conscious of his art:

> The audience was itself the singer; "Terly, terlow" they sang; and "By, by lullay" filling in the pauses, helping out with a chorus. Every body shared in the emotion of Anons song, and supplied the story. […] Anon is sometimes man; sometimes woman. He is the common voice singing out of doors, […]. He was a simple singer, lifting a song or a story from other peoples lips, and letting the audience join in the chorus. (*Anon* 382)

This folk tradition is still alive while, in the sixteenth century, in opposition to it another type of poetry becomes prominent, 'book poetry, read aloud' indoors to a small group of listeners,

exemplified in the essay by the poet Spenser (389-92). Spenser attaches his name to his book and is separate from his audience, but as he recites his poetry 'in the great room', he can still hear the voice of Anon: 'the voice at the back door' (392). Therefore, Woolf notices that in the sixteenth century two different poetic traditions coexist side by side in England: one that is sung indoors by a self-conscious author, and another that is sung out of doors, the shared product of an entire community. As the latter develops, it moves away from the streets and finds its designed space in the playhouse, where it becomes poetic drama (392-93).

It is broadly correct to infer from Woolf's identification of these two alternative models that she sees Spenser as the ancestor of a self-conscious tradition of poetry, to which Romanticism will give mature expression, and poetic drama as the outcome of unselfconscious artistic creation. However, we must be careful not to see this distinction as too simplistic and clear-cut. The main argument of the essay 'Anon' prevents this, in that it describes the history of literature as a whole, poetic drama included, as moving towards an intensified self-consciousness, which is the chief trait of the modern mind. If, on the one hand, Spenser's self-consciousness is still very imperfect, for he can only talk about emotion in an allegorical and generalised way (389), on the other hand playwrights do not stay anonymous forever, but they speak more and more in their own voice and their characters acquire increasingly distinct personalities. But the full development of self-consciousness is ultimately fatal for the theatre: since mature plays (as, for example, Shakespeare's *The Tempest*) are better appreciated in private, they start getting printed in books, causing the undifferentiated audience to be replaced by individual readers (398). The impressionistic and imaginative character of 'Anon' is probably the reason behind some historical inaccuracies, such as the conclusion just mentioned which seems to imply that drama becomes unfit for the stage just after Shakespeare, overcome by the success of print culture. Nevertheless, the abrupt and fanciful ending of 'Anon' throws light on a very important aspect of Woolf's theory of poetry, which is her belief that poetic

drama has such a peculiar and strong relationship with its audience, that the deterioration of this bond means the spiritual, if not historical, death of the theatre.

The immediate correspondence between the play and its audience is therefore the aspect I want to focus on in order to define the dramatic-choral trend of Woolf's poetic style, as opposed to the Romantic trend. The essay 'Anon' suggests that the close relationship with the audience which characterises a theatre performance originates from the complete unselfconsciousness of Anon the primitive singer, but does not immediately cease when the playwright starts differentiating himself from his public, as long as a large audience keeps going to the playhouse and is not yet transformed into separate readers. Woolf shows that the play's modes of interaction with its audience are much more intense than any of the pressures placed upon Spenser by his indoor group of listeners/readers. Book poets like Spenser are influenced by their audience in that their writing has to please their patron, the Queen, and their readers' preference of genre: 'According to its wealth, its poverty, its education, its ignorance, the public demands what satisfies its own need – poetry, history, instruction, a story to make them forget their own drab lives' (390). Although this type of influence is quite strong and complex, it does not equate to the impact of the audience on poetic drama: they play a role in the very creation of the play, especially in the early works:

> And the play itself was still anonymous. The lack of Marlowes name, or of Kyds, shows how largely the play was a *common product*, written by one hand, but so moulded in transition that the author had no sense of property in it. It was in part the work of the audience. And the audience was a large one. […] Their presence is obvious enough in the early plays. It is they who draw up the extravagance of the hyperbole, as a sheet of paper draws up the fire. It was they who made the playwright capable of his great strides, of vast audacities beyond the reach of the *solitary writer* with his mind fixed upon the reader in the great room. (395, my italics)

The expressions in italics, 'common product' and 'solitary writer', indicate clearly that Woolf is setting up a contrast between a collective and a solitary tradition of poetry. It is also noteworthy that this difference in poetic conception has a stylistic impact on the early plays.

Elizabethan spectators want to see their own passions mirrored in the drama, 'spoken for them in poetry', and exaggerated by hyperbolic, coarse speech (396). What the audience mostly contributes to, at this stage, is the plot, as the public demands 'great names, great deeds, simple outlines, and not the single subtlety of one soul' (394).

The description of the development of poetic drama becomes more relevant to Woolf's modern perspective as it comes to the point when the playwright stops being anonymous and starts speaking in his own voice, occasionally separating himself from the actors and from the audience. What seems paradoxical is that these 'moments of separation', during pauses in the plot in which the poet comments on the action, asking questions or expressing emotion, are in fact the times when his poetry is most universal. The source of his creativity is still the audience's 'general life':

> But at some point there comes a break when anonymity withdraws. Does it come when the playwright had absorbed the contribution of the audience; and can return to them their own general life individualised in single and separate figures? There comes a point when the audience is no longer master of the playwright. Yet he is not separate from them. A common life still unites them; but there are moments of separation. Now we say, he is speaking our own thoughts. Now he is our selves. (398)

It is quite difficult to interpret what Woolf exactly means by 'our selves': most probably, she intends both 'us as human beings' and, more specifically, 'us moderns, endowed with a more acute self-consciousness'. The latter shade of meaning comes across more clearly in a previous draft of this passage: 'But here on the other hand, what we call for short ourselves – the thought that we think instinctively, the comment that is illuminating today; the words that we remember…' (424). Woolf argues that while the Elizabethan audience demands and inspires the plot, the comments concerning 'the motive behind the action' (423) are the work of the single mind of the author, and for this reason they appeal to the moderns. Yet, this passage also conveys that the dramatic poet's voice becomes distinct after having absorbed the public's contribution, which he returns to them, so that there is still a profound exchange, a kind of

choral unity between him and the audience. His words stand at the point of intersection between general life and self-consciousness.

It is precisely this hybrid crossing between the general and the individual mind that fascinated Woolf long before she wrote ‘Anon’, at the time of writing the essay ‘On Not Knowing Greek’ for the first *Common Reader* (1925). The essay that contains Woolf's very definition of poetry as ‘this lapse from the particular to the general’ (*E* 4: 43), which is a Romantic definition, is in fact analysing poetry as revealed in ancient Greek tragedies. Woolf describes that poetic context in a way which is starkly opposed to the set of circumstances that favour poetry in the Romantic sense. According to Woolf's imagery, if Romantic poetry is borne out of solitude and the dark hours, Greek drama is produced by a society that due to sunshine and warm weather is used to discuss everything out of doors, so that ‘small incidents are debated in the street, not in the sitting-room, and become dramatic’ (40). While the reader of Romantic poetry gets to know the author's most intimate thoughts, Greek literature is called by Woolf ‘the impersonal literature’ because tradition has preserved no information about its authors (39). Finally, if in *Orlando* poetry is defined as a ‘secret transaction’ between the poet and nature (*O* 188), Woolf here stresses the fact that the Greek play is a public event, enacted in front of many people:

> They [the characters of Greek tragedies] were speaking to an enormous audience rayed around them on one of those brilliant southern days when the sun is so hot and yet the air so exciting. The poet, therefore, had to bethink him, not of some theme which could be read for hours by people in privacy, but of something emphatic, familiar, brief, that would carry, instantly and directly, to an audience of seventeen thousand people perhaps, with ears and eyes eager and attentive, with bodies whose muscles would grow stiff if they sat too long without diversion. Music and dancing he would need, and naturally would choose one of those legends, like our Tristram and Iseult, which are known to everyone in outline, so that a great fund of emotion is already prepared, but can be stressed in a new place by each new poet. (40)

That theatrical performances happen in the sunshine is highlighted again, as if to deny all associations of poetry and darkness that Woolf makes elsewhere, and the impact of the

audience on the play is described as vividly as ever by reference to the crowd's immediate, physical presence: the spectators' eyes, ears and muscles are there to be satisfied or appeased and cannot be ignored. To guarantee the success of communication in a short space of time, the Greek poet tells a story that already belongs to a common patrimony.

Woolf not only notes the impact of the physicality of the audience, but also the effect of the physicality of the actors. As 'their bodies and their faces' are 'passively waiting to be made use of', the play must make action and movement a priority, so that the actors' physical presence limits what the characters can say in terms of generalised comments, which are the very essence of poetry (43). Therefore, Woolf argues that in Greek drama the highest poetic function is performed not by the characters but by the chorus:

> The intolerable restrictions of the drama could be loosened, however, if a means could be found by which what was general and poetic, comment, not action, could be freed without interrupting the movement of the whole. It is this that the choruses supply; the old men or women who take no active part in the drama, the undifferentiated voices who sing like birds in the pauses of the wind; who can comment, or sum up, or allow the poet to speak himself or supply, by contrast, another side to his conception. (43)

There are conceptual affinities between this passage and the account of the evolution of English drama in 'Anon'. They both convey that poetry is the opposite of action and movement: it is the comment the fills the pauses in the action, as it is also the case of the lyrical passages of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*. They further say that this comment is made by the poet speaking in his own voice, as partly separate from the audience, looking from a distance at the plot which is provided by tradition. All the same, in both the Greek and the Elizabethan play the poet's voice is still in part the voice of the community, and in Greek tragedy this is particularly evident in the fact that poetic comments are offered by a chorus of 'undifferentiated voices'. The choruses are thus an hybrid between an individual and a collective consciousness, as they express the poet's conception, but via a plural subject.

There are striking similarities between Woolf's 'On Not Knowing Greek' and a chapter on Greek tragedy found in G. Lowes Dickinson's *The Greek View of Life* (1896). Dickinson was a friend of Woolf's closely associated to the Bloomsbury group, so it is likely that Woolf read his book or encountered his ideas about Greek tragedy in conversation. He might have inspired some of Woolf's statements about the function of the chorus, such as that of providing comments upon the action, and of serving as vehicle for the voice of the dramatist. In the lyric odes, according to Dickinson,

> the chorus commented on the situation, bestowed advice or warning, praise or blame, and finally summed up the moral of the whole. Through the chorus, in fact, the poet could speak in his own person, and impose upon the whole tragedy any tone which he desired. Periodically he could drop the dramatist and assume the preacher; and thus ensure that his play should be, what we have seen was its recognized ideal, not merely a representation but an interpretation of life.[2]

Clearly, Woolf's notion that the chorus aims at poetic generalisations at the expense of realistic details is in harmony with Dickinson's observation that the Greek play is purposefully non-mimetic, as 'Underlying the whole construction of the plot, the dialogue, the reflections, the lyric interludes, is the intention to illustrate some general moral law, some common and typical problem, some fundamental truth'.[3] For Dickinson as for Woolf, the chorus plays a key role in showing these universal truths, thus giving meaning to the whole play and consequently to human life. However, Woolf makes a few original additions to Dickinson's analysis which throw light upon her own concerns as a writer. First of all, she qualifies the generalising faculty of the chorus as fundamentally poetic; secondly, she stresses much more than Dickinson does the collective nature of the chorus' voice; finally and most importantly, she connects the function of the chorus to that of the narrator in novels.

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[2] G. Lowes Dickinson, *The Greek View of Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1915), p. 229.
[3] Dickinson, p. 227.

The latter point is particularly significant because it draws a line of continuity between poetic drama and novels. 'On Not Knowing Greek' illustrates their affinity in the following terms:

> Always in imaginative literature, where characters speak for themselves and the author has no part, the need of that voice is making itself felt. For though Shakespeare (unless we consider that his fools and madmen supply the part) dispensed with the chorus, novelists are always devising some substitute – Thackeray speaking in his own person. Fielding coming out and addressing the world before his curtain rises. So to grasp the meaning of the play the chorus is of the utmost importance. One must be able to pass easily into those ecstasies, those wild and apparently irrelevant utterances, those sometimes obvious and commonplace statements, to decide their relevance or irrelevance, and give them their relation to the play as a whole. (*E* 4: 43)

The fact that Woolf sees an analogy between the voice of the Greek chorus and the voice of the narrator in novels invites us to enquire whether she ever experimented with a choral narrator herself, before the actual choruses of *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*. In considering this hypothesis, it is worth taking into account Yopie Prins' claim that Victorian women readers and translators of Greek tragedies – Woolf being part of this culture as she studied and translated ancient Greek from a young age, alone or trained by (mostly) female tutors – tended to identify with the chorus for its role of interpreter between poet and audience, as 'a collective body that could reflect on the performance'. Prins also observes that translating Greek tragedy as 'a genre that combined dramatic dialogues with choral odes' gave women 'the opportunity to write in different literary forms'.[4] In writing *Jacob's Room*, therefore, her first truly experimental work, Woolf may have seen Greek tragedy as an initial model of inspiration for combining action and dialogue with poetic generalisations, in a similar way as T. S. Eliot, about a decade later, revived the chorus in order to justify the inclusion of lyric and unrealistic speech in his verse drama, as a form of mediation between characters and audience, and as a direct

[4] Yopie Prins, *Ladies' Greek: Victorian Translations of Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 30-31.

link to his Greek models.[5] As if to suggest an analogous tribute to classical literature, *Jacob's Room* is full of references to the classics, compares modern society to the model of ancient Greek civilisation, and is partly set in Greece.

## III.2. Poetic effects in *Jacob's Room*: a choral narrator

During her years of self-education, the classics were Woolf's main subject of study. She started taking lessons in Greek and Latin as early as 1897 and continued, under the guidance of different tutors, for about twelve years. In 1906, during a trip to Greece, she began to keep a notebook in which she commented and annotated classical authors. The readings of her youth covered Plato, the Greek epigrams, the *Odyssey*, Aristophanes, and most importantly the great tragic playwrights.[6] A letter to her brother Thoby of 1901 shows that she especially appreciated Sophocles, even before she learnt to appreciate Shakespeare: 'I find to my immense pride that I really *enjoy* not only admire Sophocles. So after all there is hope for Shakespeare' (*L* 1: 42).

There is evidence in Woolf's letters and diary that her readings of Greek drama continued in later years, closer to the composition of *Jacob's Room*: in a 1918 letter to Saxon Sydney-Turner she criticises Richard Jebb's translation of Sophocles' tragedies, and in the same year she records in her diary some reflections upon the *Electra* (*L* 2: 221; *D* 1: 184-85). Her reading notes show that she read the *Antigone* for a second time in 1919, in Greek, and express her reservations about the effectiveness of translation.[7] According to the diary, she stopped reading Greek in the summer of 1920, a few months after beginning *Jacob's Room*, but resumed in 1922 while correcting the proofs, as she began a programme of reading Greek

[5] Anthony Cuda, '"A Precise Way of Thinking and Feeling": Eliot and Verse Drama', in *The New Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot*, ed. by Jason Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 116-30 (pp. 121-22).

[6] Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 143-44.

[7] Emily Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Migrations of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 39-40.

literature for the essay 'On Not Knowing Greek' (*D* 2: 133-34; 196-97). Between 1922 and 1924, while reading more Sophocles in the French prose translation of Leconte de Lisle, Woolf also worked on her own translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, opting for a prose rather than a poetic translation.[8] Significantly, then, the study of Greek literature marks both the beginning and the end of the composition of *Jacob's Room*, showing that the novel, with its frequent classical references, was part of an ongoing confrontation with the Greek world.

There are two main reasons behind the novel's engagement with ancient Greece, one related to Woolf's experience, and one connected to the novel's thematic content. The first reason is that the protagonist Jacob is modelled on Woolf's memories of Thoby, whom she always associated with classical Greece because of his studies at public school and Cambridge. Indeed, taking Greek and Latin lessons meant to the young Virginia that she could keep a privileged connection with her brother, as they could read and discuss the same authors.[9] Moreover, Thoby died of typhoid just after the 1906 trip to Greece Virginia shared with him and their other siblings, and which inspired a section of the novel.[10] The second reason for the classical references in *Jacob's Room* is that the ideal of ancient Greek civilisation is an important theme of the novel, as the narrator's depiction of modern society is constantly set against that high achievement of the past. Thus, for example, Jacob and some other characters are sometimes likened to Greek gods or heroes, and the modern city of Athens, poor and mutable, is compared to the ancient city, beautiful and immortal, symbolised by the Parthenon.

The narrator addresses the question of how modern civilisation compares to classical standards by asking whether the Greek model is actually real and attainable, or just an illusion:

> Luckily Jacob had little sense of personal association; he seldom thought of Plato or Socrates in the flesh; on the other hand his feeling for architecture was very strong; he preferred statues to pictures; and he was beginning to think a great deal

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[8] Emily Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 44-46; Dalgarno, *Migrations*, p. 40.

[9] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, pp. 115-16; 143-44.

[10] Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, pp. 227-31.

> about the problems of civilization, which were solved, of course, so very remarkably by the ancient Greeks, though their solution is no help to us. (*JR* 145)

'Us' obviously refers to the community of the moderns, to which Jacob and the narrator both belong: noticeably, in this passage there is an abrupt shift of focus, accompanied by a temporal shift from past to present tense, from Jacob's thoughts about civilisation as he visits the Parthenon to the general comment of the narrator that the Greek's solution 'is no help to us'. The shift indicates that the narrator is looking at Jacob's story, set in the (recent) past, from the larger perspective of the society of which Jacob is part, drawing from those events comments and reflections that are meaningful to, and revealing of, that society. In fact, the true protagonist of the novel is not Jacob but his society and the status of modern civilisation. This is evident from the fact, now generally accepted in criticism, that Jacob does not stand for a realistic individual but for a general type. As Hermione Lee well explains:

> The emptiness of Jacob's Room has led to the novel being criticized. Jacob 'is absent'. He 'escapes us'. We have the luminous halo, but nothing inside it. The justice of such views is mitigated by the positive sense we have of Jacob, if not as an individual, then as a figure of a recognizable class, at a particular time, doomed to a particular tragic fate.[11]

A character thus conceived feels a bit out of place in a novel, and it certainly did feel so to Woolf's contemporary readers, who were accustomed to realist novels. Those same readers, however, might not have found Jacob so strange had they encountered him in a Greek tragedy, where characters are expected to be representative of a human condition rather than realistic individuals. That is because, as Woolf's theory implies, Jacob is a 'poetic' character in the dramatic-choral model: his features are generic and his consciousness difficult to access. Indeed, Leonard's comment on *Jacob's Room*'s characters, noted by Woolf in her diary, sounds precisely like a description of classical tragic figures: 'puppets, moved hither & thither by fate' (*D* 2: 186).

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[11] Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Routledge, 2010), p. 84.

The different features of *Jacob's Room* briefly gathered so far, which I will explore more in depth below, all together point to a very interesting conclusion in terms of poetic effects in prose. If we consider that this is a novel about modern civilisation, confronting itself with the ideal of ancient Greek civilisation; that the real protagonist is not an individual called Jacob but an entire society with its values and its destiny – a quality enhanced by the fact that the novel is crowded with characters, some of which appear only in one sentence; and that Jacob himself is presented as a substitute for a Greek hero, then we can also advance the hypothesis that the novel's prominent narrator represents the voice of the modern community, which includes the perspective of readers, acting as the modern equivalent of the Greek chorus.

In *Jacob's Room* there are several instances of generalised comments uttered by a collective narrator. A telling example is the narrator's description of the coast of Cornwall as Jacob and his friend Timmy Durrant are sailing in the Scilly Isles. The impressions recorded are not, or not only, Jacob's and Timmy's, but what everyone of their time and background would feel at the sight of that coast:

> No doubt if this were Italy, Greece, or even the shores of Spain, sadness would be routed by strangeness and excitement and the nudge of a classical education. But the Cornish hills have stark chimneys standing on them; and, somehow or other, loveliness is infernally sad. Yes, the chimneys and the coastguard stations and the little bays with the waves breaking unseen by any one make one remember the overpowering sorrow. And what can this sorrow be?
> *It is brewed by the earth itself. It comes from the houses on the coast. We start transparent, and then the cloud thickens. All history backs our pane of glass. To escape is vain.*
> But whether this is the right interpretation of Jacob's gloom as he sat naked, in the sun, looking at the Land's End, it is impossible to say; for he never spoke a word. (*JR* 43, my italics)

This long narratorial comment inserts Jacob and Timmy's gaze on the coast into the generalised perspective of modern civilisation looking at its own landscape, saddened by the inexorable direction of history. Since this feeling of sorrow is inherent in the modern condition and is a shared feeling, it is uttered by a plural subject – 'We start transparent', 'All history backs our

pane of glass' – in the stark and brief, solemn statements that make up the lines in italics. As in *Mrs Dalloway*, likewise in *Jacob's Room* the highest poetic moments are marked by metaphor, which is an essential element of the dramatic-choral model of poetry too. But in contrast to the poetic passages of *Mrs Dalloway*, this choral passage by definition has no roots in the reflections of a solitary self, expanding into a generalisation; quite the opposite, since Jacob's consciousness is in fact unknown and an object of speculation.

Quoting some choral passages from one of the Greek tragedies will help to bring out the affinities with *Jacob's Room*'s narrator, even though in providing specific examples I do not imply that Woolf was influenced by a text in particular: more likely, she was inspired by the idea of a collective consciousness and tried to recreate the overall effect of its wise or perplexed utterances. The fact that, as we have seen, Woolf encountered the Greek plays in three languages (Greek, English and sometimes French), and that she was sceptical of translations, makes it even more difficult to point to a precise stylistic model. That being said, Arthur Verrall's prose translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1889) can be considered an English paradigm close enough to her taste, since Verrall was praised for his 'poetic sense of Aeschylean language' and his literary sensibility may have been the very reason that prompted Woolf to choose his version as the crib for her own translation of the *Agamemnon*. Moreover, both of Woolf's most influential tutors, Professor George Warr and Janet Case, had a special interest in Aeschylean drama, and Woolf herself in 'On Not Knowing Greek' praises Aeschylus' choruses as the most poetic and metaphorical (*E* 4: 44-45).[12]

The choruses of Verrall's *Agamemnon* do resemble, in universal reach and ominous tone, some of the narrator's interventions in *Jacob's Room*, such as the above declaration that 'We start transparent, and then the cloud thickens. […] To escape is vain' (*JR* 43). The Elders

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[12] Prins, pp. 39-40; 42.

of Aeschylus' tragedy similarly claim that 'Remedy is all vain. Unhidden the mischief glows with a baleful light' and later state a universal law:

> For whosoever are guilty of lives, upon them God's eyes are fixed. The time comes when the dark Chastisers take the man's strength away: and once he is gone, no help for him. Glory too high is dangerous; it is upon the peak that the thunder strikes.[13]

This kind of solemn inflection is echoed in several narratorial comments scattered here and there in *Jacob's Room*, as for instance 'The words we seek hang close to the tree. We come at dawn and find them sweet beneath the leaf' (*JR* 88), or 'As frequent as street corners in Holborn are these chasms in the continuity of our ways. Yet we keep straight on' (90), or again, this time even with a suggestion of ritualistic dance and music: 'No one stands still. It seems as if we marched to the sound of music; perhaps the wind and the river; perhaps these same drums and trumpets – the ecstasy and hubbub of the soul' (108). Finally, statements like 'Such is the manner of our seeing. Such the conditions of our love' (*JR* 66) reflect an English construction also frequently found, among other places, in *Agamemnon*'s translated choruses, as in 'Such was the sin of Paris' and 'Such was the home-sorrow ere they parted hence'.[14]

Another element that the narrator of *Jacob's Room* and Greek choruses have in common is their uncertainty: they both try to make sense of the events as they happen, asking questions and speculating about the mind of the characters. The Elders of the *Agamemnon*, for instance, do not know anything beyond what they can see ('What followed I saw not, neither do I tell'),[15] and they doubt what they see, as when they cannot believe wholeheartedly in the good news of Agamemnon's victorious return from Troy, due to a bad presentiment:

> [T]hey are returned, mine own eyes tell me so. But yet, as without the lyre, my bosom repeats that dirge of Doom, unlearned and self-inspired, unable to grasp in

[13] Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. by Arthur Woollgar Verrall (London: Macmillan, 1889), pp. 237-38. Translation of ll. 398-99; 467-76.

[14] Aeschylus, pp. 237-38. Translation of ll. 409; 435-37.

[15] Aeschylus, p. 235. Translation of l. 259.

> full the welcome assurance of hope. […] But I pray my false expectation may lose itself in void.[16]

Not only can the chorus not interpret the events clearly, they also struggle to understand and predict the characters' actions, as when an Elder is not sure how Cassandra will respond to Clytemnestra's invitation to enter the palace (as a slave): 'She waits for thee. And may-be, since thou art in the toils of fate, thou should'st obey, if it may be, – though, may-be, thou wilt not'.[17] The same mixed feelings about the story's developments, and the same powerlessness to enter a character's mind also characterise the narrator's reaction when Jacob discovers that Florinda is cheating on him with another man:

> Whether we know what was in his mind is another question. Granted ten years' seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him comes first; this is swallowed up by a desire to help – overwhelming sense, reason, and the time of night; anger would follow close on that – with Florinda, with destiny; and then up would bubble an irresponsible optimism. "Surely there's enough light in the street at this moment to drown all our cares in gold!" Ah, what's the use of saying it? Even while you speak and look over your shoulder towards Shaftesbury Avenue, destiny is chipping a dent in him. He has turned to go. As for following him back to his rooms, no – that we won't do. (89)

Compared to tragic choruses, who only fluctuate between the pronouns 'I' and 'we', both referring to a compact group of people, the narrator's use of personal pronouns in *Jacob's room* is more complex and disorienting. Their constant shifting makes the narrator's identity inconsistent and, as a result, as ungraspable as Jacob's. Sometimes the narrator calls herself 'I' (for convenience, I will refer to the narrator using the feminine singular); sometimes, as in the passage above, she bears the characteristics of the author herself ('Granted ten years' seniority and a difference of sex'); most of the times she uses 'we', but also a generic 'one', and even 'you'. In the comment 'Even while you speak and look over your shoulder towards Shaftesbury Avenue […]', for instance, the narrator is describing her own gaze, but by using the second

[16] Aeschylus, pp. 248-49. Translation of ll. 978-89.
[17] Aeschylus, p. 249. Translation of ll. 1032-33.

person she is also getting the audience-reader involved, communicating a sense of physical participation and immediacy.

I would argue that in a modern novel, where an actual chorus cannot, obviously, be visible on stage, it is precisely this confusion and continuous shifting that creates the effect of a community witnessing the events, a large community that includes the audience. This way, the narrator plays a 'choral' part in the hybrid sense suggested by Woolf in 'Anon' and 'On Not Knowing Greek': her generalised comments express the poet's conception, but via a plural (or unstable, or dispersed) voice, which is meant to interpret the thoughts, feelings and perspective of an entire society. Certainly, the narrator of *Jacob's Room*, even when she speaks in the first person singular, is an identity that cannot be confined, and appears definitely more fragmented than its classical ancestor:

> For though I have no wish to be Queen of England – or only for a moment – I would willingly sit beside her; I would hear the Prime Minister's gossip; the countess whisper, and share her memories of halls and gardens […] And then, doffing one's own headpiece, how strange to assume for a moment someone's – any one's […]. But no – we must choose. Never was there a harsher necessity! or one which entails greater pain, more certain disaster; for wherever I seat myself, I die in exile: Whittaker in his lodging-house; Lady Charles at the Manor. (*JR* 63)

Discussing the novel's prominent narrator, Hermione Lee underlines its role in communicating Woolf's belief in the elusiveness of character, as the continuous present-tense, generalised commentary that accompanies the historical past of the plot makes *Jacob's Room* 'a novel about writing about Jacob'. Among the different personal pronouns, Lee stresses the frequent use of 'one' and notices the fluid movement, often within the same sentence, between the characters' thoughts, uncertainly rendered, and the narrator's 'impersonal' generalisations.[18] This technique partly anticipates the way Woolf introduces the poetic perspective in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, mingling it with the voice of a character or including it as a separate, disembodied commentary. In *Jacob's Room*, however, not only is the characters'

[18] Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, pp. 76-78.

inner life harder to penetrate, but the narrator's generalised voice does not seem to be coming from a superior dimension, far removed from the novel's scene. Rather, the immediate spontaneity of many remarks gives the impression that the narrator has been imagined as physically present on the novel's stage, like a Greek chorus watching the development of the story without taking part in it and without being able to affect its course. The narrator of *Jacob's Room* is therefore a shifting, collective, general entity; yet not remote and immaterial, because endowed with a body (or bodies), senses, and a position in space.

The narrator's theatrical presence, already evident from the passage in which she seems to stand beside Jacob in Shaftesbury Avenue, is stressed on several other occasions. It comes across most obviously in the account of Jacob's evenings at Cambridge, for in this case the narrator's position 'on stage' determines her view and therefore limits her knowledge. In trying to relate what Jacob and his friends are doing in the common room from the courtyard outside the college, she can only guess at the students' activities, except what she can see through an open window: 'the window being open, one could see how they sat – legs issuing here, one there crumpled in a corner of the sofa; and, presumably, for you could not see him, somebody stood by the fender, talking' (*JR* 38). The choral narrator is someone who can see, hear, smell the elements of her own story, and invites the audience to do the same, addressing it directly as a fellow spectator. This explains the visual immediacy of descriptions such as the following: '*If you look closer you will see* that three elderly men at a little distance from each other run spiders along the pavement as if the street were their parlour, and *here*, against the wall, a woman stares at nothing, boot-laces extended, which *she does not ask you* to buy' (60; my italics). What is even more striking, however, is that in *Jacob's Room* the narrator's voice is clearly not the silent voice of a printed book, but is spoken aloud, although, as opposed to the Greek chorus' voice, the characters cannot hear it. In the scene where Jacob is having dinner at a restaurant with Florinda, for example, the narrator observes: 'Talk in a restaurant is dazed

sleep-walkers' talk, so many things to look at – so much noise – other people talking. Can one overhear? Oh, but they mustn't overhear *us*' (74). The pronoun '*us*', which appears in italics in the text, really underlines the presence of a collective body on the novel's stage – or of an individual with a choric function, addressing and involving the public – while the insistence on the vocabulary of seeing and of hearing communicates the sense of an audience that is attending the play, as remarked in 'On Not Knowing Greek', 'with ears and eyes eager and attentive' (*E* 4: 40).

The dramatic-choral poetic effects of *Jacob's Room* are enhanced by a poetic rendering of character. As already mentioned, what makes Jacob poetic in the dramatic-choral mode is that he represents a general type rather than a precise individual, and that his most intimate thoughts are inaccessible to the narrator. This definition can be drawn once again from 'On Not Knowing Greek':

> In six pages of Proust we can find more complicated and varied emotions than in the whole of the *Electra*. But in the *Electra* or in the *Antigone* we are impressed by something different, by something perhaps more impressive – by heroism itself, by fidelity itself. In spite of the labour and the difficulty it is this that draws us back and back to the Greeks; the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there. (*E* 4: 42)

Interestingly, G. Lowes Dickinson makes a very similar point in *The Greek View of Life*:

> In the Greek tragedy the general point of view predominates over the idiosyncrasies of particular persons. It is human nature that is represented in the broad, not this or that highly specialized variation […]. Man is the subject of the Greek drama; the subject of the modern novel is Tom and Dick.[19]

According to Dickinson, it is their archetypal function that makes the characters of Greek drama 'simple' and 'fixed', attributes that Woolf also recalls when she notes that 'Electra stands before us like a figure so tightly bound that she can only move an inch this way, an inch that' (*E* 4: 41).

[19] Dickinson, p. 228.

Indeed, fixity is an essential quality of Jacob, who especially at the moments when readers of novels would most expect him to be moved by passion or express his feelings, is found standing motionless:

> "You are in love!" he [Jacob's friend Bonamy] exclaimed.
> Jacob blushed.
> The sharpest of knives never cut so deep.
> As for responding, or taking the least account of it, Jacob stared straight ahead of him, fixed, monolithic – oh, very beautiful! – like a British Admiral, exclaimed Bonamy in a rage, rising from his seat and walking off; waiting for some sound; none came […]. (*JR* 161)

Jacob's fixity is stressed even more by the fact that he is often compared to a statue. Florinda, for example, exclaims: 'Jacob. You're like one of those statues…I think there are lovely things in the British Museum, don't you?' (74); while Fanny, another girl in love with him, thinks of him as 'more statuesque, noble, and eyeless than ever' (167). Also Sandra, always veiled, is likened to a caryatid in the Parthenon (147). These details are no coincidence, for they reflect the way Greek tragedies were performed in the nineteenth century, with actors posing so as to imitate Greek statuary.[20] Precisely this style of performance prompted De Quincey to define, in his *Theory of Greek Tragedy*, the tragic characters' attitude as 'statuesque' and their passions as 'frozen into marble life' due to the actors wearing masks.[21]

A profound distance separates a character like Jacob from the finely wrought personalities of Mrs Dalloway or Mrs Ramsay. Yet, both types play a role in channelling the poetic perspective in prose, each according to a different poetic model. In Woolf's Romantic-lyrical approach, a generalised and universal view of character is achieved following a deep exploration of an individual consciousness, until his/her perspective is transcended and expanded into an essential trait of human nature, usually expressed through figurative language. In the dramatic-choral mode as interpreted in *Jacob's Room*, on the contrary, there

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[20] Prins, pp. 28-29.
[21] Thomas De Quincey, *Theory of Greek Tragedy*, ed. by WM. D. Armes (San Francisco: Doxey, 1893), p.8.

is no such double movement of contraction and expansion: characters like Jacob, inspired by classical tragic heroes and limited in the range of feelings they can expose, already correspond to poetic types, or general outlines of human nature. But thanks to the theatricality of this approach, what is lost in introspective depth is gained in force of expression by the choral narrator, whose questioning, searching voice is a function of the mysteriousness of the characters and of their destiny. Moreover, the physical immediacy of the narrator's commentary closely involves the audience into a shared intellectual and emotional response to Jacob's story. The choice of a dramatic-choral model of poetic effects for *Jacob's Room*, despite reviving aspects of an ancient literary form, serves multiple modern purposes. Paradoxically, it makes Jacob a very modern character, as his poetic features in a novel's context are made to mean that personality in the modern age is very difficult to catch by writers, after the abandonment of the conventional methods of realist novels. The use of a choral narrator makes the novel about the destiny of the whole of modern civilisation, calling its qualities and practices into question. Finally, the memory of Greek tragedy lurking behind *Jacob's Room* darkens the colours of this civilisation's and its hero's fate, as well as providing a standard of beauty and perfection that modern society has set for itself, but failed to meet.

To conclude, the Romantic-lyrical and dramatic-choral trends are two facets of Woolf's engagement with poetry that run side by side in her works. Her exploration of the dramatic trend will also lead, inevitably, to the confrontation with Shakespeare, so that as we shall see drama and lyric will find a successful point of contact in the prose rendering of the Shakespearean soliloquy. Highlighting the surfacing of these trends in Woolf's novels does not mean reducing the variety of her style to those models but simply shows that they are a crucial and constant focus of her experimental writing. Thus, the narrator in *Jacob's Room* does not fulfil only a choral role but wears other disguises, as when she inserts in the narrative Jacob's memories or reports some of his thoughts in the conventional, omniscient manner. The narrator

of *Jacob's Room* keeps shifting narrative strategies in order to 'parody previous conventions for fixing character'.[22] Nevertheless, the trends I have identified are particularly prominent because they represent the prose legacy of the two forms, the lyric and the poetic play, that Woolf in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' claims to be dead in the modern age but whose 'duties' are to be taken over by the 'cannibal' novel of the future (*E* 4: 434-35).

The results of Woolf's stylistic cannibalism are particularly interesting as the Romantic-lyrical and dramatic-choral models are in many ways opposed to each other. This can be clearly visualised by recalling Woolf's recurrent image of the hill-top. At the end of *Orlando*, Orlando's climbing of the hill in the park is accompanied by a minute description of her states of mind, which eventually lead her to gain a general perspective – with her vision from the hill-top reaching as far as the Scottish hills and the Hebrides – and culminate in the sublime vision of the wild goose (*O* 187-89). Interestingly, *Jacob's Room* also contains a climbing scene (*JR* 153-56), when Jacob and Sandra walk together up the hill in Athens in order to reach the Acropolis, but its handling of focalisation is completely different. Little is said about the characters' states of mind, only a few brief comments and what is conveyed by their broken and awkward dialogue. It is the choral narrator who describes the darkness around them, as opposed to Orlando's looking at the 'dark pool' of her own mind (*O* 189), and by doing so she progressively enlarges her point of view beyond Athens and away from Jacob and Sandra, encompassing first the whole mainland of Greece, then both Greece and the plains of Troy with the Sea of Marmara between them, up to Albania and Turkey, and finally Paris, Constantinople and London. It is only at the end of this journey that the chorus remembers about the characters:

> But to return to Jacob and Sandra.

[22] Michael R. Olin-Hitt, 'Power, Discipline, and Individuality: Subversive Characterization in *Jacob's Room*', in *Virginia Woolf: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Beth Rigel Daugherty and Eileen Barrett (New York: Pace University Press, 1996), pp. 128-34 (p. 131).

> They had vanished. There was the Acropolis; but had they reached it? The columns and the Temple remain; the emotion of the living breaks fresh on them year after year; and of that what remains?
> As for reaching the Acropolis who shall say that we ever do it, or that when Jacob woke next morning he found anything hard and durable to keep forever? (*JR* 156)

The intensification and transcendence of the self in *Orlando* is countered, in *Jacob's Room*, by the negation of the self in favour of the community: the characters are denied the sublime experience, or even if they have it the stress falls elsewhere, upon the questioning voice of the chorus, which communicates what in the story is relevant to society as a whole. It is a crucial dilemma for Woolf, whether to focus on the self or rather on the sense of connection between selves, a problem I believe which determines her oscillation between the Romantic-lyrical and the dramatic-choral models of poetic effects, and her attempts at reconciling them.

### III.3. The dramatic soliloquies of *The Waves*: the art of poetic speech

Virginia Woolf's engagement with lyric poetry and drama, which continues to inform her work up to her very last novel *Between the Acts*, comes to a particularly successful synthesis with the composition of the play-poem *The Waves*. The 'cannibal' novel that Woolf had envisioned in her 1927 essay 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' (*E* 4: 434) stands at the crossing between the Romantic-lyrical and the dramatic-choral poetic modes, that is, between the communication of solitary emotion and the expression of shared feeling. In this section I am going to show how the novel's 'dramatic soliloquies', as Woolf defines them in her diary (*D* 3: 312), are a hybrid between thought and speech, on the model of Shakespeare's soliloquies, and between lyrical and choral expression. The hybrid character of the novel is evident in Woolf's own description of *The Waves* as a 'playpoem' (*D* 3: 203): unquestionably dramatic in form, but written to be read in private and not acted (*E* 4: 435).

Crucial with regard to the opposition between solitude and sharing in the novel is the question of whether the characters' soliloquies are to be considered a representation of thought or a representation of speech. Woolf's remarks in her diary during the conception and composition of *The Waves* are contradictory and seemingly convey that she intended the soliloquies to represent both at the same time. In a diary entry of 1927, having just conceived the idea for a play-poem *The Moths*, she sounds undecided whether to have her characters talking or thinking:

> Now the moths will I think fill out the skeleton which I dashed in here: the play-poem idea: the idea of some continuous stream, not solely of *human thought*, but of the ship, the night&c, all flowing together […]. A man & a woman are to be sitting at table *talking*. *Or shall they remain silent?* […] The contrasts might be something of this sort: *she might talk, or think*, about the age of the earth: the death of humanity; then moths keep on coming. (*D* 3: 139, my italics)

What Woolf is sure about at this stage, is that the subject of the play-poem will be, in accordance with her theory of poetry, universals such as the night, death and the earth, with all these elements brought together by a 'continuous stream', which in the finished work is recognisable in the rhythmic succession of its wave-like sentences. What instead she is still unsure about, is the nature of the voices that are to convey this flow: should it be expressed indirectly by describing the thoughts of the characters, or directly by reporting their speech? In 1929, when the book was not yet begun, she was more inclined towards thought, as this diary entry shows: 'A mind thinking. They might be islands of light – islands in the stream that I am trying to convey: life itself going on.' (*D* 3: 229). The description of thoughts as 'islands of light' gives the book an abstract rather than dramatic quality, and evokes the interior monologue's technique of rounding off 'moments'. Similarly, at the very start of the writing process Woolf asks herself: 'Who thinks it? And am I outside the thinker?' (*D* 3: 257). But the following year thinking has turned into speaking, as she admits 'I have not yet mastered the speaking voice' and then adds that she re-writes her draft 'reading much of it aloud, like poetry'

(*D* 3: 298). Only when in the middle of the novel, she finally recognises: 'The Waves is I think resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies' (*D* 3: 312). This brief account of Woolf's reflections about voice in *The Waves* shows that the novel's soliloquies have a hybrid nature: on the one hand, they are intended as a depiction of the characters' innermost thoughts, a view on their minds; on the other, their formalisation into dramatic direct speech gives them a public, shared quality that was absent from the interior monologues of Woolf's earlier novels.

As the novel took shape as a succession of dramatic soliloquies, rhythmically moulded and more and more conceived as forms of poetic writing, the model of Shakespeare's soliloquies must have been present to Woolf, who in her reflections upon the tasks of poetry always paid particular attention to the features of Elizabethan poetic drama. The influence of Shakespeare's drama on the form of *The Waves* has been best underlined by Alice Fox, who sees the book as 'a play with everything left out but the soliloquies', and notes that these 'take much from Shakespeare's: all six characters examine their lives, relive and reinterpret the past, capture meaning in recurrent images and metaphors, and in general touch upon internal reality' in a manner reminiscent of Shakespeare's soliloquists. These observations lead Fox to conclude that 'It is this concentration on the dramatic soliloquy that makes *The Waves* Woolf's most Elizabethan book in form'.[23] Fox also compared two successive drafts of the novel with the published text and found that the amount of Shakespearian allusions increased as Woolf approached the final version.[24] Woolf's engagement with Shakespearean drama was lifelong, but during the composition of *The Waves* it reached one of its peaks and was so intense that it almost became part of her writing process. In 1930 she notes in her diary: 'I read Shakespeare *directly* I have finished writing. When my mind is agape and red-hot. Then it is astonishing'

[23] Alice Fox, *Virginia Woolf and the Literature of the English Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 136.

[24] Fox, p. 133.

(157). In this passage she admires the fecundity of Shakespeare's language in general, but in her letters and essays she also makes more specific comments on his ability to express thought through direct speech, and wonders about the legacy of this dramatic craft in the novel's genre.

For instance, in a 1932 letter to Hugh Walpole, written after the publication of *The Waves*, she makes an interesting remark about the survival of the dramatic art in the novels of Walter Scott:

> One of the things I want to write about one day is the Shakespearean talk in Scott: the dialogues: surely that is the last appearance in England of the blank verse of Falstaff and so on! We have lost the art of the *poetic speech*— (*L* 5: 104, my italics)

In fact, an undated revision of an essay titled 'The Antiquary' defines Scott's dialogues as Shakespearean, claiming that Scott 'is perhaps the last novelist to practise the great, the Shakespearean art, of making people reveal themselves in speech' (*E* 6: 436).[25] A similar observation appears in a 1934 letter to the Shakespeare scholar and dramatist George Rylands, a crucial figure in the development of Woolf's ideas about poetry and fiction because, as revealed by Emily Kopley, he 'supported Woolf's claim that prose, and the novel in particular, was assuming the prestige and cultural duties of verse', and praised *The Waves* for incorporating elements of many poetic styles, including the Shakespearean soliloquy.[26] In the letter, Woolf claims that the 'last relics' of the Shakespearean soliloquy can be found in some of Scott's speeches in *The Antiquary* (*L* 5: 335) and argues, more generally, that 'the play persisted in the novelist's mind, long after it was dead'. Hence, she names a series of Victorian authors who, after Scott, continued this dramatic tradition, and concludes that contemporary novelists too should 'get back to the spoken word' (334-35). Finally, another essay on Scott, 'Gas at Abbotsford', though published much later, in 1940, allows us to understand how,

[25] The original version of this essay was published in 1924 and does not contain this comment, but the second version may have been redrafted in the period immediately following the publication of *The Waves* (1931), for inclusion in the second *Common Reader*, as 'The Antiquary' figures in its initial plan (see *E* 6: 436, n.1; *E* 5: 332, n.1).

[26] Kopley, pp. 950; 954-55.

according to Woolf, prose can be poetic in the dramatic sense, that is, in connection with the speaking voice. In this essay she makes a distinction between the 'ventriloquist novelists', who merely 'imitate human speech', and the 'playwright novelists', who are half-ventriloquists, half-poets:

> Or was he [Scott] the last of the playwright novelists, who, when the pressure of emotion is strong enough behind them can leap the bounds of prose and make real thoughts and real emotions issue in real words from living lips? So many playwrights did; but of novelists who – except Sir Walter and, perhaps, Dickens? (*E* 6: 217)

It follows from this passage that the 'playwright novelist', a figure parallel to the 'poet novelist' mentioned in Chapter 1 in relation to Thomas Hardy, writes poetry insofar as he expresses emotion at high pressure, concentrated, and manages to embody the truth – the reality of the mind – in direct speech. This is why in 'The Antiquary' essay Shakespeare's and Scott's characters are said to 'reveal themselves in speech' (436): everything about them is contained in their own words (and actions) so that the narrator has no part (435).

All these reflections are very relevant to understanding the poetic background of *The Waves*, although the novel itself is not mentioned in them. Woolf's criticism of other writers was often influenced by her own thinking about possible solutions to the problems of modern literature, so it is no coincidence that her effort to write the dramatic novel she described in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' was followed by an inquiry into other examples of incorporating poetic drama in fiction. As she wrote a book whose characters entirely emerge through their words, she looked up at Shakespeare's model and sought its novelistic legacy, considering the different ways in which a character might reveal him or herself in 'poetic speech' (*L* 5: 104). While comparing Scott to Shakespeare in this light, she found a crucial difference between them: while Scott's characters only talk, Shakespeare's also think. The passage that contains this realisation is once again found in the essay 'The Antiquary' and I will quote it in full:

> We know […] what his [Scott's] characters are, and we know it almost as we know what our friends are by hearing their voices and watching their faces simultaneously. […] We notice different things; our observation of face and voice differs; and thus Scott's characters, like Shakespeare's and Jane Austen's, have the seed of life in them. They change as we change. But though this gift is an essential element in what we call immortality, it does not by any means prove that the character lives as profoundly, as fully, as Falstaff lives or Hamlet. Scott's characters, indeed, suffer from a serious disability; *it is only when they speak that they are alive; they never think*; as for prying into their minds himself, or drawing inferences from their behaviour, Scott never attempted it. (*E* 6: 434-35; my italics)

The sentence in italics somehow implies that, unlike Scott, Shakespeare can have his characters think as they talk: that is, they can think aloud. This particular ability brings us back to the specific form of the Shakespearean soliloquy and to the reasons why Woolf found it especially apt for combining lyricism and drama. The dramatic soliloquy, indeed, was in Woolf's eyes the perfect means to free the interior monologue from the confinement of silence, to find that hybrid dimension between thought and speech where the private world of the mind can finally be shared – after all, the boundaries between thought and speech are not necessarily clear-cut, as words can embody and even impact thoughts conceived in silence – a dimension in which separate minds can truly communicate with each other and at times even appear deeply connected. As I will demonstrate below, the form of the dramatic soliloquy allowed Woolf to make the solitary (lyrical) and the choral modes of poetry interact simultaneously in her work.

To understand Woolf's recreation of the Shakespearean soliloquy as a hybrid form of expression, at the crossing between thought and speech, we must put it in the context of the reception of Shakespeare's soliloquies that was characteristic of her period. Whether Shakespeare's soliloquies, according to the conventions of Elizabethan theatre, were meant to be the representation of a character's unspoken thoughts (interior monologues) or self-addressed speeches (words actually spoken aloud by a character to him/herself as a form of external behaviour, not necessarily corresponding to that character's innermost thoughts) is an

interesting question still under critical debate.[27] A recent study by James Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies*, persuasively demonstrates that in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century drama soliloquies were in fact self-addressed speeches and not interior monologues, as to an Elizabethan audience having the power to penetrate a character's thoughts would have seemed unrealistic. For Hirsh, there is no evidence that Shakespeare broke this convention: on the contrary, he exploited its potential for suspense, as soliloquies were always in danger of being overheard, and used it to explore the discrepancy between a character's outward behaviour, including his words to himself, and the actual feelings that may be hidden behind it. According to this view, Shakespeare's soliloquies were therefore not a reliable mirror of a character's inner life.[28] On the other hand, other critics such as Neil Corcoran consider this argument as too dogmatic, suggesting that Shakespeare may well have elaborated or destabilised this convention as he did with others: just occasionally, perhaps, in the soliloquies that most resemble internal reflection.[29] In any case, what is certain is that after the Restoration soliloquies in plays began to represent interior monologues – before the term was invented – and since then the change of convention, accompanied by a desire to reach at the core or essence of a character, retroactively affected the interpretation and performance of Shakespeare's soliloquies as well.[30] In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century in particular, which is the period that interests us, the soliloquies of Shakespeare's plays were 'internalized', that is, delivered as 'spoken thoughts':[31] the actor would voice the unmediated thoughts (or interior monologue) of a character who was not actually speaking them aloud in

[27] For the definitions of and difference between interior monologue and self-addressed speech, see James E. Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), pp. 39-52.

[28] Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies*, pp. 119-98.

[29] Neil Corcoran, *Reading Shakespeare's Soliloquies: Text, Theatre, Film* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), p. 86.

[30] Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies*, pp. 278-79; 332-33.

[31] Mary Z. Maher, *Modern Hamlets and Their Soliloquies: An Expanded Edition* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003), p. xxii.

the fiction.[32] This is how Woolf would have encountered Shakespeare's soliloquies on stage, and this moreover was the interpretation of some Romantic authors among the most familiar to her: Scott, Lamb and Coleridge all described Shakespeare's soliloquies as silent, inward meditations made accessible to the audience.[33] Hamlet's soliloquies, in particular, were regarded by both Romantics and Modernists as 'the epitome of interiority and self-consciousness'.[34]

It is therefore very likely that Woolf too considered Shakespeare's soliloquies to be a representation of thought, a point of view that is obviously consistent with her interest, shared with other modernist authors, in the portrayal of a character's inner life through interior monologue. Her use of the word 'soliloquy' also sheds light on her understanding of the form. In the passage of 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' which explains that the novel of the future should give 'the relation of the mind to general ideas and its soliloquy in solitude' (*E* 4: 436), for instance, Woolf calls soliloquy what we now define interior monologue, the rendering of an entirely mental activity, and remarkably makes it a pivotal component of poetic writing. This may be even proof that, as suggested by Corcoran, the Shakespearean soliloquy is indeed one of the antecedents of the modern novel's interior monologue and stream of consciousness techniques.[35] The very fact that in describing the form of *The Waves* as 'a series of dramatic soliloquies' (*D* 3: 312) Woolf needs to specify that her characters' soliloquies are 'dramatic' is evidence that she understood the word 'soliloquy' itself, void of attributes, as the representation of silent thought. Besides, by the time Woolf was writing even the concept of dramatisation had long been detached from theatrical representation: nineteenth-century poets such as Tennyson and Browning, drawing inspiration from the Shakespearian soliloquy, had already

[32] See Hirsh's interpretation of Maher's "spoken thoughts" in Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies*, p. 333.
[33] Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies*, p. 340.
[34] Corcoran, p. 58.
[35] Corcoran, pp. 60-61.

invented the dramatic monologue, a poetic form destined to the printed page in which a character, like Bernard in the final soliloquy of *The Waves*, addresses an implied interlocutor. Still away from the stage, this form survived in modernist poetry: it was adapted, for instance, by T. S. Eliot, who not only wrote 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' as a dramatic interior monologue, but also experimented with the insertion of interlocking monologues in *The Waste Land*.[36] The simple fact that the soliloquies of *The Waves* are not meant for the stage, but for being read in private, undoubtedly encourages readers to interpret them as immaterial threads of thought addressed to the mind rather than to the ear.

Indeed, Woolf like the Romantics much preferred reading Shakespeare's plays to watching their performances. In 'On Not Knowing Greek', she points out that 'the later plays of Shakespeare, where there is more of poetry than of action, are better read than seen, better understood by leaving out the actual body than by having the body […] visible to the eye' (*E* 4: 58). In a later review, '"Twelfth Night" At the Old Vic' (1933), she argues that to truly appreciate Shakespeare's suggestive language, the 'prodigality of his metaphors', and the complexity of his characters one needs the additional time that reading allows. In commenting on *Twelfth Night* she even makes a distinction between Shakespeare the poet and Shakespeare the comedian, saying that 'when he wrote as a poet he was apt to write too quick for the human tongue'. Even though Woolf was aware that 'Shakespeare wrote for the body and for the mind simultaneously', she could not help but feel a discrepancy between the two types of writing (*E* 6: 4-7). Arguably she would feel this gap even more intensely in relation to the soliloquies, which constituted a meditative pause in the play's action, her impression probably reflecting the way Shakespeare's soliloquies were consumed by the public of her time. For instance, it was a common editorial practice to detach Shakespeare's soliloquies from their dramatic contexts and gather them together in collections as if they were semi-independent lyric poems,

[36] Corcoran, pp. 60-61.

in order to isolate Shakespeare's finest poetry for the instruction and enjoyment of readers.[37] Therefore the perception of Shakespeare the poet as separate from Shakespeare the dramatist, which informed Woolf's reading of the plays, was a popular idea created and promoted by numerous anthologies which collected extracts from Shakespeare's plays and presented them as gems of wisdom, alongside some of his sonnets and passages from the narrative poems, often without heading or contextual information.[38]

These anthologies were widely published and read both in the nineteenth and in the twentieth centuries. To cite an example close to Woolf, George Rylands' anthology, *The Ages of Man*, came out in 1939 and arranges extracts from Shakespeare's works, especially the plays, thematically according to topics relevant to each stage of human life: 'Youth', 'Manhood', and 'Age'. This arrangement is noteworthy because the soliloquies of *The Waves* are also disposed along the arch of human life, parallel to the sun's journey across the sky, and are meant to give insights into the different stages of experience. The layout of anthologies like Rylands' *The Ages of Man* may explain why Woolf considered Shakespeare the author who marked the transition from the oral culture of anonymity and large audiences to the print culture of named writers of books and private readers (*Anon* 398). Woolf herself in her essays tended to think of drama as poetry and to quote from Renaissance plays in the same way as she cited a poem's lines, emphasizing the same qualities of concentration, generalisation, and intensity of emotion.[39] According to Woolf, Shakespeare's works demonstrate that 'the uncovered theatre where the sun beats and the rain pours […] must be replaced by the theatre of the brain' (398): that is to say, his plays partake in both the dramatic and the lyrical poetic modes, the latter perceived by the moderns through the lesson of Romanticism. This makes clear how Woolf

[37] Hirsh, *Shakespeare and the History of Soliloquies*, pp. 365-66.

[38] Anne Isherwood, 'Cut out "into little stars": Shakespeare in Anthologies' (doctoral thesis, King's College London, 2014), pp. 196-98 < https://kclpure.kcl.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/cut-out-into-little-stars(91104f3f-e4bf-4485-8528-2757cbbbe539).html>.

[39] Fox, pp. 82-83.

would regard Shakespeare's soliloquies as 'spoken thoughts' and why, perfectly in line with her own interest in the human mind, she would choose that medium to express the characters (or character) of *The Waves*.

The novel's focus on interiority and the fact that its soliloquies seem chiefly intended to be a representation of thought – even though, as I will argue below, it is more accurate to say that they explore the boundaries between though and speech – have led many critics to neglect its dramatic aspects, in order to emphasise the 'poem' over the 'play' side of this 'play-poem', foregrounding the work's poetic qualities as independent of dramatic form. Ralph Freedman, in his 1963 study devoted to the genre of the lyrical novel, compares *The Waves*' soliloquies to stanzas and calls the interludes 'prose poems', arguing that the 'chief characteristics' of the book as a whole 'are those of a poem, in which images are related to one another not through cause, space, or time, but through a design viewed from an omniscient perspective.'[40] Freedman's analysis captures very well the novel's poetic effects which rely on the work being structured around a formal pattern of images or symbolic design (a stylistic device that I will explore more in depth in Chapter 6), but does not seem to see the soliloquy form as relevant to the poetic nature of the book.[41] Michael O'Neill and Jane Goldman, in their respective contributions to *British Prose Poetry*, both consider *The Waves* as an extended prose poem for reasons unrelated to its dramatic form: O'Neill, like Freedman, underlines the fact that the work reconnects subjective experience to 'a pattern, or shape, or order, or design',[42] while Goldman lays greater stress on the soliloquies' 'poetically saturated' language, seeing *The Waves* as 'A prose poem sustained as a novel of book length that foregrounds itself in the mode of the signifier […] and breaks open its own metaphoricity'.[43] Finally, David Bradshaw

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[40] Freedman, pp. 244; 247; 256.
[41] Freedman, p. 244.
[42] Michael O'Neill, 'The Marvellous Clouds: Reflections on the Prose Poetry of Woolf, Baudelaire and Williams', in *British Prose Poetry*, ed. by Jane Monson, pp. 73-89 (p. 76).
[43] Jane Goldman, '"I Grow More & More Poetic": Virginia Woolf and Prose Poetry', in *British Prose Poetry*, ed. by Jane Monson, pp. 91-115 (pp. 96; 104).

not only deems the novel's dramatic qualities peripheral but explicitly denies them, maintaining that *The Waves*, for all Woolf's intentions, 'did not turn out to be a 'play-poem', but it is certainly a poem-novel' (*W* xxxviii). This claim, however, overlooks that side of Woolf's theory of poetry that considers drama as a privileged vehicle of the poetic or generalised perspective, the channel of common belief, in parallel to the lyric that gains knowledge of universal truths through intense solitary emotion. Moreover, according to the literary history sketched in 'Anon', Shakespearean drama marks a transitional moment between the two modes of expression and is thus able to encompass them both: with Shakespeare the play, having reached its full maturity, is about to leave the externality of the theatre for the intimacy of the printed word, due to the increased self-consciousness of the playwright, of the audience, and consequently of characters. In Shakespearean drama, the 'general life' is returned to the audience 'individualised in single and separate figures' since 'So many private people are pressing their weight of unexpressed emotion upon the writers consciousness' (*Anon* 398). Besides, a choric element persists, even though it is no longer, but for a few exceptions, expressed by an actual chorus: the comment to the action – the dramatist's own meditations – has been absorbed by the voices of the characters themselves, especially when engaged in soliloquy.

Taking into account Woolf's view of the history of English drama, we can see that her choice of the dramatic soliloquy form is in itself, even regardless of the musical and metaphorical aspects of *The Waves*, an essential contribution to the novel's poetic effects. Not only does the Shakespearean soliloquy display lyrical properties of self-consciousness and self-expression 'at a moment of heightened emotion' (features enhanced by Romantic interpretations of the form), it also includes, as explained by Corcoran, a choric element. The 'choric mode' in a soliloquy, as defined by Corcoran, consists in 'the individual hero's abstraction of himself from the particularities of his immediate situation with the effect of

setting it within or against a larger cosmic scene. […] In this way, he briefly plays chorus to his own action'.[44] As I will show below, the soliloquists of *The Waves* frequently enlarge their perspective to make general statements about human life, and a choric function also drives the novels' interludes, which provide precisely that cosmic scene of cyclical nature against which the characters' lives are to be measured. However, it may be objected that a choric voice thus intended has lost its original communal character to take on the more modern role of omniscient narrator (the analogy between the chorus in plays and the narrator in novels is indeed pointed out by Woolf in 'On Not Knowing Greek'; *E* 4: 43). As discussed in Chapter 2, an exchange of voices between the character and the narrator, and therefore between a particular and a general perspective, was already a feature of the interior monologues of *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, which Woolf had perfected as a sophisticated channel of lyrical expression. A novel does not require its characters to spell out their thoughts for the reader to be able to access them, and *The Waves*, despite being a cross-genre work, is sold and consumed as a novel: why, then, the need to make the soliloquies dramatic? What is the difference, with regard to poetic effects, between the interior monologue and the soliloquy?

My argument is that the direct speech form, even though not actually meant to be spelt out on stage, and even if designed (mainly) as a representation of thought, does carry an element of externality and sharing which is absent from the interior monologue. As opposed to the narrator giving access to a character's mind, in the dramatic soliloquy the character reveals him or herself directly to the implied reader, who in *The Waves* seems to occupy an intermediate position between eavesdropper and addressee. Even though in *The Waves* there is no actual theatrical audience, its simply imagined presence, the 'sense of an audience', as Woolf calls it in her letter to George Rylands, is enough to turn a novelist into a 'playwright novelist' whose characters reveal themselves through direct speech (*L* 5: 334). The

[44] Corcoran, pp. 11; 38-39.

dramatisation of the soliloquies not only creates the illusion of communication between characters and reader-audience, but also, at times, gives the impression that a sort of exchange is going on among the characters themselves, if not a proper dialogue: for instance, when they are soliloquising in each other's company, or when a character seems to be aware of or even to share the thoughts and visions of another character, as if the six protagonists, like the reader-audience, could also, sometimes, benefit from the mind-revealing function of the soliloquy. A circuit of mental communication and mutual disclosure is thus created, which opens up a channel for the characters' different voices to flow into each other and become parts of the same chorus. It follows that, thanks to the dramatic form of the novel, the generalised statements uttered by the soliloquists when they assume a wider perspective – especially as their dramatised 'I' switches to 'We' – can also be understood as 'choric' in a truly collective sense, carrying out poetry's universalising task through both lyrical and shared emotion. As suggested in 'How Should One Read a Book?' (1932), the reader-audience too is partly involved in this song: after quoting a few lines from both Renaissance poetic plays and Romantic poetry, Woolf admiringly highlights the poet's 'power to make us at once actors and spectators; his power to run his hand into character as if it were a glove, and be Falstaff or Lear; his power to condense, to widen, to state, once and forever' (*E* 5: 579). The epitome of the poet being, notably, Shakespeare – perhaps for his ability to reunite lyrical and dramatic qualities.

The dramatic-choral aspect of *The Waves* particularly stands out in relation to the peculiar bond that connects its characters. Even though the novel ostensibly names six different characters, Woolf declared in a 1931 letter to Lowes Dickinson that 'The six characters were supposed to be one' (*L* 4: 397). In the text, this ambiguity is explicitly voiced by Bernard in his final soliloquy, when he affirms:

> And now I ask, "who am I?" I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. We sat here together. But now Percival is dead, and Rhoda is dead; we are divided; we are

> not here. Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them. As I talked I felt, "I am you". (*W* 172)

This undetermined identity can be interpreted in two ways, which do not exclude each other: the novel dramatises the consciousness of a single self which is split into contrasting selves, and/or it wants to show that there is a mystic continuity between all human beings, no matter how different they are from each other.[45] Both points of view are backed by evidence from Woolf's letters and diary and therefore can be considered as simultaneously at play. In the letter to Lowes Dickinson already quoted above, for instance, Woolf states that 'I did mean that in some vague way we are the same person, and not separate people', referring to the community of human beings, but immediately below she adds 'I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia', talking about her experience of a divided self (*L* 4: 397). Early in 1929, with *The Waves* still being planned under the title *The Moths*, Woolf writes in her diary: 'Perhaps it may be that though we change; one flying after another, so quick so quick, yet we are somehow successive, & continuous – we human beings' (*D* 3: 218). But in 1934, reflecting upon the dialogue form in a letter to the poet R. C. Trevelyan, she suggests that he write 'A dialogue between the different parts of yourself perhaps, now, at the moment' (*L* 5: 294), no doubt inspired by her own experiment with soliloquy in *The Waves*.

This double way of understanding the identity of the characters of *The Waves* is interesting in relation to Woolf's theory of poetry because it requires readers to keep shifting their focus from the (divided) consciousness of a solitary individual, which is the subject of the

[45] The very choice of having multiple speakers expressing themselves in a dramatic context as opposed to the single voice of the lyric opens up questions about the boundaries of identity, especially following the development of the dramatic monologue form by Robert Browning in *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69). As observed by Matthew Reynolds in relation to Browning's monologues, 'By its very nature, representing a speaking voice in a dramatic context and in verse, the monologue form investigates the relation between the self and the limits which are constitutive of its identity, but by which it may also feel to be constrained.' Compared to Browning, however, who did not thoroughly believe in the existence of a common, essential humanity and used the dramatic monologue precisely to foreground human diversity, Woolf conceived her dramatic soliloquies as ultimately recomposed into a superior choral unity. See Matthew Reynolds, *The Realms of Verse 1830-1870: English Poetry in a Time of Nation-Building* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 161; 182.

Romantic-lyrical poetic tradition, to the shared feelings but also contrasts between different individuals, which is the subject of the dramatic-choral tradition. A useful way to interpret the characters' identity, suggested by Robin Hackett, is to see them as going through cycles of 'individuation and reincorporation into a larger whole, a movement evoked by the repetitive action of waves as they rise out of the sea momentarily, becoming individual, and then sink back into indistinguishability [...]'.[46] The characters, Hackett notes, first introduced as a group, become more and more distinct as they age, but at regular intervals, prompted by their devotion to their common friend Percival (the only protagonist who does not speak), meet all together again and merge back into unity. In the interludes, the characters' identity fluctuations are mirrored by metaphorical birds that alternatively sing alone or in chorus.[47] It has also been observed that, in line with the universalising drive of poetic writing, the characters of *The Waves* are meant to represent the archetypes of all humankind: according to Beverly Ann Schlack, they not only exist as individuals but also as abstractions which, taken together, compose a 'universal human consciousness';[48] likewise, Ralph Freedman argues that since the six friends are related to one another through a pattern of similar or contrasting motifs, they all contribute to portray 'a single organism – one symbol of a common humanity'.[49]

The unity of the characters becomes most apparent when they gather for two dinner parties in Percival's honour: the first time to celebrate his departure to India, the second in memory of his death. Schlack and Freedman have both underlined Percival's role as a catalyst, since the protagonists' love for their friend is the common feeling that allows them to overcome their sense of divergence and isolation.[50] The meaning of this ghostly character, who dies in

[46] Robin Hackett, 'Supplanting Shakespeare's Rising Sons: A Perverse Reading through Woolf's *The Waves*', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, 18 (1999), 263-80 (p. 264).
[47] Hackett, p. 278.
[48] Beverly Ann Schlack, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1979), p. 103.
[49] Freedman, p. 252.
[50] Freedman, p. 246; Schlack, p. 114.

India at the service of the British empire, has been variously interpreted as the parody of the archetypal nationalistic hero, the banner of colonisation and militarism, or the symbol of a Grail Quest which, handed over to Bernard, terminates in the vision and defiance of Death.[51] Without diminishing the possibilities opened up by Percival's suggestive name, what I wish to stress in relation to the novel's poetic effects is that it evokes a literary tradition, the Arthurian legends, which originates in a shared oral culture. In 'Anon', Woolf mentions precisely these legends as an example of 'the reservoir of common belief', 'the voice of Anon' himself, representing 'the world beneath our consciousness; the anonymous world to which we can still return' (*Anon* 384-85). The novel's reference to oral culture, combined with the comments Louis makes shortly after Percival is first introduced, while the boys are at boarding school, that 'The time approaches when these soliloquies shall be shared' and that 'it is Percival who inspires poetry' (*W* 22-23), indicate that one aspect of *The Waves*' style of poetic expression is to be understood as communal and choral.

The way Percival, interpreted as common emotion or belief, inspires choral poetic expression becomes clear if we examine how his presence among the characters affects the style of their soliloquies. As Percival enters the restaurant where all his friends have reunited to say goodbye before he leaves for India, Bernard recalls the interludes' image of the singing birds to describe how their separate voices are now drawing closer:

> '[…] We who have been separated by our youth (the oldest is not yet twenty-five), who have sung like eager birds each his own song and tapped with the remorseless and savage egotism of the young our own snail-shell till it cracked (I am engaged), or perched solitary outside some bedroom window and sang of love, of fame and other single experiences so dear to the callow bird with a yellow tuft on its beak, now come nearer; and shuffling closer on our perch in this restaurant where everybody's interests are at variance […] – sitting together here we love each other and believe in our own endurance.'
> 'Now let us issue from the darkness of solitude,' said Louis.

[51] See Hackett, p. 269; *W*, p. xxii; Schlack, pp. 126-31.

> 'Now let us say, brutally and directly, what is in our minds,' said Neville. 'Our isolation, our preparation, is over. The furtive days of secrecy and hiding, the revelations on staircases, moments of terror and ecstasy.' (*W* 72)

In this passage, the change of poetic mode from the lyrical to the choral is declared and enacted at the same time. The lyrical songs of the egotistical birds 'perched solitary', expressing 'single experiences', are transcended as the characters finally join their soliloquies, interlacing them as different voice parts in the same chorus. This is signalled, in the text, not only by the use of the first person plural ('We'; 'us'; 'our') and by the fact that the characters' various statements all contribute to the same train of thought, but also by echoes and logic-temporal linking words indicating that each voice is picking up where the previous one left off (the repetition of 'Now let us', for instance, and subsequent openings such as 'And then' or 'But'; *W* 73-74). The dramatic form, the speaking voice ('let us say, brutally and directly, what is in our minds') is essential to the realisation of this collective song, even though the boundaries between direct speech and thought are here, as in the rest of the novel, extremely blurred.

The chorus continues with each character recalling their 'moments of being' – the 'moments of terror and ecstasy' announced by Neville – that they had previously experienced as solitary, lyrical emotions, but that are now shared in order to make up a pattern of moments encompassing all their individual points of view (*W* 72-74). Bernard explains this phenomenon with the metaphor of the seven-sided flower:

> '[…] We have come together […] to make one thing, not enduring – for what endures? – but seen by many eyes simultaneously. There is a red carnation in that vase. A single flower as we sat here waiting [for Percival to arrive], but now a seven-sided flower, many-petalled, red, puce, purple-shaded, stiff with silver-tinted leaves – a whole flower to which every eye brings its own contribution.'
> 'After the capricious fires, the abysmal dullness of youth,' said Neville, 'the light falls upon real objects now. Here are knives and forks. The world is displayed, and we too, so that we can talk.' (*W* 74)

The sight of a flower, and the instantaneous realisation that it constitutes an ordered whole, symbol as well as component of the entire earth, is one of the experiences Woolf relates as one

of her most striking ‘moments of being’ (*MB* 83-84). As explained in the previous chapter, poetic writing based on the Romantic-lyrical model is the form best suited to express this type of intimate and climactic emotion, the ‘single flower’. The seven-sided flower, on the other hand, is the moment composed of all the characters’ joint individual moments, as well as, of course, the ‘splendid moment created by us from Percival’, there at the restaurant, in which the sharing takes place in the form of a choral song (*W* 85). This moment, as it is based on sharing, is of necessity staged: the text indicates this explicitly through Neville’s declaration that their bodies and the objects around them are ‘displayed […] so that we can talk’.

The characters join in a chorus of this type, with shorter soliloquies succeeding each other mimicking dialogue, on three occasions in the novel, all characterised by shared emotion: in the opening childhood scene in the garden, in the farewell to Percival just described, and in the Hampton Court reunion after Percival’s death. Outside of these three scenes, the protagonists utter longer and more self-centred soliloquies that describe significant ‘moments’ in their lives (*The Waves*, rather than moving along a linear plot, is structured around a succession of present moments, which also contain dips into memory) and stress the differences and contrasts between their personalities. In the first nursery scene, the transition from chorus to soliloquy proper is announced by Rhoda through a description of the garden birds (as we have seen, a recurrent image), which ‘sang in chorus first […]. But one sings by the bedroom window alone’ (*W* 5). As if acting on this announcement, shortly afterwards Louis begins the first of the long soliloquies by declaring: ‘Now they have all gone. […] I am alone’ (*W* 5). These are almost the exact words with which Hamlet launches into his second soliloquy (‘Ay, so, God bye to you! now I am alone’),[52] a sentence that Corcoran calls ‘self-addressed stage direction’ and which has inspired the formula generally used by editorial stage directions to

[52] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), II. 2. 552.

indicate the soliloquist's situation (e.g. '*Enter* Richard, Duke of Gloucester, *alone*').[53] The incipit of Louis' first soliloquy, which is later repeated to introduce other soliloquies, marks Woolf's intention to revisit Shakespeare's model and, most importantly, to highlight the dramatic character of the protagonists' solitary meditations.

Indeed, as much as this drama is internalised,[54] the text is permeated with rhetorical devices which remind the reader-audience that the characters can be heard and looked at (as was already the case in *Jacob's Room*, though less prominently) and that introspection is brought outwards. There is repeated emphasis on the speaking voice (beyond the short narratorial interventions framing the soliloquies with 'said Neville', 'said Bernard'), on the acts of looking and listening, on concrete objects, on the immediacy of thought and action, and on dialogue – if only illusory, imagined, or self-addressed. Traditionally theatrical soliloquies, although spoken in solitude, contain elements of dialogue, in order to maintain some appearance of dramatic interaction.[55] Like Shakespeare's soliloquists, the soliloquists of *The Waves* dramatise their own self by insisting on the pronoun 'I' ('I rose and walked away – I, I, I; not Byron, Shelley, Dostoevsky, but I, Bernard. I even repeated my own name once or twice' *W* 152), address themselves or a part of themselves ('But *you* understand, *you*, my self, who always comes at a call […], you understand that I am only superficially represented by what I was saying tonight'; 44), or apostrophise someone else, who may be present, absent, or indeterminate ('But behold! It is over' 65).[56] Indeed, in *The Waves* this dialogic effect is strengthened even more by the fact that often the characters (somewhat paradoxically) soliloquise in each other's presence, addressing each other.

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[53] Corcoran, p. 57.

[54] Fox, pp. 137-38.

[55] James Hirsh, 'Dialogic Self-Address in Shakespeare's Plays', *Shakespeare*, 8 (2012), 312-27 (p. 316).

[56] For a description of the dramatic effects of Shakespeare's soliloquies (self-dramatisation, self-address, and solitary dialogue) see Corcoran, pp. 23-26.

The soliloquy spoken by Neville when he receives the news of Percival's death exemplifies particularly well the way *The Waves* artfully blends inwardness and externality:

> 'Women shuffle past the window as if there were no gulf cut in the street; no tree with stiff leaves which we cannot pass. […] We are infinitely abject, shuffling past with our eyes shut. But why should I submit? Why try to lift my foot and mount the stair? This is where I stand; here, holding the telegram. […] Why meet and resume? […] From this moment I am solitary. No one will know me now. […]
> 'Now I say there is a grinning, there is a subterfuge. There is something sneering behind our backs. That boy almost lost his footing as he leapt on the bus. Percival fell; was killed; is buried; and I watch people passing; holding tight to the rails of omnibuses; determined to save their lives.
> 'I will not lift my foot to climb the stair. I will stand for one moment beneath the immitigable tree, alone with the man whose throat is cut, while downstairs the cook shoves in and out the dampers. I will not climb the stair. We are doomed, all of us. Women shuffle past with shopping-bags. People keep on passing. Yet you shall not destroy me. For this moment, this one moment, we are together. I press you to me. Come, pain, feed on me. Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob.' (*W* 88-89)

Neville's soliloquy describes the 'moment' he receives the shock of Percival's death (the word 'moment' is repeated four times), which in turn merges with the memory of another significant moment in his past, when as a child, hearing about a man found dead in the gutter with his throat cut, first came to realise that death is a universal doom. The two moments, past and present, are almost identical, defeating the narrative's temporal progression and thus standing outside time: the image of the apple tree little Neville sees as he overhears the cook talking about the dead man, turned into a symbol of death itself as 'the immitigable tree which we cannot pass', together with his inability to move up the staircase, persist unchanged across the years.[57] On both occasions, Neville not only experiences this emotion in solitude, but feels that his shock has set him apart from other people, who keep getting on with their lives unaware. Yet, from this solitary emotion he is able to generalise, as indicated by the pronoun switch from 'I' to 'We'. His epiphany transcends his individual encounter with death and translates into short poetic (and often metaphorical) statements of universal, eternal validity breaking off the

[57] This corresponds to another 'moment of being' of Woolf's own memory: 'It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it.' (*MB* 84)

narrative to encapsulate the inescapable threat of mortality: ‘We are infinitely abject, shuffling past with our eyes shut’; ‘There is something sneering behind our backs’; ‘We are doomed, all of us’. These statements closely resemble the comments uttered by the choral narrator of *Jacob’s Room*, but this time, to achieve a true blending between lyricism and chorality, they have been incorporated within the speech of a solitary individual, as the culmination of a sublime pattern of emotion.

Self-dramatisation adds yet another effect to this already mixed poetic style. In his soliloquy, Neville confidently declares: ‘From this moment I am solitary. No one will know me now’. Nevertheless, the manner of his expression is manifestly histrionic, as if he was staging his own emotion to an overhearing audience: for instance, in the concluding ‘I sob, I sob’, or in the exclamation just preceding the extract reported, ‘Oh, to crumple this telegram in my fingers – to let the light of the world flood back – to say this has not happened!’ (*W* 88). Sentences of this kind would sound out of place in a novel’s interior monologue, precisely because the novel’s genre implies no stage and no attentive eyes and ears. The dramatisation of *The Waves*’ soliloquies partly serves the purpose of giving the ‘moment’ even more prominence and immediacy, as if it was concretely unfolding in front of the reader-audience (‘This is where I stand; here, holding the telegram’), but it is also important in order to introduce a dialogic element into the epiphany and, thus, begin to externalise the experience. Neville, as Shakespeare’s soliloquists do, asks many rhetorical questions (‘But why should I submit?’; ‘Why meet and resume?’), emphasises his own speaking voice (‘Now *I say* there is a grinning, there is a subterfuge’; my italics) and makes pain a separate entity that he can address in the second person (‘Come, pain, feed on me’). Of course, it is still a solitary dialogue, in which the soliloquist speaks to himself or to an abstract object, but it requires a more self-conscious communicative effort and a higher degree of formalisation. In particular, the personification of emotions or abstract entities, which in *The Waves* acquires special significance as it also

concludes Bernard's final soliloquy ('Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!'; 177), is for Woolf a rhetorical device that requires the reader to 'think poetically', because the text is working on a 'larger, freer, more depersonalised scale': concepts and passions are brought out of the mind of individuals so that 'we are shown the outer semblance' (*E* 6: 489-90). Dramatic externalisation, therefore, is the precondition for the soliloquies to be shared in the choral sections.

In fact, if we look at the long soliloquies from a broader perspective and consider that they flow into each other smoothly as parts of the same 'continuous stream' (*D* 3: 139), we may even extend the argument to say that they too are individual voices or parts in a single, large chorus encompassing the whole novel. Bernard definitely suggests this when he considers the multifaceted group of his friends: 'How impossible to order them rightly; to detach one separately, or to give the effect of the whole – again like music. What a symphony with its concord and its discord […]! Each played his own tune, fiddle, flute, trumpet, drum or whatever the instrument might be' (*W* 154). Several critics, such as David Bradshaw, have drawn attention to the unifying 'undulant flow of the narrative, where one person's words merge almost imperceptibly into another's', also due to the grammatical and syntactical similarity of their speech (*W* xi). For Bradshaw, the stylistic homogeneity of the soliloquies is meant to emphasise the characters' collective consciousness, although he then argues that this communal identity is eventually disavowed by Bernard, and that separation and solipsism prevail in the end (xiv-xv). Similarly, Freedman notes that the soliloquies give the impression of continuity of speech, thanks to a pattern of recurrent images 'which unify the characters as a chorus – as an image of a man in his diverse manifestations'.[58] However, he also claims that except for these moments of formal contiguity created by overlapping images and shared memories, the characters in *The Waves* are in fact 'hermetically sealed off from one another' and unable to

[58] Freedman, p.247.

truly communicate – the unifying pattern of humanity being visible only from the perspective of the omniscient poet.[59] Judging from the way lyrical and dramatic-choral poetic effects coexist simultaneously in the novel, I would be more inclined to consider the identity of the characters of *The Waves* as either hybrid – separate and continuous at the same time – or as an unresolved question. The novel keeps swinging between lyrical and choral expression, and sometimes it appears that both are contained within each other. The metaphor of the seven-sided flower helps to visualise how *The Waves* is constructed: the chorus bidding farewell to Percival, composed of each character's voice briefly recalling an individual 'moment', can be seen as a small-scale reproduction of the structure of the novel as a whole, with the long lyrical soliloquies representing the constituent 'petals' of a continuous chorus. From this point of view, the abrupt change of personal pronoun from 'I' to 'We' within a long soliloquy, as when Rhoda, before killing herself, unexpectedly expresses her action as plural ('We launch out now over the precipice'; 122), acquires a choral significance: it signals that the soliloquist is now speaking on behalf of the whole group, expressing a common emotion, as it is more manifestly the case in Bernard's final speech.

The novel's hybrid nature, its unstable position across various genres and poetic trends, is reflected in the figure of Bernard, a writer who is also pulled into different directions: prose, poetry, and drama. Strictly with regard to form, he is a prose writer, because he is always engaged in making 'phrases' and 'stories', jotting down observations for a 'book' – a novel – that 'will certainly run to many volumes, embracing every known variety of man and woman' (*W* 39). Yet, Bernard's novel remains a project and all he manages to produce is a notebook filled with 'half-finished phrases' (40): once again, Woolf in *The Waves* addresses writing first of all as a problem and a struggle, for it is difficult to find a mode of expression fit for the

[59] Freedman, pp. 252-53; 267.

modern age,[60] and second, as an issue of attitude and mindset before their articulation into words. In terms of attitude, then, Bernard resembles now a prose writer, now a poet, as he presents some features of both. With novelists, he shares the fascination with facts and concrete details ('I fill my mind with whatever happens to be the contents of a room or a railway carriage as one fills a fountain-pen in an inkpot'; 'I require the concrete in everything'; 39), the passion for weaving abundant and long – but imperfect – sentences ('I am a natural coiner of words, a blower of bubbles through one thing and another'; 67) and a certain ease of inspiration, as any person or object prompts him to invent a story ('Bernard says there is always a story'; 21). As opposed to Neville and Louis, whose temperament is decidedly poetic, he craves society and does not disdain the ordinary and ugly face of modern life.[61]

These gifts, however, do not satisfy him. Like the writer envisioned in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', he wants his prose to accomplish some of the tasks of poetry. Throughout the novel, Bernard wishes he had Neville's and Louis' capacity for concentration, order and exactitude, as he too conceives himself 'called upon to provide, some winter's night, a meaning for all my observations – a line that runs from one to another, a summing-up that completes' (67). He is well aware that stories do not represent life ('And I begin to ask, Are there stories?'; 'why impose my arbitrary design?'; 111), so he eventually rejects linear narrative altogether: instead, being constantly engaged in 'finding some perfect phrase that fits this very moment exactly' (40), he embraces a lyrical mode of expression centred on sudden epiphanies enclosed in 'some final statement' (112). Significantly, a sentence of this kind, which instantly reveals a previously opaque meaning, is to Bernard equivalent to a poem, as the following comment makes clear: 'I made a phrase – a poem about a wood pigeon – a single phrase, for a hole had been knocked in my mind, one of those sudden transparencies through which one sees

[60] Schlack, p. 110.
[61] Schlack sees in Bernard 'the projection of Woolf's own novelistic voice' (p. 109) and interprets the contrast between him and Neville as the contrast between novelist and poet (p. 114).

everything' (145). This concentration on significant phrases, which make the rhythmical flow of prose rise to sharp peaks of poetic intensity, aptly describes Woolf's lyrical style in *The Waves*; as she notes in her Diary, 'I begin to see what I had in my mind; & want to begin cutting out masses of irrelevance, & clearing, sharpening & making the good phrases shine. One wave after another' (*D* 3: 303).

Bernard's poetic, polishing impulse runs in the opposite direction to his other, prosaic inclination to make sentences gather as many details as possible. The same tension is constantly enlivening Woolf's style, particularly in *The Waves*, where she wants 'the moment' to contain 'whatever it includes', but nothing superfluous:

> Is that not my grudge against novel[ist]s – that they select nothing? The poets succeeding by simplifying: practically everything is left out. I want to put practically everything in; yet to saturate. That is what I want to do in The Moths. It must include nonsense, fact, sordidity: but made transparent. I think I must read Ibsen & Shakespeare & Racine. (*D* 3: 209-10)

Years earlier, in the draft essay 'Byron and Mr Briggs' (1922), Woolf depicted a writer's figure who, exactly like Bernard, sits in a railway carriage and is divided between the temptation to absorb all the nuances of the scene he observes, and the pressure to submit everything to 'the strict outline of our conception […] as the supreme felicities – Shakespeare's daffodils, the faery casements of Keats, are faithful, in spite of their sudden and astonishing beauty, to the design' (*E* 3: 489-90). Therefore, Bernard has a lot of the poet in him – for one thing, his prose is rhythmical – and in the novel he is even associated with a poet, Byron, although a poet who, according to Woolf, 'wasn't committed to be poetical' (*D* 1: 181), but was rather a novelist in disguise. During the composition of *The Waves*, Woolf read *Childe Harold*, and she commented in her diary that Byron's poetry contains 'much that is spurious, vapid, yet very changeable, & then rich & with greater range than the other poets, could he have got the whole into order. A novelist, he might have been' (*D* 3: 288).

Bernard resembles Byron also for his protean personality and histrionic poses.[62] His natural inclination to dramatic expression completes the picture of Bernard's poetic qualities and points to the third genre that contributes to *The Waves*' three-fold identity as novel, poem, and play. Since his youth, Bernard is aware of having a composite personality, one that juggles 'the entrances and exits of several different men who alternately act their parts as Bernard' (*W* 44). Moreover, his identity is strongly dependent on other people: in contrast with those of his friends whose disposition is solely and purely lyrical, whose self emerges most acutely in solitude, Bernard is defined through social relations. Comparing himself to Louis and Rhoda, he admits: 'my character is in part made of the stimulus which other people provide, and is not mine, as yours are'; then, implying that his multiple personality is linked to his acts of oral communication, he adds: 'I am made and remade continually. Different people draw different words from me' (78). But most significantly, in another passage he clearly specifies that the particular type of social interaction that truly makes him thrive is that which connects him, as actor and dramatist, to his audience:

> But soliloquies in back streets soon pall. I need an audience. That is my downfall. That always ruffles the edge of the final statement and prevents it from forming. […] I make my phrase and run off with it to some furnished room where it will be lit by dozens of candles. I need eyes on me to draw out these frills and furbelows. To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self. (67-68)

This extract conveys the idea, also explored in 'Anon', that the dramatic poet is not completely separate from his audience: therefore his art, constantly subjected to the pressure of the public, is much more supple and unstable compared to the definite 'final statement' stamped by the single voice of lyric poetry. Indeed, Bernard does not fail to acknowledge that his many selves 'cloud the fine simplicity of my moment of emotion' (52). This is interesting if considered in relation to his final soliloquy, which encompasses the points of view of all the other characters

[62] See Schlack, pp. 112-13.

and is the only speech actually addressed to a fictional audience: an indeterminate, anonymous and silent interlocutor who is likely to be a representation of *The Waves*' implied reader. In the process of writing, Woolf indeed envisioned this ending as 'a gigantic conversation' (*D* 3: 285), 'a tremendous discussion, in which every life shall have its voice – a mosaic' rather than a statement, and she worries about not having yet mastered 'the speaking voice' (*D* 3: 298). Bernard's lyrical attempt to explain to his interlocutor the meaning of his life and hand it to him 'as one breaks off a bunch of grapes' (*W* 143) is therefore complicated by the fact that his existence is multiple, and includes the lives of all his friends ('it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; 165). As a consequence, the mode of poetic expression he employs is relational to the highest degree: it is performed orally to an audience – notably, Bernard's speaking voice is emphasised throughout the novel more than his writing ('see how phrases at once begin to wreathe off my lips'; 38) – and it is centred on the essence of communal life.

In this sense, we can perceive a line of continuity running from Percival to Bernard, as both figures play an analogous role in drawing all the characters together under a unified identity. Percival dies (as Anon, the nameless, oral, collective source of old literature also dies long before the modern age), but Bernard, certain that something of him still remains, decides to take on his legacy ('if I discover a new vein in myself I shall submit to you privately') and sets out to find a form of communication which will continue to give voice to common emotion (90). This explains why Bernard from the very beginning of the novel keeps hearing a chorus singing outdoors in the distance, and desires to join it, to be 'thrown up and down on the roar of other people's voices, singing the same song' (167). This chorus, which Bernard hears 'chanting its old, chanting its almost wordless, almost senseless song that comes across courts at night' (*W* 148) is strikingly similar to Anon's 'common voice singing out of doors' or 'at the back door', 'lifting a song or a story from other peoples lips', later described by Woolf in

'Anon' (*Anon* 382-83). Schlack perceptively notes how Bernard in the final scene, as he heroically flings himself against death, riding a horse, identifies with Percival, who also died riding – both of them being the expression of 'the voice of humanity asserting itself against the indifference of the universe'.[63] The poetic power of this last image, therefore, resides in its extreme generalisation and abstraction, as it depicts the whole meaning of the novel stripped to its fundamentals: humanity's relation to life and to death.

The confrontation of life with death, to Woolf a typical focus of Elizabethan drama,[64] makes Bernard's final soliloquy particularly Shakespearean, as Shakespeare's soliloquies are frequently associated with death and, moreover, are often powerfully located at the end of a scene, sometimes occupying an entire scene.[65] Various critics have noted a parallel between Bernard and King Lear: like Lear on the heath, Bernard too finds himself (figuratively) facing a storm, symbolising the power of indifferent nature to crash human life.[66] In her reading notes for *King Lear*, Woolf felt the universal significance of the storm scene, and saw in the figure of Lear an image of all humankind exposed on the heath, at the mercy of malevolent outside forces.[67] This is probably why Bernard's words echo Lear's cry 'Howl, howl, howl!'[68] when he declares near the end: 'I need a howl; a cry. When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words' (*W* 176). Once again, Bernard's choral voice swings back to lyric cry, following the novel's perpetual wave-like oscillation, often integration, between communal and solitary expression.

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[63] Schlack, p. 130.

[64] Fox, p. 137. Woolf summarises the overarching theme of Elizabethan drama in 'Notes on an Elizabethan Play': 'Ruin, weariness, death, perpetually death, stand grimly to confront the other presence of Elizabethan drama which is life' (*E* 4: 68).

[65] Corcoran, pp. 31-32.

[66] See, for instance, Robert Sawyer, 'Virginia Woolf and the Aesthetics of Modernist Shakespeare', *South Atlantic Review*, 74 (2009), 1-19 (p. 9); and Schlack, p. 123.

[67] Fox, p. 110.

[68] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by George Ian Duthie and John Dover Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), v. 3. 257.

The above analysis has shown how, in *The Waves*, the combination of lyrical and choral poetic effects, far from being purely a matter of style, is also thematically relevant, tied as it is to questions of identity and communication between human beings. Significantly, in the course of his final summary Bernard goes over three different stages of identity, which he experiences cyclically: the solitary self, the collective self, and even 'the world seen without a self', which seems to point to the depersonalised natural views of the interludes (*W* 171). Poetic expression is therefore, for Woolf, extremely multi-faceted, and in *The Waves* she is especially interested in exploring the areas in which different modes interlace and overlap. In this light, the form of the soliloquy offers broad poetic possibilities, not only for its bond to Shakespeare's model, but chiefly for its hybrid position between thought and speech, inwardness and externality, solitude and sharing. In *The Waves*, Woolf stretches the soliloquy to its very limits and almost negates it, by presenting it as one of the voice parts that make up a chorus.

The dramatic-choral mode of poetry did not cease to attract Woolf after the publication of *The Waves*, even as she was writing the most factual of all her novels, *The Years*:

> (but I am thinking all the time of what is to end Here and Now [*The Years*' working title]. I want a Chorus. a general statement. a song for 4 voices. how am I to get it? I am now almost within sight of the end. racing along: becoming more & more dramatic.
> And how to make the transition from the colloquial to the lyrical, from the particular to the general?) (*D* 4: 236)

Woolf's continuing interest in assimilating drama into fiction produced noteworthy results also after the highpoint of *The Waves*, especially in *Between the Acts*; however, the analysis of later novels is less relevant to my argument, since *The Waves* already brings to a mature synthesis both dramatic-choral and Romantic-lyrical poetic effects. In contrast with Cecchi, who as an essayist did not very much pursue the implications of the poetic point of view on character creation, but focused on the epiphanic power of visions and their conflicting interplay with critical analysis, a major aspect of Woolf's lifelong exploration of poetry in prose, as the above

diary entry confirms, had to do with consciousness and voice, individual and collective. As Violeta Sotirova has demonstrated in her perceptive study of Woolf's depiction of consciousness, even in the novels that are most deeply engaged with the interior monologue, *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, 'Woolf's transcription of character consciousness intertwines viewpoints, interconnects characters' thoughts and presents them not as a solipsistic or inaccessible realm, but as open minds, and ones deeply engaged with the consciousness of others.'[69] Ultimately, both the Romantic-lyrical and the dramatic-choral types of poetic effects aim, in different ways, at exceeding the limits of subjectivity: thus, as we shall see in Chapter 6 after analysing Cecchi's lyricism, the two authors' conceptions of poetry converge on its most impersonal aspect, on what poetry is if considered in its very essence, irrespective of voice – pure, abstract form.

[69] Violeta Sotirova, *Consciousness in Modernist Fiction: A Stylistic Study* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 133.

## IV. Poetry and the essay: Emilio Cecchi's interpretation of lyricism in context

In tracing the configuration of ideas that make up Woolf's theory of poetry in prose we have seen a remarkable interpenetration between her creative and her critical work: on the one hand, her novels express some of her reflections on poetry and fiction; on the other, her essays make frequent use of narration and imagery to convey critical ideas. Woolf, however, always considered journalism as a parallel and auxiliary activity, distinct from her creative work. This was not the case for Emilio Cecchi, who poured all his faculties into one short form, the essay or article: although some of his essays are more, or entirely, critical – book reviews, for instance – and others more imaginative, all of them were written for newspapers and magazines, which he used as platforms to explore a wide variety of topics and styles. Interestingly, Cecchi valued precisely this quality of diversity in Woolf's collections of essays, where 'il saggio d'immaginazione e il poemetto in prosa […] trovano posto fra l'articolo critico, la conferenza, o la lettera polemica' (*SIA* 2: 35).[1] Woolf, Cecchi writes in his review of *The Death of the Moth*, was a master in the art of 'comporre «mescolanze»',[2] and he admits his regret that Italian essayists generally cannot find such a free, varied, and intimate voice, for they feel they have to comply with a strict theoretical architecture.

This chapter examines Cecchi's choice of the essay genre as the form that can best convey, among a variety of styles, his own ideal of lyricism. Compared to Woolf, whose view of poetry comprises a wide spectrum of possibilities, from epiphany to dramatic soliloquy and choral point of view, Cecchi sees poetry largely in terms of lyrical, subjective expression, manifested through images. Indeed, due to the influence of the aesthetic theory of Benedetto

[1] 'the imaginative essay and the prose poem […] are placed among the critical article, the conference paper, or the polemical letter'.

[2] 'compiling "miscellanies"'.

Croce, in early twentieth-century Italy the words *poesia* and *lirica* had partly ceased to designate form and had come to be also used as quasi-synonyms, to indicate subjective, intuitive and visionary inspiration, considered to be the essence of art. Cecchi, however, questioned the idea that literature should achieve 'pure lyricism', that is, the communication of spontaneous emotion freed from the intrusion of other forms of discourse: interested, like Woolf, in showing how poetry intersects with other points of view, especially with rationality, he found a model for his work in the English essay tradition, which combines intense emotion with understatement, criticism and humour.

After following Cecchi's development as an essayist through the creation of the *elzeviro*, a unique type of article which merges journalism and literature, the chapter concludes by arguing that Cecchi's concept of lyricism, a very broad category including all expressions of inner life, is inextricably tied to its very opposite, non-lyricism. In other words, the essay can achieve a poetic effect as a result of the friction between a lyrical passage or statement and its prosaic surroundings of criticism and humour, a clash which creates a spark of surprise, and therefore an enhanced epiphanic experience.

## IV.1. The essay: an alternative mode of poetic vision

In his article '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' (1949), Cecchi attempts a definition of the essay, the genre he had been practising for over forty years, by making an important distinction. The essay genre, he argues, should not be confused with poetic prose (such as, in Italy, the works labelled as *prosa d'arte* or *poemetto in prosa*), owing to the fact that the two styles, despite their tendency to be associated and even found in the same author, belong to two separate traditions. The core of the difference resides precisely in their relationship with 'poetry', and in the alternative ways through which they approach its qualities in prose. Cecchi contrasts the

typical representatives of the essay tradition, Montaigne and Lamb, with one of the major models of *prosa d'arte*, De Quincey, in the following terms:

> [I]n Lamb, come in Montaigne, non mai occorre una impostazione di tono fortemente scandito, erto, perentorio; né mai nella loro materia, una disposizione mitica, leggendaria, allegorica. La poesia lievita, in Lamb e Montaigne, sulla immediata, nuda realtà; di cui le pedantesche «citazioni» del grande Michele non sono che uno dei tanti appigli, documenti e diagrammi. Mentre in De Quincey, da cima a fondo, tutta la struttura ideologica e formale è originariamente e segretamente poetizzata, liricizzata. (*SV* 326)[3]

In contrast with Woolf, who deemed De Quincey's 'dreams' and 'visions' to be often badly integrated with 'the levels of ordinary existence' (*E* 4: 363-64), Cecchi criticises De Quincey's style for being, on the contrary, not discontinuous enough: for Cecchi, De Quincey's prose performs an 'insensibile crescendo patetico'[4] where there is no discrepancy of tone or style ('dislivello') because 'tutto, in qualche modo, è diventato sogno dentro un sogno' (*SV* 326).[5]

The chief quality of poetry stressed at this point in the article is, as in Woolf's 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', its close relation to dreams: the content of dreams as well as their atmosphere and emotional intensity. De Quincey himself, in the Preface to his collected works, describes the style of his *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* and *Suspiria de Profundis* as 'modes of impassioned prose', namely 'attempts to clothe in words the visionary scenes derived from the world of dreams, where a single false note, a single note in a wrong key, ruins the whole music'.[6] Close to De Quincey's definition, Cecchi classifies as *prosa d'arte* or poetic prose the works that are entirely concerned with the dimension of dreams and visions, and whose style maintains a sustained pathos throughout. In the essay genre, instead, the presence of poetry is less straightforward. While the 'poesia' Cecchi can perceive in Montaigne and

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[3] 'Lamb and Montaigne's style is never markedly rhythmical, exalted, emphatic; nor does their subject matter ever show a mythical, legendary, allegorical disposition. Poetry rises, in Lamb as in Montaigne, from immediate, naked reality; of which the pedantic "quotations" of the great Michel are but one among many footholds, documents and diagrams. Whereas in De Quincey, from beginning to end, the whole ideological and formal structure is essentially and intimately poeticised, lyricised.'

[4] 'an imperceptible emotional crescendo'.

[5] 'everything, in some way, has become a dream within a dream'.

[6] De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, I, p. 14.

Lamb is also the product of dreams, altogether different is the manner in which such visions make their way into their essays' prose, since, far from affecting the style of the whole piece, they enter 'discretamente per una porticciuola che si schiude sul vicolo della vita comune. Il vicolo della prosa quotidiana' (*SV* 325).[7] For a preliminary exploration of the nature of this style, I will initially focus on Lamb's essay 'Witches, and Other Night-Fears', as it explicitly treats the topic of imagination and dreams in relation to poetry and the ability to write it. Cecchi often praised Lamb's talent for punctuating daily prose with lyricism; moreover, he was very familiar with the original English text of *The Essays of Elia*, whose Italian translation by Mario Praz he reviewed critically in 1924.[8]

Considered alongside De Quincey's remarks about 'impassioned prose', 'Witches, and Other Night-Fears' is a particularly interesting piece: the reading of this essay, especially if compared to the style of De Quincey's *Opium-Eater* and *Suspiria*, may indeed have prompted Cecchi's reflections on the various modes of interplay between dream and reality, poetry and prose. Lamb's essay examines the subject of imagination and dreams from various angles: it discusses ancient beliefs such as witchcraft and devilish spirits, Elia's own childhood fear of a witch seen in a book illustration, the reasons why fantastical creatures make such an impression on human imagination, and finally the notion that a poet's skill is proportionate to the visionary quality of his night dreams. Upon examination of his latest dream, begun promisingly with a mythical scene of sea nuptials but ending disappointingly on the familiar shores of the Thames, Elia concludes humorously that he had better abandon his poetic ambitions and stick to his 'proper element of prose'.[9]

The humorous ending not only casts an ironic glance upon the author – seemingly a failed poet – and his anti-climactic dreams; it equally makes fun of poets and their extremely

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[7] 'discreetly via a little door that opens on the alleyway of ordinary life. The alleyway of daily prose'.
[8] See *Carteggio Cecchi-Praz*, ed. by Francesca Bianca Crucitti Ullrich (Milan: Adelphi, 1985), p. 72 (n. 10); p. 77 (n. 2).
[9] Charles Lamb, *Poems and Essays of Charles Lamb* (London: Warne, 1879), p. 211.

unrealistic and exotic dreams, exemplified by Coleridge's 'Kubla Khan, and Abyssinian maids', to which Elia opposes his inclination to 'a daylight vividness of vision'.[10] Yet another layer of irony is added by the fact that 'Witches, and Other Night-Fears', despite its author's professed lack of imagination and matter-of-fact attitude, is in fact entirely devoted to the topic of dreams and visions. True, the tone is mostly humorous or critical, and the subject minutely dissected, but there are moments of emotional intensity, especially when Elia narrates his first encounter with the witch and his subsequent visions of the creature sitting by his bed at night (before reverting quickly to a more distanced analysis). The outcome of these short outbursts of feeling is often a mixed register, from understatement to greater involvement, back into a conversational style, even within a couple of sentences:

> Be old Stackhouse then acquitted in part, if I say, that to his picture of the witch raising up Samuel – (O that old man covered with a mantle!) – I owe – not my midnight terrors, the hell of my infancy – but the shape and manner of their visitation. It was he who dressed up for me a hag that nightly sate upon my pillow – a sure bedfellow, when my aunt or my maid was far from me.[11]

This passage begins humorously by calling the fatal book containing the picture of the witch 'old Stackhouse', but then reaches a peak of pathos in the actual description of the illustration, where the witch, as noted by George Clay Reecer, is made even more terrifying by being left indistinct.[12] This emotional fragment, and the other intimate confession on 'my midnight terrors, the hell of my infancy', are embedded in the development of a rational argument according to which traditional horror figures are not the cause of human fears, which are innate, but only give them visual representation. The tone then rises up again with the terrible vision of the 'hag that nightly sate upon my pillow', which is however soon diminished by calling the

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[10] Lamb, pp. 210-11.

[11] Lamb, p. 209.

[12] George Clay Reecer, 'The Prose Style of Charles Lamb' (doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1968), pp. 209-210, in *ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global* <https://ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2090/dissertations-theses/prose-style-charles-lamb/docview/302338637/se-2?accountid=13042>.

witch playfully 'a sure bedfellow'. Lamb's style is therefore broken up – visually as well, through frequent interrupting dashes – into different registers, that range from the familiar, the critical, and the pathetic or confessional.

It is now clear why Cecchi sets Lamb's heterogeneous style, with its jumps and starts, in opposition to De Quincey's impassioned prose, where a 'a single note in a wrong key' is enough to ruin 'the whole music'. Lamb's intercourse with poetry, which for now can be broadly identified with visionary matter and emotional intensity, is more ambivalent than De Quincey's, but this does not imply that he rejects it. In fact, 'Witches, and Other Night-Fears' continuously makes reference to poets, not only as targets of satire but also seriously as creators of many supernatural creatures, from Dante's devils to Shakespeare's Prospero. Moreover, when it is time to conjure up the supreme figure, that shapeless image of spiritual fear itself which is the source of all visions, Elia suspends his prose to quote a stanza from Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*.[13] The final 'inland landing' of the essay after this excursus into the realm of dreams suggests not that poetry and its attributes should be ruled out, but merely restrained, or rather challenged by an alternative mode of poetic vision.[14]

In the context of these reflections, Cecchi's essay 'Cavallerie berbere' [Berber cavalries] (1936), found at the opening of the collection *Corse al trotto* [Trot races], can be considered a declaration of style and proves helpful in defining Cecchi's own position on the matter of poetry in prose. Initially, this essay seems to be about horses: Cecchi compares the rustic Berber breed he has seen in Libya to the ceremonial beauty of Mexican horses, and expresses his preference for the former. Soon however, the subject of horses gets entangled with issues of writing: the Mexican horses that used to be Cecchi's favourites before going to Libya are described by quoting the poem *La grandeza Mexicana* (1604) by Bernardo de

[13] Lamb, p. 210.
[14] Lamb, p. 211.

Balbuena, whose verses give them 'lirica esaltazione'[15] by comparing them – *naturalmente*, comments Cecchi with a touch of irony – to Centaurs, hippogriffs and other mythological or literary steeds. But a clearer sign that horses are in fact a metaphor of writing styles comes with Cecchi's statement that he feels drawn to 'betray' the Mexican breed, for he has become more modest with age and has found Berber horses better suited to him. Then, in contrast with the fantastical associations spun by the poet Bernardo de Balbuena, he prosaically compares Berber horses, for their shabby look, to a crowd of little Arab women dragging their slippers. Cecchi's subsequent remarks on Berber horses being very short, indeed 'pocket size', and gathering in large numbers in a narrow space, without a set order, reinforces their affinity to newspaper articles, the form in which his essays were mainly published. The opposition between Berber and Mexican horses closely resembles that between *saggio* and *prosa d'arte* Cecchi draws in the homonymous essay: whether Mexican steeds stand for poetry proper like the verses of Balbuena or simply for a prose style that is steeped in myth and allegory, Cecchi's preferred genre clearly wants to achieve something different, and access 'poetry' through another route.

The subsequent section of the essay goes more deeply into matters of style by specifying how the 'gait' of Berber horses differs from that of the Mexican breed. With a series of adjectives that are normally related to writing, Cecchi states that the Berber gait ('andatura') is never 'cerimoniale, ornata, gratuitamente eloquente',[16] that these horses are not 'oratorical' animals (*SV* 872). Their pace knows no middle ground: they either proceed at a light amble, or throw themselves into a large gallop. Precisely this inconsistency of speed brings Cecchi back to the issue of poetry, for paradoxically it is the Berber horses, and not the Mexican ones, which are likened to poets:

[15] 'lyrical exaltation'.
[16] 'ceremonial, ornate, gratuitously eloquent'.

> Sono come i poeti, che di regola preferiscono stare zitti, o si sbrigano alla meglio nelle sentenze del linguaggio comune, per gli usi ordinari; eppoi escono in rapite parole d'incantesimo, che sembrano echeggiare da un'altra sfera, e a tutti si comunica la loro ebbrezza, il loro furore. (872)[17]

Two features of poets are stressed here: their overall humble attitude, sometimes interrupted by occasional outbursts of passion; and correspondingly their mixed style, that combines ordinary language with 'enchanted words'. It follows that, according to Cecchi, true poetry is not to be found in uniform elegance and sentimentality, but originates at the crossing or communication between the level of the ordinary and that 'other sphere' of the extraordinary, here defined, alternately, as emotional intensity or illusion ('fantasmi e miraggi del deserto'; 870).[18] These features are indeed reminiscent of Lamb's style as analysed above, and firmly situate Cecchi within an established, and mainly English, tradition of essay writing.

Much has been said about this tradition, and one of the characteristics of the essay genre which is often singled out is its humble attitude and its ostensibly limited ambitions. Graham Good, for instance, has highlighted the essay's circumscribed claims to knowledge – aiming merely at attaining accidental, temporary and unorganised knowledge – and its self-proclaimed artlessness and formlessness, as originally it was not considered an art.[19] Furthermore, the essay tends to focus on small things: Good underlines that it finds 'significance and beauty in the detail of a small world and little-regarded people and things' and hence 'also turns aside from the grand design and the imposing statement for minor truths'.[20] It is interesting that Lamb, in particular, one of Cecchi's most important models, built his identity as an essayist (with the related connotations of modesty and triviality) partly in opposition to Romantic poets, especially Coleridge. In the 1828 dedication which accompanies a volume of his youthful

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[17] 'They are like poets, who as a rule prefer to be silent, or manage as best they can using common expressions, to meet their ordinary needs; and then bring out enraptured, enchanted words, which seem to echo from another sphere, and to everyone is communicated their inebriation, their frenzy.'

[18] 'visions and mirages of the desert'.

[19] Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 3-4; 13-14.

[20] Good, p. 14.

poems, Lamb writes to Coleridge that those early pieces were composed only thanks to the poet's close association (they were originally published among Coleridge's poems), without which Lamb's 'sap' or inspiration is now completely 'dried up and extinct', causing him to decline 'into prose and *criticism*'. He also suggests, with a remark very similar to Cecchi's in 'Cavallerie berbere', that his weakened imaginative power might be the result of old age, when 'Life itself loses much of its Poetry for us'.[21] In a letter to Coleridge, quoted by Thomas McFarland, Lamb calls his essays 'my nothings',[22] while Elia once describes himself as 'the lean and meagre figure of your insignificant essayist'.[23]

It is with Lamb, therefore, that the essay genre enters markedly in dialogue with poetry, beginning an interaction characterised by both competition and emulation. McFarland argues that Coleridge was for Lamb an 'intellectual *alter ego*' and compares their relationship to a pair of opera glasses, with Coleridge and Lamb looking from opposite ends: the former seeing everything large, the latter small – each vision made possible by the perspective of the other. McFarland notes that although Lamb in 'Witches' seems to surrender to poets the whole domain of dreams, this does not prevent him from writing the essay 'Dream Children: A Reverie' in prose, thus offering 'the little-ended Elia transformation of the large-ended poetic or Coleridgean vision'.[24] Fred V. Randel has also analysed Lamb's relation with the Romantic poets, stressing Lamb's wish, evident in the irony of 'Witches, and Other Night-Fears', to distance himself from their work.[25] He rightly points out, however, the ambivalent character of this rivalry, for *The Essays of Elia* have also much in common with Romantic poetry: 'an infusion of personality, an extension of subject matter, and a decrease in formality of style and

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[21] Lamb, p. 3.

[22] Thomas McFarland, *Romantic Cruxes: The English Essayists and the Spirit of the Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 44.

[23] Lamb, p. 319.

[24] McFarland, pp. 44-45.

[25] Fred V. Randel, *The World of Elia: Charles Lamb's Essayistic Romanticism* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press, 1975), pp. 7-10.

organization' are the kind of innovations that both Lamb and the Romantic poets introduced in the familiar essay genre and in verse respectively. More importantly, Randel sees in Lamb's essays a parallel emphasis on personal experience and an 'impulse toward transcending limitations of time, space, and finitude itself', which makes them an alternative to Romantic poetry's pursuit of infinitude, by trying to discover it in the ordinary world and not in another dimension.[26]

If various modern critics have noticed that Lamb's essays have shared features with Romantic poetry, it is a prerogative of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criticism to explicitly call them 'poetic'. Cecchi is not alone in his assessment: in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', he quotes Virginia Woolf's observation that Lamb's essays are suddenly subverted by 'that lightning crack of genius in the middle of them which leaves them flawed and imperfect, but starred with poetry' as the comment which best captures his peculiar style (*SV* 325).[27] Pater, another author Cecchi was familiar with, is of the same opinion in his essay 'Charles Lamb', where he states that 'for a humourist such as Charles Lamb', 'the characteristics of places, ranks, habits of life, are transfigured […] by poetic light'.[28] Pater underlines once again the low-key simplicity of Lamb's pieces, which is a constant in the tradition of the familiar essay, but also remarks how Lamb always gives the reader 'so much more than he seemed to propose' and how 'he could throw the gleam of poetry or humour on what seemed common or threadbare'.[29] Hugh Walker, who published a history of the English essay in 1915, after describing the features of Lamb's humour, proceeds:

> But there is something of the poetic as well as of the grotesque; this, too, was characteristic of Lamb. Though he was not much of a poet in verse there is an

[26] Randel, pp. 12-13.
[27] The quotation, which Cecchi reports in Italian, is from *A Room of One's Own* (*ROO* 8-9).
[28] Walter Pater, *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1924), pp. 117-18.
[29] Pater, pp. 119; 122.

> *unmistakable atmosphere of poetry* about his more serious prose, and it shows occasionally even in the most humorous essays.[30] (my italics)

Walker then lists a few of Lamb's expressions where he can perceive 'a touch of the poet', or even 'more than a touch', concluding with the pieces in which he finds the 'poetry' is prevalent: 'The whole of *Dream Children* is poetic and much of *A Quaker's Meeting*'.[31] His judgement about 'Dream Children' coincides with Cecchi's, who associates it with 'Christ's Hospital, 'Blakesmoor' and 'Old China' as those compositions which 'effettivamente oltrepassano il grado di «capitolo», e contrappuntata divagazione e variazione umoresca, ecc., per attingere la sfera superiore' (*SV* 324).[32]

It is worth noting, in order to put Cecchi's reading and emulation of Lamb in context, how in the nineteenth and early twentieth century there was a tendency in literary criticism to measure, so to speak, the 'temperature' of prose compositions, its fluctuations between highs and lows. Recording them was a way to grant prose, at least in its best achievements, the same dignity as poetry, because by the 'poetry' parameter it was given the stamp of literary value. It is according to this criterion that De Quincey ranks the body of his own works in the Preface, distinguishing his consistently visionary and emotionally intense 'impassioned prose' pieces from a lower category of compositions that rather resemble, in their 'mixed character', the essays of Lamb. It is that class of papers, the *Autobiographic Sketches*, which 'proposes primarily to amuse the reader; but which, in doing so, may or may not happen occasionally to reach a higher station, at which the amusement passes into an impassioned interest': 'At times', he continues, 'the narrative rises into a far higher key'.[33] Despite their ability to 'rise', De Quincey does not consider his *Autobiographic Sketches* as worthy as the *Opium Eater* and the

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[30] Hugh Walker, *The English Essay and Essayists* (Kolkata: Books Way, 2008), p. 157.

[31] Walker, p. 157.

[32] 'effectively overcome the status of *capitolo* [in contemporary Italian literature, used as a synonym of essay or other short prose composition], and counterpointed, humorous digression and variation, etc. [the lexicon used belongs to music], to dip into the superior sphere'.

[33] De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, I, p. 9.

*Suspiria*, which in his opinion are 'a far higher class of compositions' and can legitimately claim the title of works of art because their theme and style are entirely impassioned.[34] Accordingly, in his assessment Lamb's essays are impaired by their inability to sustain pathos for longer than a momentary glimpse: 'he literally collapses, literally sinks away from openings suddenly offering themselves to flights of pathos or solemnity in direct prosecution of his own theme'; 'the most felicitous passages always accomplish their circuit in a few sentences', so that their sentiment 'does not prolong itself – it does not repeat itself – it does not propagate itself'. All these frustrating faults De Quincey attributes to Lamb's 'insensibility to music' and consequent absence of any 'sense of the rhythmical in prose composition'.[35]

For Cecchi, musicality does not seem to be a defining feature of the poetic, or indeed of good prose. As we have seen, in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' he reproduces faithfully De Quincey's distinction between prose compositions that have a mixed style and those which are steadily elaborate and rhythmical ('di tono fortemente scandito' *SV* 326), but reversing his value judgement in favour of the former. Cecchi's book *Scrittori inglesi e americani*, which collects his articles on English and American authors, contains many appreciations of the surprises hidden in a modest subject matter and style. Sometimes, as in this comment on Stevenson, Cecchi expresses this idea metaphorically:

> Era di quei poeti che dicono qualche grande cosa lirica, tutte le volte che scrivono una lirica. Ma forse ne dicono una anche più grande, quando si crederebbe che avessero tirato giù il più vago degli appunti, o magari avessero soltanto chiesto un cerino. Era di quei pittori che stemperano gli ori e le gemme del sultano e i colori del tramonto, nella loro nuova edizione delle *Mille e una notte*. Ma poi si scopre che la figura più luminosa la tinsero con una scatola di acquarelli da una lira, come quelle che per dipingere i mari ed i regni delle loro carte geografiche adoprano i bambini. (*SIA* 1: 159)[36]

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[34] De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, I, p. 14.

[35] De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, V (1897), pp. 234-35.

[36] 'He was one of those poets who say something profoundly lyrical, every time they write a lyric. But perhaps they say something even greater, when they seem to have merely jotted down the most tentative of notes, or maybe just asked for a light. He was one of those painters who paint the sultan's gold and gems and the colours of sunset, in their new edition of *One Thousand and One Nights*. But then one discovers that they

This passage shows that lyricism is not necessarily an attribute of conventional poetry, it is rather a quality that emerges unexpectedly, often combined with the most extraneous matter: with comedy, for instance, or with ephemeral journalistic material.

In his long article on Chesterton, Cecchi cannot but recognise that this author, whom he greatly admires, has a capricious style, a complicated humour, and moreover often treats subjects of merely insular interest. Nevertheless,

> Specie negli articoli di «The London Illustrated News» e di «New Witness», più affrettati o talora obbligati, folti di personalismi e allusioni per noi di minor rilievo […] non manca mai, nemmeno nel più stanco di tali scritti, il ristoro improvviso di qualche nota di vera poesia. Poiché è certo che il principale contrappeso di questo temperamento sta appunto nella qualità poetica; benché, comparativamente, Chesterton non abbia dato molti versi. (*SIA* 1: 371)[37]

In order to justify Chesterton's narrow, rather than universal, focus, Cecchi reflects that, while tragedy is naturally expressed through generalisation and indeterminacy, comedy is more effective when attached to precise reality, even when it conveys universal meanings (371). The ties to specific and ephemeral reality are particularly strong in newspapers. In the waste of Chesterton's old articles for *The New Witness*, Cecchi finds him 'al suo peggio';[38] however, he feels that, 'in questa massa di prosa enorme ed impervia', he could make a beautiful anthology out of the 'tante immagini rimaste sepolte fra la cenere di controversie ormai dimenticate, con tanti spunti cui non fu dato liberamente di crescere, ma che il tempo non ha potuto scolorire' (373).[39] It is the contrast of opposite qualities that Cecchi finds most fascinating in Chesterton, to the point that, in relating his meeting with the writer in 'Visita a Chesterton' [Visit to

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painted the most glowing figure with a cheap box of watercolours, like the ones that children use to colour the seas and kingdoms of their maps.'

[37] 'Especially the articles of *The London Illustrated News* and *The New Witness*, which are the most rushed or sometimes imposed, thick with personal references and allusions of minor relevance to us […], even the tritest of these writings, never lack a few sudden, reviving notes of true poetry. For certainly the main offset of such a disposition is precisely the poetic quality; even though, comparatively, Chesterton has not written much verse.'

[38] 'at his worst'.

[39] 'from within this huge and intricate mass of prose' he could make a beautiful anthology out of the 'many images left buried under the ashes of forgotten controversies, with many ideas which did not have the chance to grow, but which time was unable to let fade'.

Chesterton], he notes how conflicting traits also inform his living figure and conversation, as well as his writing. Chesterton is a very big man who lives in a small house, but 'se in qualche modo egli è grande, è soltanto in quella misura che la sua casa è così piccola';[40] he talks about city matters, far from mythological, but his words seem to be coming from the heart of a forest or a myth; finally, one would expect to see in him a clown, and finds instead a bishop (*SV* 80-82).

The above examples illuminate some of the reasons why Cecchi, who associated poetry with the gem that can be discovered in the midst of trivialities, was fond of the understated premises and uneven style of the English essay tradition, which he promoted in Italy both through his creative work and as a literary critic. This predilection becomes even more significant, and crucial to define more clearly Cecchi's particular understanding of poetry in prose, if considered in relation to his cultural background and the prevalent ideas around poetry and lyricism that were circulating in Italy at the beginning of his career.

## IV.2. The pursuit of pure lyricism in early twentieth-century Italian literature

An explanation of Cecchi's preoccupation with lyricism, and the various ways to approach it in prose, can be found in the debates that animated different groups of Italian intellectuals during his formative years, in the pre-war period and during World War I. As Giovanni Papini testifies in his 'Soliloquio sulla poesia' [Soliloquy on poetry] (1926), the ideal of '"poesia pura", di cui si faceva allora un gran discorrere',[41] was a widespread concern among early twentieth-century intellectuals, who were divided into different activist groups gathered around various cultural reviews. In 1903 Cecchi met and became friends in Florence with both Papini

[40] 'if in any way he is great, it is only in the measure that his house is small'.

[41] The ideal of '*pure poetry*, which was then object of continuous debate'. Giovanni Papini, *Pane e vino con un Soliloquio sulla poesia* (Firenze: Vallecchi, 1926), p. 34.

and Giuseppe Prezzolini, the founders of the literary magazine *La Voce*, with which he collaborated as a critic between 1909 and 1911 (*SV* xxxiii-xli). *La Voce* (1908-16), together with Benedetto Croce's *La critica* (1903-44), to which Cecchi also contributed, were among the most prominent reviews of the period and had a strong impact on the development of his critical views and creative writing.

Both magazines promoted the ideal of 'pure lyricism' as the supreme artistic achievement, independent of form, a moment of expression completely free from historical, ethical, or critical thinking, which were considered to serve practical purposes extraneous to the realm of art.[42] This ideal of purity affected the *Vociani*'s assessment of genres: they rejected drama and the novel (especially the naturalist novel, direct expression of positivist culture) as hybrid forms that are contaminated with narrative, in favour of *frammenti* [fragments], their peculiar invention. These consist in autobiographical short pieces written in musical prose, continuously interrupted by pauses and punctuation, supposed to express naked emotions and impressions, the intensity of unrelated vital instants, without the support of a logical or narrative structure.[43] Similarly, Croce's literary criticism favoured, in a long poem or prose work, only the 'purely lyrical' sections expressing the artist's sentimental intuition, while undermining the 'impure' parts (*non poesia*) which treat historical, ethical, or philosophical matters. For both *Vociani* and *Crociani*, 'poetry' was absolutely incompatible with thought, and could not be sustained for a long time in an extended work, but only occur in short outbursts – as in *La Voce*'s 'fragments'.

The socio-economic context in Italy before the war helps us to understand the specific meaning and implications of the pursuit of 'lyricism' at the time. In this period, the intellectual élite perceived their values and social role to be threatened by positivism and materialism

[42] Especially with regard to Croce's neoidealism, see Robert Dombroski, 'The Rise and Fall of Fascism (1910-45), in *The Cambridge History of Italian Literature*, ed. by Peter Brand and Lino Pertile (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 491-530 (pp. 509-511).

[43] See Carla Gubert, *Un mondo di cartone*, pp. 44; 128; 130.

(politically associated with socialism), and also began to see, due to the democratisation of culture, their status changing from that of a small, wealthy and authoritative caste into a much larger category of salaried workers, in competition with each other. In order to reaffirm their role of inspiration and guidance of society at a time of rapid modernisation, they gave birth to different literary movements, such as *La Voce*, that defended the cognitive power of intuition and irrationalism against positivist thinking.[44] In this context the pursuit of pure lyricism was a reaction to the flattening drive of industrialisation and socialism, a defence of the unique value of the individual as such, and not as a member of a larger social group with pre-determined desires and behaviour. It was also a defence of the value of art as a vehicle of knowledge distinct from philosophy and the social sciences, and of the artist's exclusive power to attain this knowledge purely through his own inner life. Lyricism meant the expression of interiority as the only means to access the essence of art, without the intrusion of other disciplines or indeed of other individuals, given the uniqueness of each creative experience. Lyricism therefore was intended as the utmost celebration of the voice of the self, 'la soddisfatta riaffermazione del maiuscolo io',[45] which is probably the reason why the organ of the *frammentisti* was called precisely *La Voce* [The Voice].

Alfredo Gargiulo, in his pivotal article 'La nuova letteratura' [The new literature], part of a series he published on *L'Italia letteraria* between 1930 and 1933 to provide an overview of the literature of the period 1900-1930, paraphrases the term 'lyricism' in the broadest sense as simply autobiography or 'ispirazione autobiografica':[46] 'E intanto, per meglio intenderci, non diciamo subito: lirismo; diciamo più modestamente: autobiografia'.[47] In this context, autobiography does not mean the narration of one's life, nor obviously the minute

[44] Dombroski, pp. 493-94.
[45] 'the satisfied reaffirmation of the capitalised 'I''. Alfredo Gargiulo, , *Letteratura italiana del Novecento* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1940), p. 122.
[46] 'autobiographical inspiration'.
[47] 'Meanwhile, to be more clear, let us not say 'lyricism' just yet; let us say more modestly: autobiography'. Gargiulo, pp. 60-61.

psychological analysis in the style of realist novels, which dissect the causes and effects of feelings, but rather the account of a process of inner discovery consisting in a series of illuminations. According to Gargiulo,

> [L]a sensibilità nuova esige una coerenza «lirica» rigorosa, porta alla rappresentazione di momenti essenziali, mira più alle figure che allo svolgimento delle azioni; e insomma tende a ridurre, nell'opera d'arte, i fattori non artistici, di commozione, di contenuto, o (come si chiamano in pittura) «illustrativi».[48]

This artistic goal or development Gargiulo calls 'purificatore',[49] in line with a mindset which equates pure lyricism (the expression of the self) with art.

The process of self-discovery itself is considered to be poetry, regardless of whether it is conveyed in prose or in verse: as in Virginia Woolf's theory, poetry is primarily a particular experience or mental state, and only subsequently a mode of writing. On this point, it is revealing what Gargiulo writes about the critical reception of Papini's works:

> Ma ecco dunque l'idea che il Pancrazi avanzava circa il Papini scrittore di poesie: in fondo, pure in tutta la produzione in prosa, l'autore di *Opera prima* e *Pane e vino* sarebbe stato più che altro un poeta; passando al verso, egli avrebbe perciò soltanto cercato di quintessenziare questa poesia avuta in dono da natura.[50]

Poetry already exists at prose stage; in Pancrazi's words, as quoted by Gargiulo:

> Poesie in versi, e meglio in prosa, Papini ne aveva scritte già, e non son poche. Si può dire anzi che tutta l'opera sua è nata da un lievito personale, da uno stato d'animo assai prossimo alla poesia. Anche sotto apparenza dialettica e razionale, la pagina di Papini quasi sempre fu retta da un ansito, da una passione non logica. Anche se mostra di parlare alla ragione, questo scrittore mira alla fantasia.[51]

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[48] 'The new sensibility demands a rigorous "lyrical" coherence, leads to the representation of essential moments, aims more at symbolic images than at the development of action; and all in all tends to reduce, in the work of art, the non-artistic factors, of psychology, content, or (as they are called in painting) the "illustrative" elements.' Gargiulo, pp. 63-64.

[49] 'purifying'.

[50] 'Here is, then, the idea Pancrazi put forward with regard to Papini as a writer of poetry: ultimately, even in all his production in prose, the author of *Opera prima* and *Pane e vino* was above all a poet; moving to verse, he had merely tried to purify this poetry which had been gifted to him by nature.' Gargiulo, pp. 119-20.

[51] 'Papini had already written poems in verse, even better ones in prose, and not few of them. In fact it can be said that the entirety of his work originated from a personal ascension, from an emotional state [literally, a 'state of the soul'] very close to poetry. Even beneath a dialectic and rational appearance, Papini's page was nearly always sustained by a longing, by an illogical passion. Even if he pretends to speak to reason, this writer aims at the imagination.' Pancrazi, quoted by Gargiulo, p. 120.

What emerges from these passages is the idea that poetry, being an innate gift of nature completely unrelated to reason, precedes verse, which has rather an accessory role: verse is generated when a poetic spiritual state reaches a particularly high level of intensity, or when the poet wants to express only the essence of his emotion. According to this view, there is poetry in verse as well as poetry in prose: the *frammenti* were actually more likely to be written in prose or free verse rather than traditional verse in order not to curb with rules the spontaneity of feelings and impressions. In 'La nuova letteratura' Gargiulo indeed notes the tendency, common to both the prose and verse production of his time, to work towards one and the same goal of lyricism. He observes that lyric poetry and prose writing have never been so close to each other in purpose as in the current literary period:

> E nulla, neppure per approssimazione, s'incontra nel periodo nostro, che corrisponda alla coesistenza, in altri periodi, di una lirica e di una prosa su piani assolutamente diversi: ad esempio, poco innanzi, la poesia carducciana e la narrativa veristica.[52]

Despite this general convergence of prose and verse in the quest for lyrical purity, the attribute 'prosaic' is still used by Gargiulo to indicate texts that are impure because they present non-lyrical features, such as critical thought. Unsurprisingly the essay, for its reflective nature, falls into this category.

Gargiulo's theoretical distinction between the *frammento* and the essay deserves some attention because it provides a possible perspective from which to assess Cecchi's choice, despite his initial closeness to the *Vociani*, to devote his career to the latter rather than the former. The literary production in early twentieth-century Italy was characterised by a proliferation of short prose pieces of different kinds, labelled with a variety of names – such as *frammenti*, *saggi*, *capitoli*, *capricci*, *fantasie*, *poemetti in prosa*, *elzeviri*, *prose d'arte* – in the

[52] 'Nothing, not even approximately, is to be found in our own age that corresponds to the coexistence, in other periods, of lyric poetry and prose on two absolutely distinct planes: as for instance, not long ago, Carducci's poetry and realist narrative.' Gargiulo, p. 63.

course of numerous and unsuccessful attempts to discriminate among them or classify them into genres.[53] Gargiulo's definitions of *frammento* and *saggio* in 'La nuova letteratura' is one such attempt, and Cecchi's article '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' is another, particularly crucial to understand how Cecchi framed his own position in the literary scene of his time. A coherent reorganisation of this large body of texts and terminology is, of course, beyond the scope of the present study, but looking at classifications formulated in that period proves useful to illuminate the criteria that stand behind them, and therefore understand the mindset of their author. Gargiulo's categorisation is interesting because he does not separate neatly between *frammento* and *saggio*, but puts them at different ends of the same spectrum: if for him the chief features of early twentieth-century literature are 'autobiography', or self-expression, on the one hand, and critical awareness on the other (*La Voce* and the other reviews of the time were deeply engaged in literary criticism), *frammenti* and *saggi* present both these features but in different measures, privileging lyricism over criticism or vice versa. Most importantly, Gargiulo's criterion is *antiformalista*, that is, irrespective of literary form:

> Ma si consideri questo punto: non il «saggio», che pel suo carattere prevalentemente riflessivo è prosastico senz'altro; ma il «frammento», allorché in esso la materia autobiografica è animata da un sentimento più intenso, può ben elevarsi di tono sino a trovare la sua propria espressione anche nel verso. Nulla più di ciò, crediamo, ribadisce la necessità che i termini in questione siano trattati con la maggiore possibile larghezza. E larghezza equivale, nel caso, appunto a sostanzialità, antiformalismo.[54]

Both *saggio* and *frammento* are, for Gargiulo, 'forme autobiografiche', and both arose from a background of critical awareness, but the *frammento* has progressively purified itself from

[53] See Gubert, pp. 19-20.

[54] 'But let us consider this point: not the "essay", which for its chiefly reflective nature is definitely prosaic; but surely the "fragment", whose autobiographical material is animated by more intense feeling, can elevate its tone until it finds expression also in verse. Nothing more than this, we believe, can confirm the necessity that the terms in question should be intended in the broadest possible sense. And breadth, in this case, refers precisely to their essential, anti-formalist meaning.' Gargiulo, p. 62.

critical thinking and intensified the lyricism, sometimes even to the point of finding expression in actual verse.

This is obviously Gargiulo's interpretation, which does not necessarily correspond to the way the authors themselves conceived of their work, but is revealing of a critical attitude focused, for the discrimination of genre, on notions of purity instead of form, where the literary essay is located at the 'impure' end of the spectrum. This is likely to be a Romantic legacy as it recalls De Quincey's classificatory method in the Preface to his collected works, with the impure texts (of 'mixed character') on one end, and the consistently 'impassioned' ones, 'a far higher class of compositions', the only worthy to be called art, on the other.[55] Within a framework which measures artistic quality on lyrical intensity, and calls this lyricism 'poetry' regardless of medium, Gargiulo's classification of genres makes perfect sense. Moreover, seen under this light Cecchi's move to disregard the *frammento* in order to write essays acquires special significance, as it appears as a deliberate choice of impurity and artlessness over purity. His scepticism regarding the purity ideal is evident in his appreciation of the hybrid position of Chesterton, 'troppo onesto e poeta per i politici, troppo politico per i poeti d'una poesia così pura che quasi sempre finisce nel puro nulla' (*SV* 82).[56] The history of Cecchi's ambiguous liaison with lyricism must start with an account of his disagreements with the *Vociani*.

### IV.3. Bridging the gap between lyricism and rationality: *La Ronda* and *prosa d'arte*

As outlined by Carla Gubert, Cecchi's dissent from the members of *La Voce* began precisely over their obsession with artistic purity. The *Vociani* had espoused Croce's idea that art only consists in individual, immediate intuition and is totally incompatible with logical thought or

[55] De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, I, pp. 9; 14.

[56] 'too honest and poetic for the politicians, too political for the poets of a poetry of such purity that nearly always ends up in pure nothing'.

the creation of a moral system: Croce's idealism conveniently sanctioned the aesthetic value of their dismembered *frammenti* and made it equal to that of longer and more articulate literary works. This standpoint is sharply summarised by Arturo Onofri in an article which appeared in *La Voce* in 1915:

> Tre righe valgono tre pagine, tre pagine valgono tre volumi. Lo spazio è una cretina illusione; e perciò s'impone la svalutazione del *grande*, del mastodontico; che è inevitabilmente imbottito di stoppa discorsiva, logica, letteraria, – impoetica […]. Tutti i poeti vanno letti e gustati a frammenti, ché tutti son frammentarî, senza eccezione, anche e soprattutto quelli che hanno organizzato ministerialmente le loro facoltà inventive ristoppandole di cultura di ogni genere.[57]

On the contrary, Cecchi and other intellectuals such as Boine, Cardarelli and Bacchelli had a more inclusive and constructive view of art: for them, aesthetic value could not disregard structure, cohesion, and moral commitment. They interpreted the *frammenti*'s lack of systematic thought and moral content as a sign of nihilism, the consequence of not having any positive value to propose.[58] This social and moral critique gained even more negative meaning in the aftermath of the World War I, given that many of the protagonists of *La Voce* had merged into the Futurist movement and, through the new magazine *Lacerba* (1913-15), had actively campaigned for Italy's intervention in the war.[59] Therefore, because of their political views, *Vociani*'s and *Futuristi*'s formal innovations (they both abandoned traditional literary forms and disrupted the logical structure of discourse) were associated with the moral disorder and destructive urge that had led to the war.

In order to reinstate the ethical responsibility of artists after the conflict and restore the value of the intellectual aspects of their work, a group of dissenters involving Cecchi and other

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[57] 'Three lines equal three pages, three pages equal three volumes. Space is a stupid illusion; which is why the *large* and cumbersome must be devalued, for it is inevitably stuffed with discursive, logical, literary, – unpoetic waste […]. All poets must be read and enjoyed in fragments, since all of them are fragmentary, without exception, including, and chiefly, those who administered their faculties of invention in a bureaucratic manner, stuffing them with all kinds of culture.' The passage is quoted by Margherita Ghilardi in *SV* 1736-37.

[58] Gubert, pp. 132-34.

[59] 'Lacerba', in *Treccani databases* (Istituto della Enciclopedia italiana, 2018) <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/lacerba> [last accessed 4 December 2020].

ex-*Vociani* (such as Cardarelli, Bacchelli, Baldini and Barilli), founded another literary periodical, *La Ronda* (1919-23), which called for a return to moral and intellectual order, stylistic propriety and respect for tradition (taking as models especially the prose of Manzoni and Leopardi). In 1919, Cecchi wrote in the newspaper *La Tribuna* an article titled precisely 'Ritorno all'ordine' [Return to order], in order to introduce the new review and express its rejection of the Neoromantic avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century.[60] Subsequently, in *La Ronda*, Cecchi published two articles, 'Una comunicazione accademica' [An academic report] (1919) and 'Poeti in un verso solo' [Poets in one line] (1920), which parodied, respectively, the work of *Futuristi* and *Vociani*.[61] In the first piece, Cecchi pretends to write as a philologist of the future who is presenting the findings of excavations on the site of two old public libraries, destroyed by a series of bloody revolutions. They consist of 'fragments' written in an unrecognisable language ('«Auflin bergin orazz…»') or in common 'volgare italico'[62] where words appear, however, 'sciolte da ogni senso e relazione come le parole degli ammalati di paralisi, nell'ultimo stadio' (*SV* 43).[63] The fictional author describes the context that gave rise to these barbaric texts – the age of industrialisation and positivist thinking I outlined earlier – as 'un'epoca grigia, *livellatrice*, l'Epoca della Ghisa e dei Grandi Affari' (44; my italics),[64] which nevertheless saw the emergence of 'alcune strane filosofie dell'istinto e dell'incoscienza' (45).[65] The philologist concludes that Time has fulfilled the wish

[60] Gubert, pp. 23-26.

[61] My analysis of Cecchi's essays/articles is always based, unless otherwise stated, on Margherita Ghilardi's curated edition (*SV*), which gathers the texts as Cecchi revised them for book collection. Cecchi's published book collections, which altered the articles as they originally appeared in newspapers and magazines, went themselves through successive editions that made further changes. For the present study I have been unable to compare the revised versions with the newspaper originals, but in order to contextualise the articles and highlight the fact that they were conceived for the daily and periodical press I always indicate the date of their first appearance, rather than that of their subsequent publications. I refer to Ghilardi's edition for the essays' chronology, publication details, and an account of the development of the final texts through different variants.

[62] 'Italic vernacular'.

[63] 'unconstrained by sense or coherence, like the words spoken by paralytics who have reached the last stage of the disease'.

[64] 'a grey, flattening age, the Age of Cast Iron and Big Business'.

[65] 'some strange philosophies of the instinct and the unconsciousness'.

of these sectarian groups by returning them to primordial matter and deleting their memory, with the exception of a few fragmentary relics.

In 'Poeti in un verso solo' (1920), Cecchi targets the aesthetics of the *Vociani*. His article throws ridicule on their attempts to reduce the great classics of literature to an extreme synthesis – with some parodic exaggeration, Cecchi allows only one or two lines per poet, in order to isolate only the moments in which they achieve 'pure lyricism': 'Isolata cotesta purezza, buttare a mare il resto, dove il poeta non rinunciò ad esser anche storico, moralista, profeta: insomma, lirico impuro' (*SV* 155).[66] Cecchi ironically praises the incredible convenience of this epuration:

> È chiaro che, arrivati a distillare così la quintessenza d'un poeta, [...] il patrimonio letterario e il bagaglio dell'erudizione venivano straordinariamente a semplificarsi. Una ragionevole biblioteca della nostra letteratura, sintetizzata, a dir molto, in una trentina di righe fra versi e prosa, si sarebbe potuta portare come *breloque*, dato che uno non preferisse mandarla a memoria. La Vaticana sarebbe entrata in una scatola da cerini. Il British Museum in un portasigarette. (156)[67]

However, by mockingly quoting the lines that supposedly express the chief poetic quality of each author, Cecchi shows that in fact their value can hardly be summarised, and is rather the product of the entirety of their work, or of different aspects interacting together. Since all content of thought must be avoided, the lines picked by the purists can only be beautiful descriptions or emotional cries: thus, 'dolce e chiara è la notte e senza vento'[68] would be the best of Leopardi, while Macbeth's '*horror! horror! horror!*', or, for the sake of economy, '*horror* x 3', would concentrate the essence of Shakespeare's tragedies (157-58).

Cecchi warns against the problems created by this critical stance in another article of the same year, 'Questioni di maniera' [Issues of manner] (1920). Here he openly states that

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[66] 'Having isolated this purity, jettison the rest, where the poet did not renounce being also historian, moralist, prophet: in short, an impure poet.'

[67] 'It is clear that, having distilled in such a way the quintessence of a poet, [...] our literary patrimony and scholarly heritage came to be extraordinarily simplified. A convenient library of our literature, reduced to thirty lines at most comprising both verse and prose, could be carried around like a charm, unless one preferred to memorise it. The Vatican Library would fit into a matchbox. The British Museum into a cigarette case.'

[68] 'sweet and clear is the night, and without wind' [my translation].

'lirici puri' have simply nothing to say (*SV* 129), and then argues against the widespread idea that writers should avoid having a *maniera*, a recognisable style, and keep away from literary conventions. This article reformulates from a different perspective Cecchi's conviction that there is no such thing as purity in literature and that all attempts to achieve it can only produce very bad results. He humorously compares the style of a writer, his choice set of images and rhetorical tools, to the role of clothes in love relationships. Love at the time when humans did not wear clothes must have been, true, more genuine and spontaneous, but equally had no meaning as love: these early people experienced it without awareness and left no memory of it that we can understand (131-32). Similarly, without stylistic barriers, feeling becomes meaningless and belongs to nobody, one's sentimental cry indistinguishable from another's:

> Sopprimete i calzoni. E avrete dato il più gran colpo all'amore. Sopprimete le convenzioni, l'accademia, le retoriche, e insomma le «maniere», che sono il pudore e i calzoni del sentimento e dell'immaginazione. E la poesia è morta. (132)[69]

Cecchi's revaluation of the traditional structures of discourse is consistent with the restorative principles behind *La Ronda*, whose aesthetic plan was to reorganise the expression of inner life into a rhetorical and logical framework.

For the members of *La Ronda*, including Cecchi, the most important task was to rebuild the bridge between lyricism and rationality that the *Vociani* and the *Crociani* had broken. Emotions were still important, but they had to be ordered into critical observations and reflections rather than communicated in an impressionistic manner.[70] The prose pieces published in *La Ronda* were complete, logically structured and, though still quite brief, longer than *frammenti* – which were highly condensed – stretching out into descriptions, intellectual and moral digressions, and even narration.[71] According to Carla Gubert, the *Rondisti* were

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[69] 'Eliminate trousers. And you will have given the hardest blow to love. Suppress conventions, academia, rhetoric, in short all the "manners", which are the forces of restraint and the trousers of feeling and imagination. And poetry is dead.'

[70] Gubert, p. 145.

[71] Gubert, pp. 64-65.

effectively the creators of a new genre, *prosa d'arte*, which was to become the dominant form of literary production in Italy between the wars, and counted Emilio Cecchi's writing among one of its most accomplished examples. Gubert's definition of *prosa d'arte*, however, constructed *a posteriori* by looking at stylistic and thematic resemblances between a vast amount of heterogenous texts, is very problematic in Cecchi's case, especially if we consider the nature of his appreciation of the English essay tradition.

Gubert's definition of *prosa d'arte* revolves around a particular understanding of classicism, one of the chief values promoted by *Rondisti*, as an ideal of perfection. This corresponds to Giuseppe Ungaretti's interpretation of what classicism meant to many of his contemporaries: not the study and emulation of the literature of tradition, nor a Graeco-Roman view of reality, but simply the achievement of formal perfection in art, considered first and foremost as a craft.[72] According to Gubert, this ideal of classical perfection determined the formal features of *prosa d'arte*:

> [P]er raggiungere il traguardo di una letteratura formalmente impeccabile, civile e ordinata, l'espressione inevitabile sarà quella del componimento breve ma perfetto in tutte le sue parti, ricercato linguisticamente e lontano dalla tentazione destabilizzante dell'autobiografismo e dello psicologismo […]: vale a dire la prosa d'arte.[73]

By extension, if *prosa d'arte* is often also called *prosa poetica*, it is precisely along the lines of formal stylistic refinement. The association between *prosa d'arte* and poetry originated right at the birth of the new genre: for instance, in 'Poesia in versi e in prosa' [Poetry in verse and in prose] (1930) Riccardo Bacchelli confuses *prosa d'arte* with the *poème en prose* and in general with poetry written in free verse; while Enrico Falqui in his 1938 anthology of *prosa d'arte* groups together texts that present lyrical or poetic prose as a common formal feature,

[72] Ungaretti's interpretation of the prevalent meaning of classicism for early twentieth-century intellectuals is quoted in Gubert, p. 25.

[73] 'In order to meet the target of a formally impeccable, civilised and disciplined literature, the form of its expression must inevitably be a short composition, but perfect in all its parts, linguistically refined and distant from the destabilising temptation of autobiography and psychology […]: namely, *prosa d'arte*.' Gubert, p. 26.

corresponding to a particularly elegant and distinguished style of expression.[74] In her study, Gubert argues that *prosa d'arte* is an outright prosaic genre, distinct from poetry; however, in allowing 'una qualche vicinanza con la poesia',[75] the resemblance she sees is, once again, at the surface level of language: 'la sua compromissione con il territorio della versificazione si reduce in verità ad alcuni giochi lessicali, ad un'attenzione più marcata all'ornato e alla musicalità della lingua rispetto magari allo stile di un racconto'.[76]

As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, Cecchi as an essayist did not recognise himself in this definition. Even when in a 1947 radio contribution he attributes to *saggio* and *prosa d'arte* a similar role in the improvement of Italian letters between the 1920s and the 1940s, which undeniably consisted in a fruitful stylistic and linguistic effort, he always keeps the two forms distinct: on the one hand, the essay, whose function is to express ideas; on the other hand, *prosa d'arte* (or *prosa poetica*, or *poemetto in prosa* – significantly Cecchi, contrary to Gubert, thinks they all belong to the same category), which has the more emotive disposition to 'condolere con tutta l'umanità'.[77] According to Cecchi in this contribution, both *saggio* and *prosa d'arte* work on improving their prose so that it can adhere more closely to 'una realtà più vera, appunto perché liricamente sentita e rappresentata',[78] but we know from his 1949 article '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' that they do so in very different ways:

> Per noi, infatti, prosa poetica equivale specialmente a prosa d'arte, «frammento», poemetto in prosa. Dentro ai quali termini, è se possibile anche più palese la diversità della forma del «saggio». *Grosso modo* potrebbe dirsi che la prosa poetica offre la soluzione romantica d'un problema di espressione letteraria, che nel saggio,

[74] Gubert, pp. 36-37.

[75] 'some kind of proximity to poetry'.

[76] '*prosa d'arte*'s intrusion into the territory of poetry is in fact limited to a few lexical tricks, to a more marked attention to the ornamental and musical properties of language as compared to, say, the style of a short story.' Gubert, p. 36.

[77] 'condoling with all humankind'. The relevant extract of Cecchi's radio contribution is reported in Gubert, p. 18.

[78] 'a truer reality, precisely because felt and represented lyrically'.

> con le sue premesse intellettualistiche francamente esibite, ha la sua impostazione e soluzione classica. (*SV* 330-331)[79]

If the problem of literary expression shared by the two forms is the communication of a profound reality, 'liricamente sentita e rappresentata', *prosa d'arte* offers as a solution compositions of diffused pathos and rhetoric, while the essay prefers to remain on the whole understated and grounded on ordinary reality and critical content, in order to contain lyricism within a few significant and surprising moments.

Thus, for Cecchi, classicism does not stand for an empty ideal of linguistic perfection, but for intellectual grounding: classical works are those that, like essays, are at the outset justified and driven by a rational motive. In this context, the 'poetic' element too alters its meaning: it is not the realisation of classicism, but, as we shall see, the point of disturbance, the unsettling, of classicism understood as the essay's rational scaffolding. Ungaretti, in some notes he published in *La Ronda* in 1922, appears to be close to Cecchi's ideas when he describes the relationship between poetry and rationality as one of opposition rather than identity, even though, he argues, the distinction is very subtle to the human mind because we can only ever fathom the mystery as it is manifested within rational, logical boundaries. Identifying poetry as the Dionysian principle of infinity and mystery, Ungaretti explains:

> Il mistero c'è, è in noi. Basta non dimenticarcene. Il mistero c'è, e col mistero, di pari passo, la misura; ma non la misura del mistero, cosa umanamente insensata; ma di qualche cosa che in un certo senso al mistero s'opponga, pure essendone per noi la manifestazione più alta: questo mondo terreno considerato come continua invenzione dell'uomo.[80]

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[79] 'For us, indeed, poetic prose specifically corresponds to *prosa d'arte*, "fragment", prose poem. In this light, it becomes if possible even more obvious how it differs from the essay form. It can broadly be said that poetic prose offers a romantic solution to a problem of literary expression which the essay, with its intellectual premises frankly on display, sets and solves with a classical approach.'

[80] 'Mystery exists, it is within us. We should just not forget it. Mystery exists, and with mystery goes, hand in hand, the limit; but not the limit (or measure) of mystery, which is humanly absurd; but of something that is somewhat opposed to the mystery, despite being, to us, its highest manifestation: this earthly world considered as a continuous human invention.' *Misura* reunites the ideas of limit, measure, and order. Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Per conoscere Ungaretti: Antologia delle opere*, ed. by Leone Piccioni (Milano: Mondadori, 1971), p. 301. For the identification of mystery with poetry, see pp. 324-25.

The rational aspect of art Ungaretti alludes to in this passage, *la misura*, corresponds to the calculated pattern of relations that holds a work of art together: at this superior, abstract level (which I will examine in Chapter 6), far removed from surface issues of linguistic polishing, Cecchi in fact does associate poetry with a principle of formal order as opposed to its excess, slightly diverging from Ungaretti. However, for Cecchi this form, which hints at the profound pattern of relations governing the universe, is grasped by the artist intuitively rather than rationally, so it is ultimately close to Ungaretti's idea of poetic mystery.

The account given by Eugenio Montale in his 1963 review of a collection of Cecchi's essays, *Saggi e vagabondaggi* [Essays and wanderings], throws light on the specificity of Cecchi's contribution to the programme of *La Ronda*, and on the ambiguity of his association with that group, whose members were in any case heterogeneous and bonded only by a few general guidelines. According to Montale, *La Ronda*'s objective was a new poetry born out of the best of Italian prose tradition, 'un nuovo classicismo d'impronta razionale e illuministica'[81] on the example of Leopardi's *Operette morali*:

> Il tentativo impegnò solo due o tre scrittori di quel gruppo; e fra gli altri collaboratori il meno convinto parve Emilio Cecchi che in quegli anni aveva pubblicato *Pesci rossi*, raro esempio (allora) di una poesia a sfondo saggistico, e cioè di una *prosa che si innalza alla poesia* senza ricorrere al linguaggio così detto poetico e senza apparente segno di quella martellatura formale e ritmica che fa distinguere il verso dalla prosa.[82] (my italics)

Prose which rises to poetry, therefore, and not poetic prose – a common misunderstanding which perhaps explains Cecchi's uneasiness with regard to *prosa d'arte*. Montale, like Cecchi himself, ascribes the essay to a separate tradition, already established in English literature but new in Italy:

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[81] 'a new classicism of rational and illuminist spirit'.

[82] 'The attempt involved only two or three writers of that group; and the least convinced among the contributors seemed to be Emilio Cecchi, who in those years had published *Pesci rossi*, rare example (at the time) of poetry in essay form, that is, of a prose which rises to poetry without resorting to the so-called poetic language and without apparent trace of that formal and rhythmic hammering that distinguishes verse from prose.' Eugenio Montale, *Il secondo mestiere: Prose 1920-1979*, ed. by Giorgio Zampa, 2 vols (Milan: Mondadori, 1996), II, p. 2554.

> Inteso in questo modo che cos'è il saggio? Non il saggio critico [...] e neppure il poemetto in prosa di tipo baudelairiano e mallarmeano; *né quella che fu poi definita come prosa d'arte, e che tranne poche eccezioni degenerò in esercitazioni calligrafiche*; ma un tipo di discorso colloquiale di un'eleganza volutamente dimessa, capace di accogliere una gamma pressoché illimitata di contenuti, restandone escluse solo le precipitazioni chimiche delle alte sintesi liriche e lo «sbalzo» marmoreo dell'oggettivismo parnassiano.[83] (my italics)

Montale defines the essay genre adopted by Cecchi through a series of negations: it is not quite criticism (although later he argues that Cecchi's critical pieces on art and literature and his more creative texts are just two sides of the same coin), it is not *poème en prose*, nor certainly *prosa d'arte*, and its register is medium and conversational – neither extremely condensed and subjective, nor detached and impersonal. Although Montale does not explicitly say why he calls this genre '*essay* d'intonazione poetica'[84] (he remarkably uses the English term), nor exactly how it supposedly 'rises' to poetry – in fact, he soon takes his own expression back, declaring that 'fu improprio da parte mia parlare di una prosa che si innalza alla poesia'[85] – we can gather that the poetic element for him has to do with introspection: for Montale the essay consists in 'prosa di memoria, di indagine, di autoauscultazione'[86] where the external world is included only as reflected into the mind of an individual in order to create 'un autoritratto in movimento'.[87]

Montale's interpretation of the poetic flavour of Cecchi's essay is decidedly pertinent but still a little generic. An introspective tendency *per se*, even assuming that introspection is more typical of poetry than of prose, would not make the poetic quality of the essay any different from that of *prosa d'arte*. Montale does not fail to touch upon a crucial difference

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[83] 'Understood this way, what is the essay? Not the scholarly essay [...] nor the prose poem of the kind composed by Baudelaire or Mallarmé; nor what was subsequently defined as *prosa d'arte*, which but for a few exceptions degenerated into exercises in formal perfection; but a type of conversational discourse of deliberately understated elegance, capable of embracing a nearly limitless range of topics, excluding only the chemical precipitations of rarefied lyrical syntheses and the marble "embossments" of Parnassian objectivism.' Montale, pp. 2554-55.

[84] 'essay of poetic timbre'.

[85] 'it was improper for my part to speak of poetry rising to prose'.

[86] 'prose of memory, exploration, introspection'.

[87] 'a self-portrait in motion'. Montale, pp. 2554-57.

between the two: he argues that the essay's style is much more varied, and purposefully lowers its tone and lexicon at times, but he discusses this feature apart from the poetry issue, and simply sees it as a skilful game of contrasts. For Montale, 'l'apparente dissonanza non fa che confermare la sapienza perfettamente tonale della melodia'.[88] Instead, I propose to interpret this stylistic contrast as much more than a matter of technical ability, as the reflection of an essential trait of lyricism which, according to Cecchi, is fundamentally based on dissonance. Lyricism can exist only in relation to its opposite. And a correct assessment of the value of dissonance in Cecchi's essays must go beyond the context of specialised cultural reviews, like *La Voce* and *La Ronda*, to the platform where Cecchi was publishing the most: the newspaper.

## IV.4. Lyricism and journalism: the English essay and the *elzeviro*

From 1910, Cecchi's distancing from the *Vociani* and their ideal of lyrical purity was partly a consequence of his work as a journalist for the Roman newspaper *La Tribuna*. As related by Federico Casari, Cecchi started writing newspaper articles out of necessity, but then he found himself appreciating more and more a medium which is inherently impure, forever compromised with the ephemerality of daily events and the changing tastes of the audience. Not surprisingly, the *Vociani* criticised him heavily for becoming a journalist, which they considered a mercenary profession: the quarrel over purity encompassed the very figure of the intellectual.[89] To Prezzolini's accusation of selling his intellect for money, Cecchi replied that 'Si può non diventarlo [mercenari], a patto di diventare sterili e suicidarsi in una lenta

[88] 'the apparent dissonance but confirms the melody's perfect tonal balance'. Montale, p. 2555.

[89] See Federico Casari, 'The Origin of the Elzeviro: Journalism and Literature in Italy, 1870-1920' (doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2015), pp. 146-47 <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11365/>. This section on Cecchi's journalism is greatly indebted to Casari's study.

corrosione chiamata *purità*'.[90] The lexicon of purity appears again in a sarcastic memoir by Papini:

> Molti anni fa il Cecchi si dava l'aria d'essere il più puro ed austero anacoreta dell'arte e andava dicendo che non avrebbe mai sputtanato il suo ingegno, come gli altri, su per i giornali e per le riviste […] Ad un tratto il silenzioso parlò, il romito s'imbrancò: dentro un anno o poco più cominciò a spargere articoli dappertutto dove gli capitava […] Il purissimo e moralissimo Cecchi si offriva a chiunque lo pagasse.[91]

As it emerges from a letter extract to his wife Leonetta, Cecchi seemed to be particularly attracted to the very elements that make newspaper articles 'impure', chiefly the immediate contact and exchange of ideas with the audience, which sharpens the style of the journalist: 'Il quale risultato non si ottiene che con un lavoro vivo, fatto appunto sul pubblico vivo, d'ogni giorno; non su quello più riposato e meditativo che legge i libri'.[92]

When in 1918 Cecchi moves to London to work as foreign correspondent for *La Tribuna*, Leonetta is concerned about his growing enthusiasm for journalism, which significantly she finds at odds with his vocation as a poet:

> Non che io disdegni il giornalismo: tutt'altro. Soltanto io so che la tua vita più intensa è quella di scrittore lirico, di poeta, insomma; sia pure poeta in prosa. E all'esperienza di vita giornalista [sic] per il tuo bene, non ci credo.[93]

According to Casari, when talking about poetry in prose Leonetta has in mind *frammentismo*, which had seduced Cecchi at the very beginning of his career. But now Cecchi sees in

[90] 'It may well be possible not to become mercenaries, provided one becomes sterile and kills himself in a slow corrosion called *purity*'. This extract from Cecchi's letter to Giuseppe Prezzolini is quoted in *SV* xli.

[91] 'Many years ago Cecchi used to give himself airs about being the most pure and ascetic anchorite of art and went around saying that he would never whore his intellect out, like others did, in newspapers and magazines […] All of a sudden the silent man spoke, the hermit joined the herd: in little more than a year he started to spread his articles anywhere he got the chance […] The supremely pure and moral Cecchi offered himself to anyone who would pay.' This extract from Papini's article, which appeared in *La Voce* in 1915, is quoted in Casari, p. 146.

[92] 'This result cannot be obtained but through living work, addressed precisely to a living, daily audience; not to the more contemplative and brooding audience who reads books'. Emilio to Leonetta, 18 March 1910, quoted in *SV* xxxix.

[93] 'It is not that I disdain journalism: quite the contrary. Only, I know that your most intense life is as a lyric writer, a poet, in short; even if a poet in prose. And I don't believe in the experience of a journalist's life for your own good.' Leonetta to Emilio, Florence, 4 December 1918, quoted in Casari, p. 152.

journalism the potential to renew his writing's connection to lived experience. He replies: 'Io voglio essere un uomo, non un esteta. Un santo, se mi riesce, un diavolo, un bolscevico, ma non un esteta'.[94] The contrast of identities that Cecchi playfully suggests is in itself hinting at the diversity of options opened up by journalistic writing as opposed to the empty ideal of pure lyricism. Yet, as he implies later in the same letter, the kind of journalism he wants to pursue is also different from the trend of impersonal news reporting that was just then beginning to take hold of the daily press. The word 'journalism' has to be taken with caution:

> Anche quando io dico "giornalista", non credo di spiegarmi bene, forse. Già, io adopro questa parola con cinismo voluto. Poi io intendo: un uomo capace di dare delle forti sintesi della vita, in uno stile suo. Intendo, cioè, conseguire una sempre maggiore ampiezza di esperienza; e una forma di commento sempre più libera. Se tu pensi al mio lavoro di sei o sette anni fa, tu vedi come era pedestre, e meno lirico […].[95]

Cecchi reaffirms the value of lyricism but locates it in a totally different context – the newspaper instead of the literary review where *frammenti* and *prose d'arte* were published. However, it should be noted that the meaning of *lirico* here, as in many other instances, does not appear to have radically changed from what the *Vociani* and Croce intended, an idea essentially tied to subjectivity and self-expression. This stands out more clearly in another letter to Leonetta of the London period, where he claims that his diary observations and the records of some of his conversations allow him to write 'più liricamente, e in modo di assoluta personalità', his articles.[96] In yet another letter, very close in time, he calls two of his London

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[94] 'I want to be a man, not an aesthete. A saint, if I can, a devil, a Bolshevik, but not an aesthete'. Quoted in Casari, p. 152.

[95] 'Even when I say 'journalist', I don't explain myself well, maybe. First, I use this word with deliberate cynicism. Second, I mean: a man who is capable of giving powerful synthetic views of life, in his own style. In other words, I intend to gain an ever broader range of experience; and an ever freer mode of comment. If you think of my work of six or seven years ago, you see how pedantic it was, and less lyrical […].' Emilio to Leonetta, London, 13 December 1918, LCP. II.1000, Carteggio Emilio Cecchi – Leonetta Cecchi Pieraccini, Archivio Contemporaneo Bonsanti, Gabinetto Vieusseux, Firenze. Extracts reproduced by permission of Emilio Cecchi's heir, Regione Toscana, and Gabinetto Vieusseux, all rights reserved.

[96] 'more lyrically, and in an absolutely personal manner'. Emilio to Leonetta, London, 30 November 1918, LCP. II.994, Carteggio Emilio Cecchi – Leonetta Cecchi Pieraccini, ACB, Gabinetto Vieusseux, Firenze.

articles 'due interpretazioni liriche di questa mia vita',[97] and concludes: 'Diranno: che razza di corrispondente è questo? Eppure io so di dare delle realtà',[98] thus implying, as highlighted by Casari, that the reality he depicts, centred on his personal experience, is different from that portrayed in regular, news-centred journalism.[99]

It is clear that, for Cecchi, being in touch with the world of daily, lived experience did not mean chasing the news in order to stay updated. An article on journalism he published from London in 1919, 'Dello stare a sedere' [On staying seated], criticises British reporters' restless quest for the news and opposes to it his own practise of a static journalism of opinion, based on observations and reflections upon personal life events, such as 'un'intervista con la vecchia che la mattina veniva a rifarmi il letto' (*SV* 48).[100] In a much later essay, 'Il lume a petrolio' [The oil lamp] (1943), Cecchi describes his work as a conversation and confession with himself. As with many other pieces, the occasion of the essay, a memory of his childhood's holiday house, originates from a moment of distraction and mind-wandering: 'Mentre mi sviavo col pensiero dietro a quei pretesti impercettibili che finiscono per riportarci sempre più addentro a noi stessi' (*SV* 513).[101] As Casari points out, the profession which Cecchi advocates for himself is halfway between the journalist and the humanistic writer, who interprets experience through contemplation and book learning.[102] In a *Taccuini* [Notebooks] entry of 1918, Cecchi claims that 'un uomo è sempre sicuro di poter sinceramente interessare come privato' (*T* 304):[103] what he has to say about himself will always be more exact and worthy of communication than any account of public figures and events. In 'Dell'articolo di giornale'

[97] 'two lyrical interpretations of this life of mine'.
[98] 'They will say: what sort of correspondent is this? Yet I know I depict some realities'. Emilio to Leonetta, London, 10 December 1918, LCP. II.998, Carteggio Emilio Cecchi – Leonetta Cecchi Pieraccini, ACB, Gabinetto Vieusseux, Firenze.
[99] Casari, p. 26.
[100] 'an interview to the old lady who would come and make my bed in the morning'.
[101] 'While my thoughts were straying off behind those minimal pretexts that end up taking us deeper and deeper inside ourselves'.
[102] Casari, p. 157.
[103] 'a man can always be sure to elicit sincere interest as an individual'.

[On the newspaper article] (1924), he calls this subjective take on journalism, on the model of *The Spectator* and *The Rambler*, 'poetic': 'la qualità affatto poetica o personale di un giornalismo non ancora tanto infastidito dalle "notizie", e raccomandato al genio degli scrittori'.[104] Casari perceptively argues that Cecchi created a self-centred kind of journalism where, however, self-expression is not the only measure, as in *frammentismo*, but finds limitation in the contingent reality that justifies each article, and in the discursive structure that each piece has to provide in order to be informative.[105]

In this respect, according to Casari the English essay provided Cecchi with an excellent model of negotiation between self and world:

> He needed to account for the contingent elements the correspondent needed for his task and, mostly, he needed a mediator between the lyrical instance and the requirements of the medium. Once in London, Cecchi seemed to find an answer to his search in the British essay.[106]

In fact, Cecchi's encounter with the English essay tradition of the nineteenth century happened before his London sojourn. Significantly, in *I grandi romantici inglesi* [The great English Romantics], first published in 1915, he already shows appreciation for 'il tipo di quella critica inglese, esercitata diffusamente dal Lamb, dal De Quincey, e con più vigore intellettuale da William Hazlitt, nella quale il giudizio è sommerso nell'impressione' (*GR* 177).[107] But certainly the months he spent in London between November 1918 and April 1919 gave him the opportunity to meet and make friends with two contemporary essayists, Chesterton and Belloc, who were crucial figures in the development of his identity as a writer (*SV* xlix). More importantly, as argued by Casari, Cecchi's London correspondences for *La Tribuna*, by

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[104] 'the positively poetic and personal quality of a journalism not yet bothered by the "news", and entrusted to the genius of writers'. This quotation has been expunged from the revised version of this article collected in *L'osteria del cattivo tempo* (*SV* 119-28), but the extract as originally published in *La Stampa* on 11 January 1924 is reported in Casari, p. 154.

[105] Casari, pp. 153-58; 160.

[106] Casari, p. 160.

[107] 'that type of English criticism, extensively practised by Lamb, De Quincey, and with greater intellectual vigour by William Hazlitt, in which judgement is steeped in impression'.

popularising his original perspective on journalism inspired by the English essay, resulted in the development of a new type of newspaper article: the *elzeviro*.[108]

The term *elzeviro* already existed but loosely indicated the cultural article or foreign correspondence printed on the third page of newspapers in a specific font called '*elzeviro*'. As Casari convincingly demonstrates, however, Cecchi with his *Lettere dall'Inghilterra* [Letters from England] codified it into a specific literary genre combining 'lyricism' – artistic, subjective expression – with journalistic requirements, such as an accessible, colloquial style and the conveying of information.[109] Cecchi was not the first writer who attempted to bring lyricism, normally the privileged creative output of specialised cultural reviews, into a newspaper setting. Gabriele D'Annunzio between 1911 and 1914 had already published on the third page of *Corriere della Sera*, and in *elzeviro*, a series of twenty-two lyrical fragments called 'Faville del maglio' [Sparks from the hammer], showing that the political newspaper could also be a platform for literary ability. D'Annunzio's sketches, however, though originating from a cultural pretext, were purely aesthetic pieces, not critical: they were 'experiments in artistic prose' aiming at musicality, rhythm and analogy rather than logical coherence.[110] In contrast, Cecchi, who was tired of aestheticism, attempted a more profound marriage between lyricism and journalism: instead of using the newspaper merely as a platform, he wanted the two forms of expression to interact in the same text.[111]

Chesterton and Belloc's essays, the inspiration behind Cecchi's *elzeviri*, were also published in newspapers. But in Italy, especially thanks to D'Annunzio's 'Faville del maglio', the newspaper was already prepared to serve as platform for yet another variant of 'lyricism', so Cecchi's *elzeviri* may have been received with greater awareness of their link with poetic

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[108] Casari, pp. 26; 158-66.
[109] Casari, pp. 165-66.
[110] Casari, pp. 24; 141-42.
[111] For this history of the *elzeviro* and the antecedents of Cecchi's journalistic style see Casari, pp. 18; 24-26; 115; 141; 165-66.

writing than Chesterton's and Belloc's essays in Britain. Indeed, most likely Cecchi noticed the poetic qualities of English essays precisely because the Italian literary context had already trained him to look for the lyrical potential of prose. Likewise, some of his readers were attuned to finding poetry in his *elzeviri*; Antonio Baldini, for instance, in his review of 'La giornata delle belle donne' [The day of beautiful women] (1923) titled 'Versi sotto prosa' [Verse beneath prose], claims that, despite Cecchi's journalistic style, 'Dovunque mettevo gli occhi, *versus erat*':[112]

> Ma la prosa del nostro amico, segnatamente in quelle pagine che più abbondavano di rilevate figure metriche, era significata in una lingua pianissima, di scavo, con un tono volutamente povero e dimesso: articoli, come per l'appunto dice il titolo della Collezione, di terza pagina di giornale. Nei giornali, come si sa, l'eloquenza sta di casa nella prima pagina: nelle altre si discorre alla buona, con o senza grammatica.[113]

Although Baldini humorously exaggerates the plainness of Cecchi's writing ('La giornata delle belle donne' is, in fact, a particularly polished piece), and attempts to identify in his prose actual hendecasyllables and other types of verse, his comments throw some light on the reception of Cecchi's hybrid style. First, he appreciates that Cecchi's poetry does not immediately strike the ear and sets his case apart from other attempts at 'prosa ritmica',[114] 'sempre troppo vistosi':[115] 'I ritmi e versi di Cecchi nascerebbero, senza volere e sapercelo, da una prosa che più prosa di così non saprebbe essere'.[116] Second, Baldini appears on the one

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[112] 'Wherever I looked, verse was'.

[113] 'But the prose of our friend, especially in those pages rich in distinct metrical figures, was written in the plainest, sharpest language, in a deliberately humble and simple style: articles, as according to the title of the Series, fitting for the third page of a newspaper. In newspapers, it is well known, eloquence belongs to the first page: on the others conversation is informal, with or without grammar.' Antonio Baldini, 'Versi sotto prosa', in *Lo Spettatore italiano: Rivista letteraria dell'Italia nuova, 1° Maggio - 15 Ottobre 1924*, ed. by Rosita Tordi (Bologna: Forni, 1982), pp. 344-51 (pp. 344-45). In fact, 'La giornata delle belle donne' is not an article but a fully creative piece which Cecchi conceived independently from his journalistic work: it was not published on the third page of a newspaper, but in a monthly review of literature and the arts, *Il Convegno*, which gathered pieces by different writers in anthological form. Baldini's confusion arises from the fact that the essay was subsequently collected in a series devoted to «La terza pagina» (1924), an inaccuracy which is in itself evidence of the free exchanges between literature and journalism at the time.

[114] 'rhythmic prose'.

[115] 'always too obvious'.

[116] 'Cecchi's metres and verse lines would apparently arise, casually and unconsciously, from a prose that couldn't be more prosaic.'

hand surprised to find poetry among the pages of a newspaper, but on the other hand hopeful that a better kind of modern poetry may arise from the practice of prose writing than from verse composition.[117] Despite not being the first to bring literary creativity into the *terza pagina*, Cecchi was consciously playing upon this surprise element, on the perceived incongruity between the exceptional and beautiful nature of poetry and the stereotype of ordinariness attached to the newspaper.

Indeed, all the genres Cecchi practised or came into contact with during his career shaped his approach to poetry in prose towards reconnecting lyricism with the mundane side of human experience and faculties. The episode of *La Ronda*, with the development of *prosa d'arte*, marked Cecchi's attempt to reunite lyricism with rationality and showed that the instinctive life of the mind need not be separate from its critical faculty, and that both could be incorporated in a more extended and structured text. The English literary essay model not only confirmed that lyricism was not incompatible with criticism, but showed more radically that it could even coexist with an apparently uncongenial register like humour, and that in fact lyrical expression was reinforced, not undermined, by stylistic and thematic variation. Finally, the *elzeviro* demonstrated what role lyricism could play in a newspaper setting, attached to contingent reality and brought close to a variegated audience, whose moral values the journalist had the power to influence. The next section will therefore look more deeply into the significance of these patterns of contrast and the resulting surprise, as they are an essential part of Cecchi's interpretation of poetry in prose.

[117] Baldini, pp. 345-46.

**IV.5. Lyricism and its opposite**

The above survey of Cecchi's career across different literary forms has variously touched upon different possible definitions of the value of 'lyricism' or 'poetry' in his essays, based on the meaning these concepts had in Italian intellectual circles in the first half of the century, and according to some of Cecchi's own uses of the terms. These meanings have been shifting but they have mostly been related to forms of inner life and self-expression. For this reason, it is possible to agree with Montale and consider Cecchi's essays 'poetic' insofar as they show an introspective tendency: an argument which is supported by Cecchi's subjective and contemplative take on journalism and, more broadly, by many scholarly definitions of the essay genre as a medium of idiosyncratic knowledge. This interpretation of Cecchi's poetic effects in prose is doubtless valid but still incomplete. If we merely accept the identification of prose lyricism with a text's focus on inner life, then not only we are left with a very broad category – which includes dreams, imagery, fiction, even myth – but one that is potentially applicable to any kind of text and fails to acknowledge Cecchi's important distinction between essay and *prosa d'arte*. Cecchi's idea of poetry in prose needs to be also attached to something more specific, but certainly we will not find this specificity in the ever-changing object that he labels each time as 'poetic' or 'lyrical'. The specificity of Cecchi's poetic effects is to be found in the *mode of interaction* that the poetic object establishes with its opposite, namely, with what in the text is not poetry.

I will explain this aspect of Cecchi's view of poetry in prose through four of his own essays: the first couple are pieces he wrote on the topic of journalism, 'Dell'articolo di giornale' [On the newspaper article] and 'L'avvenire del giornalismo' [The future of journalism]; while the second couple are essays on two games: 'Il giuoco di carte' [The game of cards] and 'Parole incrociate' [Crosswords]. 'Dell'articolo di giornale' (1924) is for the most part devoted to tracing the origins and development of journalism, finding the ancestors of modern articles

even in genres that preceded the invention of newspapers, such as Christian and Graeco-Roman epistolography. The last paragraphs, however, focus on the modern newspaper and present it as a medium that, for its very fleeting nature, makes writing articles particularly appealing. Here, Cecchi's argument is that there is something inherently poetic in the fact that newspaper articles are destined to disappear quickly: when we read them, they possess the fascination of things that are already on the verge of destruction, thanks to 'quella luce di tramonto che conferisce, alle immagini destinate a crollare immediatamente nella tenebra, il patetico splendore delle cose cui stiamo per dar l'ultimo addio' (*SV* 126);[118] afterwards, they are immediately clouded in the charm of memory ('la vaga poesia della rimembranza'; 127).[119] Even when a newspaper issue does survive and is lucky enough to be held in a library collection, it is never preserved entirely: its pages are only partially legible. Cecchi purposefully exaggerates the decay of old papers precisely to better highlight the poetic aura of what is left:

> La stampa sarà illeggibile, pulverulenta, e il foglio serpeggiato dagli arabeschi dei tarli, stellato di ruggine, tempestato dei cabalistici segni del tempo, simili a cifre su un antico portolano. Resteremo assorti davanti alla ruina, come davanti alla larva d'una bandiera bruciata al fuoco di cento battaglie. Finché l'occhio volgerà dove un titolo più nero galleggia sulla devastazione, o dove una frase, un'immagine superstiti brulicano sullo sfacelo come carovane sul deserto. E ci basterà per riconoscere l'articolo idolatrato, il tesoro sepolto, il poema inabissato. (127)[120]

For Cecchi, a mere newspaper article is turned into a poem by the very process that destroys it; the individual images and phrases that survive – and we will see the lyrical value of these in Cecchi's essays – stand out because of the devastation surrounding them. Cecchi also compares

[118] 'that sunset light which confers, to images destined to immediately crumble into darkness, the tragic splendour of the things we are about to bid farewell to'.

[119] 'the enchanting poetry of remembrance'. The adjective "vago" means both indefinite and beautiful, graceful. In poetic lexicon, the latter meaning is prevalent.

[120] 'The print will be illegible, dusty, and the paper zigzagged by woodworms' arabesques, starred with rust, ravaged by the cabalistic signs of time, similar to the figures of an antique pilot book. We will be engrossed before the ruin, as before the remains of a flag burnt by the fire of a hundred battles. Until our eye will turn to where a darker title floats on the devastation, or where a surviving sentence, an image, scintillate over the wreck like caravans in the desert. And this will be enough for us to recognise the idolised article, the buried treasure, the poem sunk into the abyss.'

an article which comes back to memory after seeing its poor relics in a library to a phoenix resurrecting from its ashes (127), an image which is useful for understanding the particular relationship between poetry and prose: the phoenix is *born from* its own ashes, the identity of this creature completely depends on its own negation. Significantly, 'Dell'articolo di giornale' explains lyricism by its mode of interaction rather than by its content: Cecchi never says what these precious articles, or their memorable images, are about, but rather, he points to the particular way they relate to their non-poetic context.

The other article on journalism, 'L'avvenire del giornalismo' [The future of journalism], was published in 1906. The fact that it is an early piece shows in various ways: in the tone of open attack on realism in journalism, which at the time had just begun to favour objective and impersonal reporting ('Da noi la gara è d'esser il più possible piatti, ligi al probabile, al volgare […] è tollerato chi inventa purché lo faccia imitando pedestramente il reale, il che significa qualcosa di peggio anche del copiare'),[121] and in the strong influence of Croce's philosophy, evident in the call for a 'spiritualizzazione del reale' or 'realizzazione dello spirituale'.[122] But the main idea stated here will have a lasting consequence in Cecchi's career: he wants journalism to become the poetry of the modern age through the use of imagination ('sostituire la fantasia all'apparecchio fonografico. Questa è la prima conquista del giornalismo').[123] In this case, the poetic element is equated to fiction – 'la Poesia, figlia diletta della sempre giovine fantasia'[124] – but this designation is by no means stable, since soon, within the same article, poetry shifts its meaning to 'emotion'. Although the two meanings are connected, as fiction generates emotion – in fact, Cecchi's idea of lyricism covers a broad network of related concepts – the presence of fantasy or emotion in a prose text would not, by

[121] 'In this country the contest revolves around being as much as possible dull, close to the plausible, the vulgar […] invention is tolerated as long as it pedantically imitates reality, which means something even worse than copying'.
[122] 'spiritualisation of the real' or 'realisation of the spiritual'.
[123] 'to substitute fantasy for the phonograph. This would be the first conquest of journalism'.
[124] 'Poetry, the beloved daughter of forever youthful fantasy'.

itself, be enough to produce a poetic effect. That is why Cecchi draws attention to the point of contact between poetry and its opposite; here, imagination and reality:

> In primo luogo si tratta appunto di dare alle finzioni una realtà poetica, emotiva; né questo saprà farlo il primo cantastorie che capita. Ma riusciti a dar loro quella realtà, avrà ben poco valore sapere se si tratta di finzioni o di realtà. Le realtà cominciano da esser realtà per doventar [sic] finzioni, e le finzioni tendono a diventare realtà. *C'è un punto nel quale si passano accanto, si compenetrano, formano una cosa sola.*[125] (my italics)

Once again, the poetic element of a text emerges as such, and acquires full meaning, at the moment of its interaction with its prosaic context.

To understand the specific connotations the meaning of lyricism acquires in a prosaic context it is illuminating to read Cecchi's humorous descriptions of the game of cards and crosswords. These two games have in common a high degree of variety – they are both based on combining and re-combining disparate elements – and consequently are both likely to bring about unpredictability and surprise. The essays Cecchi devotes to each of these games, 'Il giuoco di carte' and 'Parole incrociate' were first published very close in time, respectively in 1924 and 1925. What Cecchi appreciates in the game of cards is that it brings together two contrasting elements: necessity, which requires from the players logical and technical skills, and imponderability, which instead fuels their creativity and personality ('La necessità parla a chiari segni sul tappeto, ma ciascuno porta un segreto imprevedibile, scritto in quel ventaglio che si tiene sul cuore'; *SV* 236).[126] This is why, according to Cecchi, cards are superior to both chess, which is won through rationality alone, and dice, where mere instincts try their chance: although the connection is not explicit and perhaps not even conscious, we can easily see in this assessment of games the same mindset which would equally despise *lirica pura*, on the

[125] 'In the first place it is indeed a matter of giving a poetic, emotional reality to fiction; and this won't be achieved by the first chance storyteller. But once that reality is given, there will be little value in knowing whether it is fiction or reality. Realities begin by being reality to become fiction, and fiction tends to become reality. There is a point where they move past each other, they compenetrate, merge into the same thing.' Emilio Cecchi, 'L'avvenire del giornalismo', *Il Nuovo Giornale*, 27 June 1906.

[126] 'Necessity draws clear signs on the table, but each player carries an unpredictable secret, written on the fan he keeps on his heart'.

one hand, and the realist trend in literature and journalism on the other, in order to favour the mixed form of the essay. The lyrical element in the game of cards is the unpredictable move of the individual player, the card he picks from the unique set that makes up the pattern of his soul, but maybe the most defining aspect of lyricism is the way that special card intrudes among the rest. Cecchi explains this by comparing the character of various card configurations to different musical tempos:

> E ci sono nelle carte *andanti* spensierati e gioviali; *recitativi* esitanti, problematici, a un tratto provocanti, imperativi: ma la frase passa, addolcita, sopra un'altra corda, un'altra carta; un'altra ancora la carpisce, la fila, la ironizza, la elettrizza: uno strappo, un silenzio, e par che l'abisso ci stia spalancato ai piedi: si vede laggiù balenare il velo roseo della gran Donna, e dietro al velo, come i paladini dietro ad Angelica, giù a capofitto nell'abisso, *prestissimo*, tutti. (237-38)[127]

In the variegated texture of (unpoetic) voices, or styles – spanning across light humour, analysis, provocation, and irony – all entangled with each other, suddenly a crack opens to display the significant card, portraying the Queen, if not, at a more attentive reading, the experience of the abyss itself, of the silencing of all the other voices. It is precisely the succession of possible configurations, half necessary, half random, that makes the appearance of the poetic card possible.

It may be objected that identifying the imponderable card, the Queen, as the appearance of poetry in prose is an interpretative stretch, because Cecchi does not openly call it so. However, this mode of interaction between opposites is recurrent and explicitly associated with poetry in prose on other occasions. For instance, in Cecchi's reflections on the crosswords, or *puzzle*, which in his view is a game that triggers the poetic faculty:

[127] 'Among the cards, there are careless and cheerful *andantes*; hesitant, problematic *recitatives*, suddenly provocative, commanding: but the musical phrase, appeased, passes into another chord, another card; yet another one captures it, winds it, ironises it, electrifies it: a crack, a silence, and the abyss seems to lay open at our feet: far away we see the gleam of the Queen's pink veil, and behind the veil, like the paladins chasing Angelica, we fall headlong into the abyss, *prestissimo*, all of us.'

> In ognuno di noi, secondo i romantici, è un fanciullo poeta che dorme. E io paragonerei il *puzzle* alla penna di pavone che delicatamente ma irresistibilmente stuzzica nell'orecchio questo fanciullo, e lo obbliga a svegliarsi. (*SV* 303)[128]

The qualities Cecchi emphasises in the crosswords are very similar to those highlighted in card-playing: the infinite variety of possible words/cards combinations and therefore topics touched upon; the way words and cards attract each other like chemical reagents; and, precisely as a result of their (inter)reactions, the potential of each to carry a revelation. If cards are embellished with beautiful designs that favour the imagination, crosswords do not have such an intrinsic charm, they are only conglomerates of linguistic particles; outside their frame, similarly 'prosaic' is the social context in which their poetic power is enacted. By means of the crosswords, fantastical images, for example mythological figures, 'visitano neglette e *prosaiche* dimore, in un alone, in un pulviscolo di congiunzioni, particelle, avverbi e numeri per il lotto' (my italics);[129] thus, once again poetry is born from within its opposite: 'L'ultima licenza poetica, esplodente con la rabbia d'una epidemia dentro i ferrei meandri e gli incastri della così detta vita aritmetica e positiva' (305).[130] With his reference to the crosswords' wide audience, Cecchi finally expresses openly his latent analogy between *puzzles* and newspaper articles:

> E non c'è *puzzle* nel quale non dorma, in potenza, un poema; come non esiste fatto di cronaca, sulla colonna d'un quotidiano, nel quale non si trovino tutti gli ingredienti della tragedia più classica. Invenzione se altra mai democratica! (305)[131]

Independently of what poetry is, the secret of writing and, therefore, finding the poem in the newspaper article is in discovering significant combinations of disparate elements ('la poesia

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[128] 'In each of us, according to the romantics, sleeps a child poet. And I would compare the crossword puzzle to the peacock feather which delicately but irresistibly tickles this child in the ear, and forces him to wake up.'

[129] 'mythological figures visit neglected and *prosaic* homes, in a cloud, a dust of conjunctions, particles, adverbs and lottery numbers'.

[130] 'The ultimate poetic licence, breaking with the rage of an epidemic within the iron twists and the joints of the so-called arithmetic and positive life'.

[131] 'There are no crosswords in which does not lie dormant, potentially, a poem; as there is no fact of chronicle, in a newspaper column, in which are not found all the ingredient of the most classical of the tragedies. What a democratic invention!'

delle innumerevoli associazioni'; 303),[132] which would not be possible without the continuous, chaotic, utterly prosaic activity of card-shuffling and word-crossing.

The essay 'Parole incrociate' is perhaps, among the pieces analysed so far, the most complete in its representation of Cecchi's view of poetry in prose, as it adds one essential layer to it. The article portrays poetry as acting upon the prosaic text at two different levels: one which is punctual – like the sudden intrusion of a significant card, or the finding of an individual letter or word to place in the crosswords – and another level which is constructive, architectural, when these individual pieces are ordered into a superior composition. Cecchi's closing paragraph beautifully explains, still through the metaphor of the *puzzle*, how the scattered pieces come to form a meaningful pattern:

> *Puzzles* umoristici, appassionati, morali, religiosi, osceni, tragici, metafisici, scientifici, politici; e non siamo che al primo principio! La materia è ancor grezza e sparpagliata, come pietruzze che aspettano di esser commesse in mosaico; e ogni pietruzza può essere (o sembrare) l'occhio d'una figura, il seme d'un fiore, il riflesso d'una lucciola, d'una stella. (306)[133]

This passage shows how individual lyrical events or images, as random and unexpected as they may occur in the text, are in reality connected to each other in a superior system of relations which is poetry's most abstract level. This level, the mosaic, will be analysed in Chapter 6; the next chapter instead will focus on the process of revelation of the single pieces, and on the role of the poet in channelling these illuminations and introducing them in the prose text. In the above passage, the role played by a receptive subjectivity is enclosed in one word: 'sembrare' [to seem, to appear]. When Cecchi suggests that the individual stones may be significant pieces of a bigger mosaic, he immediately specifies that, in fact, they 'appear' to be so to the person filling the crosswords – by extension, the re-awakened poet. The clarification is crucial to

[132] 'the poetry of innumerable associations'.

[133] 'Puzzles may be humorous, passionate, ethical, religious, obscene, tragic, metaphysical, scientific, political; and this is only the beginning! The material is still raw and scattered, like little stones waiting to be cast into a mosaic; and each stone can be (or seem) the eye of a figure, the seed of a flower, the gleam of a firefly, or a star.'

qualify the frequent recurrence, in Cecchi's essays, of the words *sembrare* and *apparire*, with all their related terms such as *visione* and, most important of all, *apparizione*. These words signal in the text the introduction of a poetic element as an epiphanic event, and tie it back to the view of lyricism popularised by *frammentisti* and *crociani* at the beginning of the century, as the expression of intuitive, subjective knowledge.

The difference is that for Cecchi intuitive knowledge and self-expression cannot be severed from other, 'prosaic' forms of knowledge and expression. Poetry is fundamentally based on dissonance because it emerges from the interaction between a poetic element and its non-poetic context. This clash has the function to reproduce, at a textual level, the emotion of having an unexpected epiphany, in a similar way as Virginia Woolf's climactic style intends to mimic the epiphanic experience of having a 'moment of being'. Without a 'prosaic' background, lyricism would have no epiphanic power and therefore lose all its meaning as lyricism. To visualise this unity of opposites, it is worth recalling Cecchi's double description of Chesterton as a bishop, if seen from the front, and a clown, if seen from the back:

> Visto davanti Chesterton ha la figura di un vescovo. Ma il vescovo si rigira e visto di dietro ha la figura d'un *clown*. C'è una scoperta di umorista in questo gioco, c'è un'astuzia delusiva di polemista, c'è lo sfogo quasi fisico di un'ilarità connessa al dono prodigioso di formare le più strane associazioni. E c'è anche un partito preso di ridere. E il mestiere. E il dolore. (*SV* 78)[134]

Paradoxically, the very act of forming unexpected associations, which Cecchi considers, as we have gathered from the essays on cards and the crosswords, a highly poetic activity, is at the same time the specific job of the humourist. The humourist and the poet are one and the same figure, and Cecchi in 'Visita a Chesterton' discovers this 'non per un'evidenza logica, spiegata, ma per un'evidenza di sensazione' (82).[135] Cecchi notices the same process that transforms

[134] 'Seen from the front Chesterton has the figure of a bishop. But the bishop turns around and seen from the back he has the figure of a clown. In this game is the discovery of a humourist, the disenchanting cunning of a polemist, the almost physical release of hilarity connected with the prodigious gift of forming the strangest associations. And also the deliberate choice to laugh. And the craft. And the pain.'

[135] 'not through logical, plain evidence, but through an evidence of feeling'.

Chesterton from polemicist to poet happening within his own writing: the rational logic which is the backbone of the essay genre suddenly and unexpectedly gives way to intuition, the coin is flipped, the clown becomes bishop, the Queen's card opens up the abyss, a piece of the mosaic is found. Whatever the object of the revelation, which is unstable, poetry in Cecchi is always coessential with *the flipping of the coin itself*.

In conclusion, what does Cecchi's view of poetry in prose add to our understanding of the relation between essays and lyricism? We are already familiar with the essay genre being compared to the lyric in various ways. An essay may resemble a lyric in that they both find their most important defining and unifying law in subjectivity. This is, for instance, the point stressed by the Victorian poet Alexander Smith, in his piece 'On the writing of Essays' (1862):

> The essay, as a literary form, resembles the lyric, in so far as it is moulded by some central mood – whimsical, serious, or satirical. Give the mood, and the essay, from the first sentence to the last, grows around it as the cocoon grows around the silkworm. The essay-writer is a chartered libertine, and a law unto himself.[136]

Moreover, Smith calls the essayist 'a kind of poet in prose' because, in his view, an essay is 'pure literature', that is, its main goal is aesthetic, and any of its other achievements such as being informative or having social or intellectual impact are to be considered secondary. Smith's viewpoint, I think, well summarises all approaches which believe essays to be 'lyrical' to the degree that they are imaginative, idiosyncratic, and tied to personal experience or confession. More recent theorisations define the 'lyric essay' as a form which 'tends to favour the connotative and indeterminate over the denotative' and to 'defy chronological time', by conceiving of structure more in terms of movement through space, in the present of enunciation.[137] Another common approach is to judge some essays 'poetic' not because, as a whole, they act as lyrics, but because they *make use of* some linguistic or rhetorical tools which

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[136] Alexander Smith, *Dreamthorp: A Book of Essays Written in the Country* (London: Strahan, 1863), p. 25.

[137] Rachel Robertson and Paul Hetherington, 'A Mosaic Patterning: Space, Time and the Lyric Essay', *New Writing*, 14:1 (2017), 36-46 (pp. 40-41) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2016.1235204>.

are usually connected to versification. We can find an example of this idea in Gubert's observation that *prosa d'arte* occasionally crosses the boundaries with poetry whenever it displays ornate lexicon and musicality.[138]

All these ways of thinking about the possible lyrical attributes of the essay apply, to a certain extent, to Cecchi's pieces. While linguistic refinement, although taken care of, is not very relevant to Cecchi's conception of lyricism, the subjective and imaginative element is certainly crucial, as well as, as I will show in Chapter 6, the idea that the poetic quality of a prose text can lay in the architectural cohesion of all its parts, which relate to each other simultaneously. However, in believing that a poetic effect cannot be produced at all without the very elements that in an essay are extraneous to lyricism – information, social and moral critique, critical analysis (which develops temporally rather than spatially) – Cecchi points to an additional way of looking at poetry in prose, according to which lyricism is an *epiphanic event* of the prose text, the outcome of the interaction between opposite forces. Compared to the above models of interpretation, focused on identifying a static resemblance between poetry and prose, Cecchi's criticism and style, like Woolf's, invite us to take, instead, a dynamic approach, and focus on the ways poetic and prosaic elements act on each other in the textual field. This will be the method guiding my close reading in the following chapter.

[138] Gubert, p. 36.

## V. Poetic effects of contrast: a close reading of Cecchi's essays

The aim of the present chapter is to illuminate how Cecchi, in his essays, sets lyricism in contrast with prosaic elements, in order to intensify the epiphanic power of his poetic effects. What counts as lyrical varies in specific instances, as the concept in Cecchi's thought covers a broad range of meanings related to inner life: in the essay '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' alone, the meaning of lyricism fluctuates between psychological states or faculties (intuitions, revelations, emotions, ecstasy or sublime experience, memories, views of the soul), the world of the imagination (dreams, fantasies, fiction), and any contact with a transcendental, miraculous or essential reality. Consequently, what is opposite to the lyrical also varies, encompassing the essay's intellectual devices, such as logic reasoning, oratory, moral maxims, quotations and all displays of erudition, but also its humour and grounding on factual reality. In order to navigate this vast array of possible combinations, I have divided them into two sets of contrasts, according to whether lyricism – whatever form it takes – interacts with reason and/or humour, or whether it intrudes into everyday reality as a fictional or otherworldly dimension.

Overall, what unifies all of Cecchi's expressions of lyricism is, on the one hand, the rupture or discontinuity they create in the style of his essays; on the other, the use of figurative language and visual descriptions. While Woolf's theory of poetry in prose underlines the generalising role of metaphors and visions, but is centred on the rendering of character and voice, individual and choral, Cecchi's poetic effects are primarily based on the arresting and revealing power of images. This is partly due to the specific requirements of the essay genre, where observation prevails over narrative, but is also linked to Croce's definition of lyrical intuition as consisting in an image or constellation of images.[1]

[1] Benedetto Croce, *Breviario di estetica: Quattro lezioni* (Bari: Laterza, 1958), p. 35.

## V.1. The polar dynamics of poetry

In the pivotal article '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' Cecchi introduces the idea that poetry can stem from intellectualism by analysing the style of Montaigne. The trait of Montaigne's style that Cecchi underlines first is his chaotic show of erudition in the form of disparate quotations from classical authors, which are as thick as a forest and, rather than ennobling the text, make it more barbaric:

> Nella varietà ed appariscenza del materiale di citazione del Montaigne, rimane sempre qualche cosa di barbarico, come nel delubro d'una pietà ancora intricata di rozze superstizioni. Il che non fa che accrescere lo stupore di quando, in cotesta prosa, s'aprono visuali lontanissime di paesaggi d'anima. E fermentano improvvise, come nei più profondi poeti, immagini della realtà interiore. (*SV* 322)[2]

Precisely because the quotations make the essay heavy and dull, they stress by contrast the moments in which, unexpectedly, the author speaks directly and reveals something about himself. Significantly, the passage selected as an example ('*Je me plonge la tête baissée stupidement dans la mort* […], *comme dans une profondeur muette et obscure*' etc.), which describes the feeling of plunging into death unaware as in the dark waters of a profound sea, is highly metaphorical, suggesting that imagery is for Cecchi a crucial feature of lyricism. This is also indicated by the lexicon he uses to describe the poetic quality of Montaigne's prose: '*visuali lontanissime di paesaggi* d'anima'; '*immagini* della realtà interiore'; '*immagini* e *prefigurazioni* di morte' (322; my italics).[3] In addition, Cecchi underlines how some of the power of Montaigne's image of death derives from the fact that it comes as a surprise in its tedious context, proving that the essay's quotations, the non-lyrical element, are indispensable for the successful creation of a poetic effect.

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[2] 'In the variety and flamboyance of Montaigne's quotations, there is always a barbaric quality, as in the temple of a religion still entangled in coarse superstitions. This does nothing but increase the surprise when such a prose discloses remote views of landscapes of the soul. And suddenly, as in the most profound poets, there arise images of inner reality.'

[3] 'remote views of landscapes of the soul'; 'images of inner reality'; 'images and presages of death'.

Cecchi also reports the observations of Prévost-Paradol, who noted that the quotations in Montaigne's essays are impossible to remove, even when awkwardly sewn in, without seriously compromising the text – poetry depends on them, as Cecchi explains using the metaphor of two poles in an electric current:

> Il che è facile ad intendere; come nel sistema d'una corrente elettrica s'intende la inseparabilità e reciproca dipendenza dei due poli. La scintilla della poesia scocca proprio fuori da quella massa d'aspetto dottrinario e libresco; e serpeggiando penetra e rameggia in tutt'altro clima. Il linguaggio cambia timbro. Da espositivo, logico, diventa visionario; ma il modo del trapasso non appare […]. (323)[4]

Once again, the visual aspect of poetry is brought to the fore, as imagery is what marks the change of atmosphere from the prosaic mode, here consisting in the essay's logical discourse, to the lyrical.

An assessment of the poetic qualities of Cecchi's pieces must therefore start from an analysis of how he approaches the critical task, which is the essay genre's chief justification and reason for existence. The majority of Cecchi's manifestly erudite essays are devoted to art criticism, the subject that always accompanied and heavily influenced his study of literature. Often, as in the articles 'Haarlem' and 'La casa di Rembrandt', both published in 1930, art criticism enriches travel accounts that involve visits to historical buildings and museums. In 'Haarlem', for example, Cecchi describes in detail the *Grote Kerk*, then proceeds to analyse the paintings in the *Frans Hals Museum*: unexpectedly, though, the people depicted in these pictures seem to come to life, and even to be looking at their spectators from the other world. I will quote the passage at length to show its transitions from the informative style to the visionary:

> Ma nel Frans Hals Museum è il trionfo della società corporativa. Le nostre corporazioni medievali non vollero lasciar memoria di sé che nei propri registri e

[4] 'This is easy to understand; as one understands what is meant by the inseparability and reciprocal dependence of the two poles in the circuit of an electric current. The spark of poetry is kindled precisely out of that scholarly and bookish mass; and snaking its way penetrates and expands into a totally different climate. The language changes timbre. From being expository, analytical, it becomes visionary; but the manner in which the transition occurs is not apparent […].'

> in tante gloriose opere di vita e d'arte. L'individualismo protestante si compiacque di ricordi più personali; ed ecco i sinedri dei sindaci, degli economi, dei consiglieri, degli uffiziali, degli alfieri che si affollano nella cornice delle tele; e sembran gente che, da qualche magica finestra spalancata sull'altra vita, si ostini ancora a guardare in questo mondo.
> Quanto l'impeto e la versatilità dei pittori sono sorprendenti, tanto nei personaggi ritrattati ci colpisce qualche cosa di strano e anormale. Direi quasi che paiono ipnotizzati, in quegli atti del ridere, del mangiare e del bere. Son rimasti con la forchetta in aria per l'eternità. L'artista si dimenticò di svegliarli, di rompere l'incanto. E non c'è più rimedio. Vincono il tempo, ma come per procura; in grazia d'una volontà infinitamente più forte della loro, che li ha sospesi, splendide e astratte marionette, nel gran niente. (*SV* 417)[5]

The discussion of the paintings begins with a comparison between the individualistic Dutch guilds and their more understated Italian counterparts, so the initial tone is matter-of-fact. This style changes with 'ed ecco' and the consequent shift from past to present tense, which marks the insertion of a lively, immediate image in the historical framework. Yet, the very detailed list of professions which follows still maintains an academic approach, until the simile comparing the portraits to windows open on the afterlife definitely indicates that the leap from fact to vision has occurred. The first sentence of the next paragraph, by referring to the versatile style of Dutch painters, reverts back to the intellectual mode as a brief pause before, once again, the uncanny image of people suspended in time, frozen by a spell, re-emerges in all vividness, its intensity enhanced by the alliterative metaphor describing them as 'astratte marionette' hanging in the great void. The vision, once reached its peak, lasts but a moment: the explanatory words which open the new paragraph – '*Intendo che* i nostri grandi, o il Rembrandt dei *Sindaci* ad Amsterdam […]'[6] (417; my italics) – break the spell and re-focus the reader's attention on

[5] 'But in the Frans Hals Museum is the triumph of corporate society. Our medieval corporations did not want to leave memory of themselves but in their records and in many glorious works of life and art. Protestant individualism delighted in more personal testimonies; and here are assemblies of mayors, treasurers, advisors, officers, knights crowding within the frames of the canvases; and they look like people who, from some magic window which lays wide open onto the afterlife, obstinately keeps on looking at this world.
The more astounding the painters' inspiration and versatility are, the more we are struck by something strange and abnormal in the characters portrayed. I would almost say that they look hypnotised, in those acts of laughing, eating and drinking. The have remained holding their forks in the air for eternity. The artist forgot to wake them up, to break the spell. And there is no more remedy. They defeat time, but somehow vicariously; thanks to a will infinitely more powerful than their own, which has suspended them, splendid and abstract marionettes, in the great void.'

[6] 'I mean that our great masters, or the Rembrandt of the *Syndics* in Amsterdam […]'.

art criticism. Alongside the shifts in style, from expository to figurative, are shifts in lexicon: from concrete and academic words such as 'società corporativa', 'registri', 'individualismo', 'mangiare' and 'bere',[7] to words belonging to the supernatural sphere, like 'finestra magica', 'altra vita' and 'incanto'[8] – the two lexical orders often overlapping so as to ensure, as when 'forchetta' appears next to 'eternità',[9] that there is an evident clash between prosaic and lyrical elements, so as to produce a more intense poetic effect.

Cecchi's analysis of the style of Rembrandt is punctuated by even stronger visionary strokes. In 'La casa di Rembrandt' [The house of Rembrandt] Cecchi explains how, during his visit to Rembrandt's house, he discovered an artistic personality different from the figure usually delineated by critics, or emerging from the works kept in art galleries. He expresses his renovated impression of Rembrandt by quoting what Baudelaire said about another painter: 'Voi che siete il primo nella decadenza della vostra arte'.[10] This quotation, which Cecchi validates by commenting 'Primo davvero, il Rembrandt; e non più emulato',[11] constitutes the intellectual baseline of what follows:

> Una millenaria fatica, un tedio secolare lo devastano e nobilitano. E ci vuol poco a vedere come il suo preteso antitradizionalismo in ogni caso non sia che la sazietà d'un istinto carico di cultura fino al disgusto. Egli è di quegli artisti che mettono mano al cosmo e ripetono per proprio conto le giornate della creazione. Nella tenebra densa, i suoi occhi di grosso felino guardano aggrumarsi e lentamente arroventirsi la materia originaria. Decomposto negli elementi, il mondo si riaggrega in una sostanza funebre e sontuosa. Linee e forme pigramente si stirano, sorgono, ripiombano nel buio. E ricordano quei lontani appelli dei corni, quei rantoli e moribondi sussulti nell'orchestra di Wagner; quei repentini clangori di metalli soprannaturali. (*SV* 429)[12]

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[7] 'corporate society', 'records', 'individualism', 'eating', and 'drinking'.

[8] 'magic window', 'afterlife', and 'spell'.

[9] 'fork' appears next to 'eternity'.

[10] 'You who are the first in the decadence of your art'.

[11] 'Truly the first, Rembrandt, and never again emulated'.

[12] 'A millenary fatigue, a centennial tedium overcome him and ennoble him. And it takes little to see how his feigned anti-traditionalism is in any case nothing but the satiety of an instinct full of culture to the point of disgust. He is one of those artists who lay their hands on the cosmos and repeat on their own account the days of creation. In thick darkness, his big cat's eyes look at original matter coagulating and slowly growing red-hot. Decomposed into its elements, the world reassembles into a funereal and sumptuous substance. Lines and

This paragraph is decidedly imaginative, but the visionary world is accessed in a very awkward, hesitant manner. First of all, the quotation from Baudelaire anchors Cecchi's fantasy to a precise document. Second, two sentences at the beginning set a very casual and conversational tone, as if spoken by a critic explaining the relevant traits of Rembrandt's style ('E ci vuol poco a vedere come […]'; 'Egli è di quegli artisti che […]'),[13] but while the first sentence continues academically – as expected – with a comment on the artist's anti-traditionalism, the second one ends surprisingly in a metaphor that compares him to God in the act of creation. Suddenly, the reader is transported into a transcendental dimension, in which the image of Rembrandt looking with cat-like eyes at the shaping of primordial matter stands out as the central poetic vision. It is in this superior, elemental dimension, also suggested by the adjective 'soprannaturali' closing the paragraph, that lines and shapes in painting can be likened to music: the reference to Wagner, though, ties the vision back to reality and culture. In fact, the whole fantastical digression is justified by a critical purpose, as the vision of chaotic matter aggregating in the light and then falling back into darkness is effectively a description of Rembrandt's characteristic chiaroscuro. Thus, the dynamic interaction between the lyrical and the non-lyrical poles is maintained throughout.

This stylistic configuration is recurrent in Cecchi's essays on the visual arts, which often offer imaginative outbursts inspired by the artworks themselves. The 'lyrical' element in these essays tends to involve a lively rendition of the work of art, in which the subject represented comes to life; frequently, this enlivened figure brings the viewer in touch with a cosmic, or at least mysterious dimension of reality that transcends the mundane. This is what happens both in the window-portraits of 'Haarlem' and in the cosmic creation of 'La casa di Rembrandt' just analysed, as well as in the later essays 'Ritratti in profilo' [Profile portraits]

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shapes idly stretch out, rise, plunge back into darkness. And one is reminded of those distant horns' cries, those gasps and death-rattles in Wagner's orchestra; those rapid clangs of supernatural metals.'

[13] 'And it takes little to see how […]'; 'He is one of those artists who […]'.

(1938) and 'Deità ignote' [Unknown deities] (1937). In these two pieces, however, Cecchi does not quite achieve the same level of stylistic fusion between lyrical and prosaic elements as in the first two, in the sense that it is easier here to isolate the more intensely imaginative sections – though still crisscrossed by analytical comments and erudite details – and to separate them from the strictly scholarly parts. For instance, 'Ritratti in profilo' has an utterly colloquial and critical opening, which sounds almost like the continuation of a conversation started earlier with the reader: 'Perché poi quasi sempre li presentassero così di profilo, non credo sia mai stato spiegato sufficientemente, né presumo di riuscire io a spiegarlo' (*SV* 955);[14] this tone is maintained for most of the essay, which analyses the reasons why in fifteenth-century Italian portraiture subjects tended to be represented in profile, but changes towards the end, especially when Cecchi describes the first appearance of front-facing portraits. With a lifelike movement, the figure depicted 'turns' towards the observer:

> E il giorno che la figura di ritratto consente a voltarsi verso lo spettatore e gli consegna il proprio sguardo, è il giorno d'un grande miracolo. Lo spettatore non si sente più escluso, da una parte. Al piacere estetico, infinitamente accresciuto dalla presentazione plastica più complessa, e più ricca d'espressioni e movimenti, s'aggiunge il piacere d'una più diretta partecipazione psicologica. Un calore umano comincia a circolare fra lo spettatore e la figura. La quale sembra che in questo calore a poco a poco vibri e si spetri. […] La luce penetra in questa sostanza, e ne stimola fermenti ed effervescenze, come la luna le maree. S'aggirano intorno alla figura le forze del cosmo, e i segreti della sua umanità si caricano del loro magnetismo. (960)[15]

The experience of looking at front-facing portraits unfolds simultaneously at a double level, to which correspond two levels of expression. On the one hand, Cecchi accounts for the mundane,

[14] 'For why indeed they were nearly always presented that way, in profile, I do not think it has ever been sufficiently explained, neither do I presume to be able to explain it.'

[15] 'And the day the figure of a portrait consents to turn towards the spectator and consigns to him its own gaze, it is the day of a great miracle. The spectator does not feel excluded, set aside anymore. To the aesthetic pleasure, infinitely increased by a more complex plastic modelling, richer of expressions and movements, is added the pleasure of a more direct psychological participation. A human warmth begins to flow between the spectator and the figure, whose stone-like features in this warmth little by little seem to vibrate and to soften. […] The light penetrates into this substance, and stimulates in it ferments and effervescences, like the moon drawing the tides. Cosmic forces revolve around the figure, and the secrets of its humanity are charged with their magnetism.'

intellectual mode of aesthetic perception, conveyed through rigorous academic lexicon: a complex ‘presentazione plastica’, combined with a direct ‘partecipazione psicologica’, produces ‘piacere estetico’. In parallel, though, the spectator is also witnessing ‘a miracle’ in which not only the figure seems to be alive, but the light that falls on it and stirs it to life, like the moon moving the tides, inspires a mystic, lyrical vision of the activity of cosmic forces. The language used for the description of this superior dimension of the image, in contrast with the academic jargon employed earlier, is vague and allusive: an indefinite ‘substance’, ‘ferments’ and ‘secrets’ evoke a reality beyond our grasp.

The statue described in ‘Deità ignote’ is similarly pictured as a living creature and engenders visions of an astral world. As in ‘Ritratti in profilo’, we can distinguish some sections that are more ‘lyrical’ than others: the imaginative opening and conclusion, indeed, stand apart from the more ostensibly scholarly body of the article; also visually, the text is divided into three distinct segments. The essay’s object of enquiry is a mysterious set of faceless funerary sculptures from Cyrene, and its central section explores the possible reasons why these statues’ bodies, otherwise finely detailed, were left without facial features. In this part of the article Cecchi discusses various hypotheses – that the faces were due to be sculpted after purchase, or painted, or have a mask applied – but rejects all of them and finally agrees with the opinion of the scholar S. Ferri, who argues that the statues were not unfinished but, rather, intentional representations of an enigmatic and total female divinity attending the sepulchre. The language used in this section matches its critical purpose, diligently expressing all the typical components of academic writing: presentation of accepted knowledge (‘Si sa che’), explanation (‘In altri termini’), hypothesis’ verification (‘La supposizione poteva essere confortata da analogie con […]’), objection (‘Non fu difficile obiettare che […]’), and

argument ('È da ritenere […]') (*SV* 1021-1022).[16] Everything, of course, scrupulously documented with dates, quotations, and specialised archaeological terminology.

The opening and the conclusion of the essay, however, display a rather different, more emotional approach. At the beginning, Cecchi describes his personal encounter with one of these statues, while at the end he tries to imagine the effect their blind faces would have had in the past on the pilgrims entering the necropolis of Cyrene. Cecchi's first impression conveys all the mystery of the figure through multiple layers of similes and metaphors:

> Se ne effonde un sottile senso d'allarme, come s'entro alla luce del giorno traspaia uno spiraglio d'ecclisse, una pallida chiazza di lume lunare. O come ad immaginare che in una riunione, in un colloquio di persone vive, passi inavvertita una fantasima.
> Nessuno dapprima ci fa caso, ché le vesti, il portamento, la statura, in tutto e per tutto son come negli umani. Ma ad un tratto la figura si volta, si china; e con ansia incredula, vedendole quel viso cieco, ci s'accorge che non si tratta d'un essere di carne, ma d'una larva, d'un'ombra, d'un messaggere d'arcani sgomenti. (1020)[17]

All the images that are used to describe the statue and the emotions it produces in the narrator are drawn from the sphere of the otherworldly, reinforcing the idea that one of the expressions of Cecchi's lyricism is the connection, however momentary and imperfect, with a superior order of reality. In contrast with the academic section analysed above, which presents ideas in strict logical order, and rejects the hypotheses that turn out to be unrealistic, this passage links different images (the eclipse, the diurnal moonlight, the ghost and the uncanny messenger) not according to logic but because they all inspire a similar emotion of disturbing anxiety, and because they are commonly associated in the world of the imagination. The laws of realism are subverted here to such an extent that not only the statue is imagined as a moving figure, but the

[16] 'It is well known that'; 'In other words'; 'This hypothesis could be supported by drawing analogies to […]; 'It was not difficult to object that […]'; 'It is to be believed […]'.

[17] 'A slight sense of alarm emanates from it, as if the glimmer of an eclipse, a pale stain of moonlight was shining through the light of day. Or one could imagine it as though in a gathering, in a meeting of living people, a ghost walked in unnoticed.
Nobody realises it at first, because her clothes, her bearing, her stature, are in all respects like those of humans. But all of a sudden the figure turns round, bends; and with incredulous anxiety, seeing that blind face, one becomes aware that it is not a creature in the flesh, but a spectre, a shadow, a messenger of arcane feelings of dismay.'

observer is, paradoxically, even surprised to find that the woman is not in fact a living creature, but a ghost. Both the lyrical and the academic sections of the essay develop the same concept, the puzzling nature of the statues' faces, but they do so using their respective tools: the former exploring the viewer's emotional response, the latter researching the actual reasons behind the faces' blind features. By putting these different approaches side by side, Cecchi enhances the poetic effect of the lyrical section, while limiting, at the same time, its fantastical impulse.

This method can also be seen as a way to simultaneously express two alternative forms of experience, and of knowledge – one being the reverse, the photographic negative, of the other. Having gathered a few examples from Cecchi's essays, we can now return to '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte» and better interpret the remarks that follow his praise of the style of Montaigne:

> E coloro che obbiettano all'origine mezzo culturale e intellettualistica, o vogliam dire a una sorta di condizione bastarda della forma del «saggio», mostrano di non intendere affatto questa forma nella sua natura intrinseca […]. Pertanto, *la restituzione del motivo o pretesto intellettuale in immediatezza di emozione*, o a dirla col Leopardi, della ragione in natura, *avviene sempre con un che di lirico e sorprendente*, ch'è caratteristico alla «specie» del saggio nell'espressione più alta. (*SV* 323-24; my italics)[18]

The essential feature of the essay genre as defined by Cecchi is to turn an intellectual motif, or problem, into emotional immediacy, and to make such transformation surprising and therefore 'lyrical' (remarkably, the adjectives 'lirico e sorprendente'[19] are presented side by side as quasi-synonyms). Consistently fascinated by this idea, Cecchi once copied in his *Taccuini* a quotation from the diary of the German dramatist Friedrich Hebbel, which reads: 'L'elemento problematico, ecco la sorgente di ogni poesia' (*T* 125).[20] As we have seen, both in 'Ritratti in profilo' and in 'Deità ignote', a critical issue – the shift from profile to front-facing portraits

[18] 'And those who object to the semi-cultural and intellectualistic origin of the essay, or, we may say, to the somewhat bastard condition of its 'form', show that they do not understand it at all in its essential nature […]. Therefore, the rendering of an intellectual pretext or motif into emotional immediacy, or to use Leopardi's words, of reason into nature, always occurs with a hint of lyricism and surprise, which is characteristic of the "species" of the essay at the highest level.'

[19] 'lyrical and surprising'.

[20] 'The problematic element, here is the source of all poetry'.

and the blind faces of the Cyrene statues respectively – is explored from an emotional as well as an intellectual point of view, the two perspectives being so closely connected that, effectively, the object of criticism *becomes* itself a vision.

Cecchi's contemporaries were very critical of his method of rendering emotion via an intellectual or cultural pretext. Gargiulo wrote in 1937 that Cecchi's inclination to discussion and reflection implied a 'limitata capacità di sintesi creativa o trasfigurazione poetica'.[21] The limitation is due to the fact that Cecchi's imaginative impulse is only triggered in response to another artistic object, and is therefore only passively creative:

> Vi sono motivi di sentimento che «creano» un oggetto; ma altri ve ne sono che a tradursi in figura (o ad esprimersi, ch'è lo stesso), abbisognano per contro d'un oggetto come «dato», dal quale non discostarsi fino all'ultimo; e si posson dunque chiamare sentimenti artistici solo nella misura in cui, secondo la loro qualità, conferiscono a quel dato un particolare colore e rilievo. Così nel Cecchi; [...].[22]

Gargiulo's judgement not only applies to Cecchi's scholarly pieces, such as his art criticism or book reviews, but is also extended, 'calcando sulla discorsività delle sue prose d'arte più caratteristiche',[23] to his more creative essays. For Gargiulo, Cecchi treats objects of nature and characters as though they were cultural products also to be 'reviewed'. We know that Cecchi, instead, considered the critical 'compromise' or 'limitation' the very appeal of the essay genre, to be preferred to the exercise of creativity for its own sake. A note in his *Taccuini* describes the essay form thus:

> il «saggio», come forma d'arte-critica: arte che ha una materia critica, non possibile a sbalzarsi in fuori, in una sostanza corposa, fantastica, popolare, e accetta la

[21] 'a limited faculty of creative synthesis and poetic transfiguration'.

[22] 'There are patterns of feeling that "create" an object; but there are others that in turning into imagery (or in finding expression, which is the same thing) need by contrast an object that is already "given", from which never to be parted till the very end; and they can therefore be called artistic spirits only insofar as they give to that given object, according to their gift, particular colour and relief. This is Cecchi's case [...].' Gargiulo, pp. 425-26.

[23] 'stressing the discursive quality of his most characteristic *prose d'arte*'.

> limitazione e miscela critica. C'è qualcosa di bello molto in questo, piuttosto che la pretesa «creativa» dell'ottanta per cento dei poeti. (*T* 307)[24]

At stake in this debate is the very essence of art: what constitutes art and what can be included in it; despite his traditionalism, Cecchi is in fact very modern in his inclusive outlook on literary creation and in his promotion of genre hybridity. Critical questions, cultural facts, precise references, and so on and so forth, represent for him the tie to concrete reality which provides the necessary foundation and measure to the flights of the imagination. Significant, on this point, is Cecchi's admiration of Leopardi's *Operette morali* [Small moral works], which he notably calls 'essays'. In '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', Cecchi makes a positive remark on the *Operette*'s scrupulous notations of learned details: 'quasi un accorgimento di lasciar scoperto lo spunto culturale, e far echeggiare l'intonazione riflessa, ragionativa: sottilissima preoccupazione di grande artista, la quale giova a raffrenare il discorso che non s'impegni nel fantastico di primo abbrivo' (*SV* 327).[25] Behind the intellectual flavour of Leopardi's prose is the poet's belief that 'la bella prosa deve avere qualche cosa di poetico',[26] but take care to avoid slipping into 'prosa liricheggiante' (328).[27] Significantly, all the *Operette* Cecchi recalls in his article – 'Elogio degli uccelli' [Praise of birds], 'Cantico del gallo silvestre' [Canticle of the wild rooster], and 'Dialogo di Ruysch e delle mummie' [Dialogue between Ruysch and the mummies] – have in common the mingling of philosophical analysis with pathetic accents, sometimes with a touch of humour.

Humour plays a similar role as reason in the poetic dynamic of the essay, interacting with lyrical elements as their "prosaic" counterpart. More specifically, humour generates the

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[24] 'the "essay", as a critical-art form: an art which has a critical subject matter, impossible to dismiss, moulded into a corporeal, fantastic, popular substance, and which accepts the critical limitation and mixture. There is something very beautiful in this, rather than in the "creative" pretension of eighty percent of poets.'

[25] 'almost a carefulness about laying bare a cultural cue, about letting reverberate a reflective, reasoning tone: extremely subtle preoccupation of a great artist, good for restraining the discussion so that it does not commit to the fantastical from the very beginning'.

[26] 'beautiful prose must have something poetical'.

[27] 'lyricised prose'.

essay's typically understated tone, and the illusion that the text's focus will be on trifles and anecdotes. The piece 'Il cannocchiale' [The telescope] (1935) from *Corse al trotto* is an interesting example because it offers a modern, essayistic version of the Romantic sublime experience of looking at the night sky. From the very beginning, many details are at odds with that poetic tradition: the narrator's encounter with infinity does not take place in a solitary, beautiful natural landscape, but in the city's public gardens, where a perspiring crowd has gathered to find relief from the intolerable heat of summer. A man is offering the services of his telescope as entertainment for only fifty cents, and the narrator looks at the sky through this tool, which he compares to a carnivalesque, 'simbolico serviziale, verniciato d'un bel rosso' (*SV* 874).[28] The view of space obviously produces a disorienting feeling, but no less puzzling is the way it is described:

> Mi pareva d'esser leso, intaccato, nel senso della staticità. E che non avessi più i piedi in terra, ma fossi rovesciato in direzione d'un altro e lontanissimo orizzonte, verso il quale scivolavo, dentro alla cupa liscezza del tubo; appena ancora ridicolmente trattenuto di dietro, per l'orlo della giacchetta o la stringa d'una scarpa.
> Mi pareva d'esser sospeso in un abisso sul quale, come l'antico Mane, Thecel, Phares, campeggiava una specie d'equazione, di formula algebrica, a lettere e numeri di fuoco. E quanto ha senso nella nostra vita, nella nostra storia, ogni confortevole ricordo d'umana fatica, entrando nel segno di quella formula, ne riceveva un brutale annullamento, spariva inghiottito nel vuoto.
> A darmi meco stesso un contegno e tenermi occupato: – È proprio come sta scritto, constatavo: *Combien de royaumes nous ignorent!* – Ed è naturale, riflettevo, che gli astronomi non patiscano questi giramenti di testa. Hanno fatto il callo. Si barricano di tecnicismi. E, a forza di concentrarsi, riescono a non vedere che certi aspetti, speciali ed innocui. (875-876)[29]

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[28] 'a symbolic enema, painted in a beautiful red'.

[29] 'I felt as if I was impaired, undermined, in my sense of stasis. And as if my feet were not on the ground anymore, but I was turned upside down in the direction of another and very distant horizon, towards which I was sliding, inside the gloomy smooth surface of the tube; only still held ridiculously from behind, by the hem of my jacket or a shoestring.

I felt as if I was suspended on an abyss over which, like the ancient Manes, Thecel, Phares, hanged a sort of equation, an algebraic formula, written in letters and numbers of fire. And all that makes sense in our lives, in our history, any comforting memory of human endeavour, by entering the sign of that formula, received from it a brutal annihilation, disappeared swallowed into the void.

To pull myself together and keep myself busy: – 'It is actually the way it is written, I confirmed: *Combien de royaumes nous ignorent!* – And it is natural, I reflected, that astronomers do not suffer this sort of dizziness. They have got used to it. They barricade themselves in technical details. And, by dint of concentration, the manage to see nothing but certain aspects, specific and innocuous.'

The lyrical feeling of self-loss that is distinctive of the sublime experience is here counterbalanced, shielded by intellectual discourse and humour, as if too intense to be embraced whole. The experience of peering into space is terrifying, yet it is accompanied by the ridiculous image of the narrator physically sliding inside the tube of the telescope, being prevented from falling only by the hem of his jacket. After he finishes looking, he comes out the same way, his clothes full of dust and spiderwebs. The sensation produced by the abyss is defined with scrupulous, medical accuracy: the vertigo produces 'nausea' and 'quel moto di vomito che annuncia il mal di mare' (875),[30] as the usual sense of 'staticità'[31] fails. There follow the inevitable cultural references: the Biblical phrase 'Mane, Thecel, Phares' which cryptically announces the end of the kingdom of the proud Baltasar, and the quotation from Pascal's *Pensées* ('*Combien de royaumes nous ignorent!*'), in which the philosopher expresses his fear of the infinite spaces that surround human life.[32] Cecchi's reticence to explicitly state this fear explains his resort to erudition in the first place, so as to avoid dwelling on an uncomfortable feeling: the narrator himself admits that remembering Pascal's words helps him to regain decorum, and his attitude mirrors that of astronomers, who keep their focus on scientific details in order to elude the void. Cecchi's technique works simultaneously in two opposite directions: while trying to curb the intensity of the sublime feeling, the narrator effectively enhances it, for omission is bound to increase the significance of the thing effaced.

However, despite this elaborate cover of understatement and effacement, the emotion of sublimity does manifest itself thanks to individual words and expressions that occasionally emerge in the passage, creating sudden and powerful ruptures in its humorous texture. Leopardi, whose prose style was thoroughly studied and emulated by Cecchi and the other *Rondisti*, would have deemed such words 'poetic', because they suggest ideas of distance and

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[30] 'that retch that announces seasickness'.

[31] 'stasis, balance'.

[32] 'How many kingdoms are unaware of us!' Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. and trans. by Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005), p. 12.

indeterminacy: 'altro e lontanissimo orizzonte', 'abisso', 'ricordo d'umana fatica', 'annullamento', 'vuoto'.[33] Once again, a double stylistic layering, whose lyrical and non-lyrical components do not try to combine seamlessly but intentionally undermine each other, producing a jarring effect. The awkwardness with which Cecchi describes the sublime experience, his attempts to diminish it with humour or pin it down with science and culture, seem to enact a comment Virginia Woolf makes in 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' about the modern mind being torn apart by contrasting feelings: 'There trips along by the side of our modern beauty some mocking spirit which sneers at beauty for being beautiful […]. It is as if the modern mind, wishing always to verify its emotions, had lost the power of accepting anything simply for what it is' (*E* 4: 433). It is for this reason that she judges verse poetry as an inappropriate form of expression for the modern age: being indissolubly tied to beauty, it is not apt to convey the complex, incongruous emotions bred by modernity. Prose, instead, is more inclusive and can equally be at ease with lofty feelings as well as with mockery and ordinariness (434). Woolf's ideal, however, is the opposite of a discordant style: what she anticipates, and what she thinks the prose medium can do harmoniously, is 'poetry changing easily and naturally into prose, prose into poetry' (438). In her own work, as we have seen, she alternates lyrical and non-lyrical perspectives and voices smoothly, so that 'there is no jerk, no jolt in that change' (437). The difference from Cecchi's style becomes apparent if we compare

[33] 'other and very distant horizon', 'abyss', 'memory of human endeavour', 'annihilation', 'void'.

*La Ronda* published a whole anthology of Leopardi's reflections on style collected from the *Zibaldone*: the relevant excerpts read: 'Le parole *irrevocabile irremeabile* e altre tali produrranno sempre una sensazione piacevole […], perché destano un'idea senza limiti e non possibile a concepirsi interamente. E però saranno sempre poeticissime; e di queste tali parole sa far uso e giovarsi con grandissimo effetto il vero poeta'; 'Le parole *lontano*, *antico* e simili sono poeticissime e piacevoli, perché destano idee vaste e indefinite e non determinabili e confuse'.

[The words *irrevocable irreversible* and others of the kind will always produce a pleasurable sensation […], because they evoke an idea without limits and impossible to conceive in its entirety. Therefore they will always be very poetic; and the true poet can make use of and benefit from such words very effectively; The words *far*, *ancient* and similar ones are very poetic and pleasurable, because they evoke broad and indefinite ideas and indeterminate and confused].

Giacomo, *Il testamento letterario di Giacomo Leopardi: Pensieri dello* Zibaldone *scelti, annotati e ordinati in VI capitoli da La Ronda*, ed. by La Ronda (Roma: La Ronda Editrice, 1921), p. 70.

'Il cannocchiale' with the scene in *Night and Day* in which Katharine experiences the sublime by looking at the night sky (*ND* 199-203): as analysed in Chapter 1, Katharine changes point of view from the earthly accidents of her life (prosaic perspective), to the impersonal and universal view of the sky (poetic perspective), but the transition is gradual and she finally surrenders to the sublime experience completely, without reserve.

In his theory of the essay, although these ideas are not always reflected in practice, Cecchi advocates a much more radical use of stylistic contrast. In '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' Cecchi likens humour, but the same may be said for criticism or erudition, to a musical accompaniment or theatrical scene which provides the background for poetry to arise, before being destroyed by it:

> S'è già detto che una trama umoristica corre abbondantemente in quest'ordine di scritture, come il canovaccio d'un «basso continuo». E segna il livello limite, la base meccanica del processo immaginativo e verbale che siamo venuti illustrando. Ne segna la inquadratura tecnica. Ed è come la convenzione scenica che sostiene quella poesia che al tempo stesso la brucia e distrugge. (*SV* 324)[34]

Rather than a smooth transition from one perspective to another, Cecchi imagines a solid structure made of rationality and humour which is occasionally pierced by lyrical insertions. The intrusion of lyricism in all its manifold expressions, from transcendence to pathos, is debilitating, even fatal for the structure, and yet the scaffolding is needed. When the prosaic and lyrical styles are mingled together in the same passage, their coexistence, as we have seen, is awkward, not peaceful. Gargiulo, in a long essay on Cecchi's work (1937), noticed and heavily criticised this inconsistency, the indulging in the sublime 'purché provato al «filo del ridicolo»'[35] – largely a result of the influence of 'alcuni «fantasisti» inglesi'.[36] Admitting that

[34] 'I have already said that a humoristic weave thickly criss-crosses this class of writings, like the canvas of a "basso continuo". And it marks the baseline, the mechanical basis of the imaginative and verbal process that we have been illustrating. It delimits its technical framework. And it is like the scenic convention which sustains that poetry which, at the same time, burns it and destroys it.'

[35] 'so long as proven at "the edge of ridicule"'.

[36] 'some English "variety writers"'.

the experiment was successful in *Pesci rossi*, when Cecchi discovered a new lightness of tone after the serious criticism of his early career, Gargiulo definitely sees it as a negative trait in later collections: 'Così l'ideale «fumistico» lasciò nel Cecchi l'illusione di far spuntare, a un tocco di penna, la commozione e la «poesia» nel contesto del discorso più frivolo'.[37] Gargiulo perceptively distinguishes in Cecchi's work two types of composition, the essays in a strict sense, whose general tone is humorous or frivolous, and pieces showing from the outset a more serious outlook, and these he considers as superior for 'un potere di trasfigurazione poetica più intenso'[38] (note that he used the same expression when judging Cecchi's critical essays, which for him displayed a 'limitata [...] trasfigurazione poetica'). But even the 'serious' compositions suffer intrusions of bizarre, playful, or crude elements, to the point that Gargiulo speaks of 'un Cecchi «antinomico»', irresistibly pulled in different directions.[39] The critic struggles to understand Cecchi's very reasons for setting lyricism against its opposite: 'Quasi che gli premesse, non sappiamo se porre (ma perché?) una remora alla profonda serietà dei motivi, o avvalorarla invece (calcolo sbagliatissimo) con effetti di sorprendente contrasto'.[40]

However, a close look at the vocabulary with which Cecchi describes the appearance of lyricism or poetry in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' suggests that the aim of his discontinuous style is not merely to achieve a surprise effect for its own sake. Rather, the dualism of Cecchi's style is a reflection of his dualistic conception of reality. Parallel to the reality of lived experience runs another, superior and more essential reality which is usually unknown to man, except during a few, brief moments in which it suddenly breaks into ordinary existence. The abrupt twist in the essay's style signals that the subject matter is 'bruscamente catapultata

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[37] 'Thus the "gimmickry" ideal left in Cecchi the illusion that he could make sprout, at a touch of his pen, emotion and "poetry" in the context of the most frivolous discussion'. Gargiulo, pp. 422-23.

[38] 'a more intense power of poetic transfiguration'.

[39] Gargiulo, pp. 425-27.

[40] 'Almost as if he really wanted, who knows, either to put some restraint (but why?) to the profound seriousness of the themes, or instead to intensify it (totally wrong calculation) with effects of surprising contrast'. Gargiulo, p. 424.

secondo una nuova legge di gravità, che per un istante sovverte le leggi del cosmo' (*SV* 326).[41] Cecchi's dualistic view of reality is even more apparent in the comment that follows:

> In Montaigne e anche in Lamb, la cortina del cielo talvolta davvero si straccia; e attraverso scintillano, un attimo, segni dell'aldilà. Nella loro pagina a un tratto respirano modi dell'essere ineffabili. (326)[42]

The idea that ordinary and transcendental reality occasionally come into brief contact, bringing about a revelation to an otherwise blind humanity, was widespread amongst modernist intellectuals and, as it is well known, gave rise to the literary motif of the epiphany. In particular, the image of the crack in the sky comes from Pirandello's *Il fu Mattia Pascal* [The late Mattia Pascal], where a hole in the paper ceiling hanging over a theatre stage signifies the confounding loss of certainties and fixed values in the modern age. Most importantly, analogous metaphors of rupture are employed by Woolf in *Sketch of the Past*, such as in the image of the 'cotton wool of daily life' behind which is hidden a pattern, discoverable through a shock, and of human beings as 'sealed vessels' afloat a reality which is utterly obscure, until at one point 'the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality' (*MB* 85; 145). In Cecchi, the metaphor of the crack is reiterated on many occasions, which testify to its relevance both to his ideal of style and to the kind of experience this style is meant to represent. With regard to writing, this metaphor is found a few more times in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', as in the description of the style of Leopardi in *Saggio sugli errori popolari degli antichi* [Essay on the popular errors of the ancients], which is rich in 'amene fratture';[43] or when illustrating the prose of D'Annunzio in *Notturno* [Nocturne], whose tedious pages 'd'improvviso spaccandosi, formicolano all'interno e scintillano di tratti miracolosi' (*SV* 327; 335-336).[44] As for lived experience, in

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[41] 'brusquely catapulted into a new law of gravity, which for an instant subverts the laws of the cosmos'.

[42] 'In Montaigne and also in Lamb, the paper sky ceiling sometimes truly cracks; and lets shine through, for an instant, glimmering signs of the hereafter. Ineffable modes of being suddenly breathe on their page.'

[43] 'beautiful fractures'.

[44] 'cracking all of a sudden show, within, the swarming and gleaming of miraculous traits'.

'Collina di Firenze' [Hill in Florence] (1934) a 'strappo'[45] breaks the continuum of the narrator's daily existence to let through a mysterious scent: 'Pareva che il tessuto dei giorni si fosse reciso; lacerato il dipinto velario che tempera il fiero spettacolo del mondo' (1062).[46]

Therefore, Cecchi and Woolf's shared philosophical views translate into some common creative objectives: they both aim to express moments of revelation of universal significance, associate these moments with 'poetry', deem their quality instantaneous, and want to include them in the flow of their prose – without diluting them into a generic poetic prose which would make them lose in intensity. The two authors' styles, however, are markedly dissimilar, not only for the obvious reason that their works belong to different genres, but also because the poetic 'revelations' are enclosed in very different ways. Woolf, as we have seen, reaches up to the climax gradually, 'not in one dart, but in sweeps and circles' (*E* 4: 438), until a single meaningful sentence, usually a metaphor, breaks off from the rest. Cecchi, on the other hand, inserts lyricism where least expected, in order to show the extent of the gap between ordinary and essential reality, and the latter's subversive power. The transition to the lyrical mode is not always quite as abrupt as his critical principles prescribe – notably because these are not directly based on his own writing, but emerge from his appraisals of other authors. Often, rather than proper 'cracks', we can identify in Cecchi's prose distinct lyrical sections, or the stylistic shift is clearly indicated by words that smoothly introduce a simile (*sembra*, *come*) or an imaginative digression (*m'immagino*, *si pensa a*...). However, even when there is no sheer suddenness, his combinations of prosaic and lyrical elements are always unusual, and certainly unanticipated by the essays' titles and topics.

'Il cannocchiale' is a particularly successful example of the 'rupture' method, as it concentrates the gravity of the sublime emotion in a few words that sound out of context. This

[45] 'crack'.

[46] 'It seemed as if the fabric of the days had been severed; torn the painted veil that mitigates the fiery spectacle of the world'.

essay reflects almost exactly what Cecchi notes in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' about the way Baudelaire manages lyricism in the *Fleurs* (a work of verse, but form never matters in these considerations, because a work's poetic quality does not depend on it):

> Ad una lettura non del tutto incompetente, la tessitura fantastica, ideologica e verbale delle *Fleurs*, come appare fitta di smagliature, strappi, rappezzi, rammendi! Che violenti passaggi di tono! A volte, l'intiera massa d'un componimento è obbligata a infilarsi e passare, con contorsioni penose, attraverso la cruna d'ago d'una immagine, di una sentenza, od anche d'una sola parola, che stanno come inserite lì a forza, e provengono da un tutt'altro ordine, da tutt'altra sfera. O è come se una quintessenziale sostanza lirica, altre volte fosse, prosaicamente, brutalmente, introdotta, commentata, sigillata da un'annotazione scientifica, da un sillogismo morale. Progressioni figurative (come, per fare un esempio, nei *Sept vieillards*), che avevano raggiunto un forte grado di esaltazione e tensione, crollano d'un tratto in una situazione aneddotica, in un espediente melodrammatico, si trovano appesa dietro una coda oratoria. (*SV* 331)[47]

Cecchi's analysis of Baudelaire's *Fleurs*, later contrasted with the unified tone of the poet's *Petits poèmes en prose*, is in fact aimed at reaffirming once again the core features of the essay genre as opposed to the style of poetic prose: 'un amalgama di poesia ed eloquenza, del quale in realtà la prima fa le spese' (332).[48] It is therefore unsurprising that this passage proves to be an illuminating guide on how to find lyricism in Cecchi's essays, while at the same time pointing to the inexorable volatility of the object of this quest, whose outcome is bound to be, ultimately, subjective. The 'quintessential lyrical substance' can be contained in just one passing image, even a single word, immediately drowned in anecdote, oratory, or scientific detail. This means, first of all, that lyricism can easily be overlooked, and second, that a poetic

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[47] 'At a not entirely incompetent reading, how dense with runs, tears, patches, mends, the ideological, fantastical and verbal fabric of the *Fleurs* appears to be! What violent transitions of tone! At times, the entire mass of a composition is forced to squeeze and pass, with pitiful contortions, through the needle's eye of one image, one statement, or even a single word, which look as if they had been inserted there forcibly, and come from an utterly different order, an utterly different sphere. Or it is as if a quintessential lyrical substance was, at other times, prosaically, brutally introduced, commented, sealed by a scientific notation, by a moral syllogism. Figurative progressions (as, to give an example, in the *Sept vieillards*), which had reached a high degree of exaltation and tension, collapse all of a sudden into an anecdotical account, a melodramatic expedient, or find an oratorical coda hanging behind them.'

[48] 'a blend of poetry and eloquence, where in fact the former suffers'.

effect depends on what word or image strikes, on each reading, a reader's individual attention and sensibility.

Nevertheless, I will provide, in addition to 'Il cannocchiale', a couple more examples of 'momentary' lyricism based on my interpretation and on the criteria outlined so far, the most important of which being, of course, contrast – in its manifold expressions. The following extract is from the essay 'Ragazzi poveri' [Poor children] (1929), which gathers reflections about children's reaction to poverty, inspired by various scenes the author has seen in different cities. In one of these scenes, children have fun searching the ground for pine nuts which have fallen from the pine trees in the public gardens. They count out loud how many they have found, then they go home:

> A casa, li schiacciano con riguardo. Speculano, dentro alla polpa lattea, la famosa «manina». Ma la più parte li serbano, li amministrano, li negoziano; cercano recipienti e nascondigli. E nella loro mente rameggia la pineta; mentre (come il frate che con monotonia estatica e allucinata passa fra le dita i chicchi del rosario) contano, ricontano e allineano i pinòli. (*SV* 476)[49]

This passage elegantly juxtaposes two opposite perspectives: the secular and the spiritual. At the beginning the focus is, as typically in essays, on 'small things': children and their games, which imitate adults' activities. What children imitate is one of the most material and earthly of human occupations, commerce; moreover, the smallness of their focus is intensified by the fact that the object of their dealings is a heap of tiny pine nuts, which they line up, hide, crack open to minutely observe their core. Therefore, the rapid view of the overarching branches of the pine trees – 'E nella loro mente rameggia la pineta' – which suddenly opens up the narrow perspective of the pine nuts trade, comes as a surprise and really as a 'fracture' of the text: the reader's attention is abruptly redirected from the ground to the sky. The simile which follows,

[49] 'At home, they crush them with care. They search, inside the milk-coloured flesh, the famous "little hand" [hand-shaped inner germ of the nut]. But for the most part they store them, administrate them, trade them; look for containers and hiding places. In their minds, the expanding branches of the pine grove; while (like the friar who with ecstatic and hallucinatory monotony runs through his fingers the beads of his rosary) they count, recount and line up the pine nuts.'

notably between brackets to avoid emphasis, by casually comparing the mundane game of children to the ecstatic prayer of a friar, gives the counting of pine nuts an unexpected spiritual flavour. These images are beautiful but their effect very brief, spoiled immediately by the trite rhetorical comment which begins the ensuing paragraph: 'Di che cosa non si contentano i ragazzi poveri. Che potere sulla loro fantasia hanno gli oggetti più rifiutati' (476).[50] It is a dramatic fall, which curbs the lyrical tension and recloses the fracture. The ambivalence of the passage is reinforced by the verb *speculare* [to speculate], cleverly chosen as it evokes, at the same time, the utilitarian activity of businessmen and the abstract enquiries of philosophers.

Various openings onto distant perspectives, beyond the practical reality described by the essay, also pierce through 'Cinematografi poveri' [Poor cinemas] (1931). The topic is quite trivial, the hobbies of old age, which in the author's case consist in going to poor cinemas in deprived urban areas. Accordingly, the beginning of the essay is light and humorous: 'Tutti hanno le loro passioni, i loro capricci. Ci sono decrepite milionarie, sorde come bombarde, e in atto di brandire un cornetto acustico le ritrovate in prima fila a tutti i concerti' (*SV* 938).[51] This playful tone is maintained throughout the whole essay, which contains vibrant depictions of cinemas the author visited around the world, but each fleeting scene is also frozen in an image that belongs to a different level of reality, eternal and infinite, discerned only intermittently. This happens, for instance, when people in these otherwise lively milieus are suddenly seen as statues: a frequent motif in Cecchi's works, and a mirror reversal of the other, equally recurrent theme of the statue or painting which comes to life. The spectators of a cinema in Tuscany screening a film with Keaton have stone-like faces: 'il viso severo del mimo pareva ristampato in quelli degli spettatori: visi da statue del Pollaiuolo, con appena l'ombra d'un

[50] 'There is nothing poor children cannot be happy with. What power the most disregarded objects have over their imagination'.

[51] 'Everybody has their own passions, their own whims. There are decrepit millionaire women, deaf as posts, who in the act of brandishing an ear trumpet are found in the first row at all concerts'.

risolino agli angoli della bocca' (940).[52] Similarly fixed forever is the quick glimpse of a girl selling cigarettes, holding a red light between her breasts that 'faceva pensare al lume d'un altaruccio sormontato da un busto di martire' (940).[53] The screens themselves are openings onto ineffable worlds that have nothing to do with the content of films, as suggested by the pale and expressionless faces – again, like immobile as statues – of the spectators of a cinema in San Francisco, who '[s]embrava non assistessero a quello che io vedevo; ma a qualche cosa per me inimmaginabile, che si svolgeva dietro alla tela, a distanze infinite' (941).[54] Finally, in an almost empty cinema in Mexico City, the entrance of a small troop of musketeers suddenly provokes a magic role reversal between actors and spectators:

> Pareva che la sala si fosse rovesciata; che qualche cosa dovesse succedere, non più sul telone ma su quella distesa di seggiole vuote; e la gente dallo schermo ci guardava e faceva cenno, come chiedendo quando ci saremmo decisi a cominciare. (942)[55]

Here, as in the cinema of San Francisco, the screen allows ordinary reality and whatever is beyond it, if only the imagination, to come into contact and blur their boundaries. Taken in isolation, the above passages have nothing inherently poetic; considered in context, however, these images stand out as more enduring, because they arrest the casual flow of realistic descriptions by introducing an unsettling element, sublime or uncanny, that brusquely overturns the essay's overall familiar perspective.

Paradoxically, the reason why Cecchi often joins lyrical moments to critical, conversational, or commonplace remarks is not to contaminate them but, on the contrary, to preserve their purity: in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', he states that critical insertions are in fact

[52] 'The stern expression of the mime looked stamped onto the faces of the spectators: faces like the statues by Pollaiuolo, with just the shadow of a grin at the mouth's corners'.

[53] 'reminded one of the light of a small altar surmounted by the bust of a martyr'.

[54] 'seemed not to be attending what I was watching; but something for me unimaginable, which unfolded behind the screen, at infinite distances'.

[55] 'It looked as if the room had been reversed; as if something was about to happen, not on the screen any more but among that waste of empty seats; and the people on the screen looked at us and beckoned, as if asking when we would bring ourselves to begin.'

a way to avoid compromising the integrity of lyrical images (*SV* 332). To convey the extent of the gap or disproportion between lyricism and other modes of discourse, Cecchi recalls a chapter of Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* where a sublime effect in oratory is compared to the force of lightning for its power to provide instantaneous illumination, as opposed to the gradual tools of persuasion (*SV* 322-23).[56] In another section, Longinus also argues that the sublime for its very force and perfection is difficult to sustain: it is the lesser poets who 'never drop, their language is always smooth and the writing beautiful, whereas Pindar and Sophocles at one time set all ablaze in their rush, but the fire is quenched when you least expect it, and they fail most unhappily'.[57] Cecchi does not think, like Longinus, that these falls are accidental, or that they are the inevitable price to pay for soaring high: rather, he believes that they are introduced on purpose by the poet to enhance the lyrical images and, most importantly, to stimulate moral awareness. Indeed, Cecchi thinks that behind, for instance, De Quincey's lyricised and opulent style, which smoothens out the differences between dream and reality, is 'una certa fissità morale' (326-27).[58] On the contrary, in laying bare the discrepancies between lyrical and non-lyrical elements, the essayist requires from himself and from the reader the ethical effort of discerning the manifestations of an 'other' reality, and also a difficult process of knowledge that involves switching continuously between two completely different modes of understanding. The next section will explore in more detail precisely how Cecchi's essays manage the union between the 'intellectual' and the 'poetic' methods of knowledge.

[56] 'Sublimity, we know, brought out at the happy moment, parts all the matter this way and that, and like a lightning flash, reveals, at a stroke and in its entirety, the power of the orator.' Dionysius Longinus, *On the Sublime*, ed. and trans. by A. O. Prickard (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906), pp. 2-3.

[57] Longinus, p. 62.

[58] 'a certain moral fixity'.

### V.2. The thought sewn to the image

So far I have explored how the critical and humorous structure of some of Cecchi's essays is cut across and unsettled by visionary strokes, which open up a broader perspective on the topic, or even a channel to a transcendental dimension. Now I will focus on another mode of interaction between critical thinking and lyricism, which involves understanding and conveying a concept through the analysis of an image. This method has been partly anticipated by some of the texts analysed in the previous section, such as 'Ritratti in profilo' and 'Deità ignote', in which the visions, respectively, of the portrayed subject turning towards the spectator and the faceless statue coming to life constitute the lyrical enactment or emotional rendition of critical issues faced by art historians. In these cases, an object of critical analysis *becomes* vision and, thanks to this transformation, can be seen through more immediate lens. The process I am about to describe is similar but inverted, as it is the observation of an image which, treated as a metaphor, progressively unfolds a critical or philosophical meaning.

This method is once again introduced in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', in one of the paragraphs devoted to the style of Montaigne. Cecchi quotes Sainte-Beuve's words on Montaigne in *Port-Royal*:

> Sullo stile di Montaigne, ch'è naturalmente la condizione elementare di cotesti miracoli, il Sainte-Beuve […] dette qualche pagina ove sarebbe difficile trovar da sostituire una sillaba: – quello stile ch'è un'immagine perpetua, che a ogni tratto rinnovella, e nel quale le idee non accedono che come variate, facili, trasparenti figure. Benché non avesse, Montaigne, il concetto dell'insieme, né la capacità d'un vasto disegno; e del resto, per che cosa congegnare e travagliarsi tanto? Ché in tutto supplivano le invenzioni particolari ed il genio espressivo. La cucitura dell'idea con l'immagine è fatta così addentro che non la si scorge, e nemmeno vi si pensa: idea, immagini, in lui, sono tutt'uno: *junctura callidus acri*. (*SV* 323)[59]

[59] 'On the style of Montaigne, which is naturally the fundamental condition of these miracles, Sainte-Beuve […] gave a few pages where it would be difficult to find one syllable to substitute: – that style which is a perpetual image, renovating at each stroke, and where ideas are not admitted but as varied, easy, transparent figures. Despite the fact that he did not have, Montaigne, a conception of the whole, nor the ability to devise a vast design; and after all, to what end such agonising labour? Given that everything was supplied by individual

As Sainte-Beuve specifies, calling Montaigne's figurative creations 'poétique', Cecchi refers to Montaigne's technique of expressing thoughts through unpredictable chains of metaphors.[60] In Cecchi's essays too metaphors of this kind, which break into a sentence creating sharp associations ('*junctura callidus acri*'),[61] are crucial for generating poetic effects; however, Cecchi also applies Montaigne's method of sewing ideas to images to a larger scale, to the point of making one or two significant images embody and structure the whole argument of an essay. These pieces, therefore, present the cohesion that Montaigne is said to lack, while allowing the object of critical analysis to be apprehended intellectually and poetically at the same time.

An excellent example of an image embodying a critical argument is in Cecchi's most famous essay, 'Pesci rossi' [Goldfish] (1917), the first piece of the homonymous collection. The theme of the essay is the difference between Eastern and Western art and ways of thinking. Cecchi's overall argument, supported by various examples of ancient Chinese and Japanese art and poetry, is that while the Western mind tends to depict nature and the divine world in a familiar and humanised way, Eastern representation makes them instead as much as possible alien and monstrous. Before developing this analysis, however, the essay begins with a detailed description of goldfishes swimming in a glass bowl, noting the difference in their appearance according to whether they are seen full-face or in profile. It is only after a couple of paragraphs that Cecchi explains that the image of the fish represents his conception of the Orient:

> Di profilo erano piccole triglie e sardelle purpuree. Di faccia erano vecchi mostri arcigni dell'epoca dei Han; draghi millenari imbronciati. Di profilo evocavano canneti e graziose scogliere. Ma di faccia pareva venissero fuori da un panorama amorfo, da un oceano pacifico e velato, e la loro palla d'acqua diventava semplicemente *l'acqua*. E così le parti del mondo principiarono anche per me ad

creations and expressive genius. The idea is sewn so deeply to the image that the seam is not visible, and not even thought of: idea, images, in him, are one and the same thing: *junctura callidus acri*.'

[60] Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal*, 7 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1878), II, pp. 443-45.

[61] 'clever at the pointed juxtaposition'. Persius, *Satires*, V. 14-15. *The Satires of Horace and Persius*, ed. and trans. by Niall Rudd (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 134.

> essere qualcosa più d'una distinzione geografica, a contenere una metafisica, una teologia. Cominciai a orientarmi in quell'enigma che è l'Oriente. (*SV* 5)[62]

As the essay proceeds to make critical observations about Asian art and poetry, the link between the image of the goldfish and the theme of oriental otherness is never made explicit; however, the reader is easily led to associate the controlled and measured outlook – and linear artistic representation – of the West to the simple profile shape of the fish, and the stupefied and fluid perspective, which Cecchi believes to be characteristic of the East, to the goldfishes' dragon-like frontal aspect. The double appearance of the goldfish encapsulates, from the very beginning, all the elements of the reasoning that, later, the essay will unpack intellectually: for instance, the relation of the animals to the water in their bowl – a hospitable environment, for the profile version; a disconcerting replica of infinity, for the front version – stands, respectively, for the West's and the East's different conceptions of nature. Moreover, the goldfishes' dual identity is also an illustration of the ambiguous character ('misteriosa duplicità e inversione')[63] of Eastern artistic representations, which initially seem to evoke innocent and idyllic scenes, but at a closer look reveal that those very landscapes are actually boundless and inhuman (6). The sight of this small aquarium provokes in Cecchi a sort of intellectual epiphany, which makes him understand something fundamental about the East ('Da allora', he declares, 'in fatto d'Oriente, d'arte orientale, di coltura orientale, ho saputo dove metter le mani'; 6),[64] to the point that the goldfishes become a structuring metaphor holding the whole essay together. Notably, the association between the fish and Cecchi's thoughts about the East is not obvious, but cunning and surprising, in line with the *junctura callidus acri* dictum: in

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[62] 'In profile they were small mullets and purple sardines. In front they were old and grim monsters from the Han dynasty; millenary sullen dragons. In profile they evoked reeds and charming rocks. But in front they seemed to be coming from an amorphous landscape, from a tranquil and veiled ocean, and their bowl of water became simply *the water*. Thus, for me too, the different parts of the world started to be something more than a matter of geographical distinction, to contain a metaphysics, a theology. I began to navigate that enigma which is the East.'

[63] 'mysterious duplicity and inversion'.

[64] 'Since then, on the subject of the East, Oriental art, and Oriental culture, I have known how to find my way'.

'Pesci rossi', therefore, criticism and lyricism are unified by the epiphanic nature of a single unexpected, but highly significant, image.

Cecchi always appreciated the ability to visualise critical concepts, which is perhaps the most distinctive and constant trait of his style since his early writing. 'Pesci rossi' dates back to 1917, while in 1920 Cecchi published in *La Ronda* a review of the work of the historian Carlo Cattaneo, 'Omaggio a Cattaneo' [Homage to Cattaneo], which is regarded as Cecchi's own stylistic declaration and anticipates many of the concepts that, many years later, were restated in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»' (1949), proof of the consistency of Cecchi's ideas throughout the entirety of his career (see *SV* 1858). Cattaneo, according to Cecchi one of the best models of 'prosa di riflessione' (*SV* 972),[65] is praised particularly for the clever way in which he combines thought and description: 'Talvolta riduce all'improvviso l'estuosa materia descrittiva sotto lo schema ideologico […] ma la classificazione è ancora un'immagine e l'idea è fiorente come in una scrittura geroglifica' (969).[66] Cecchi's 'Pesci rossi' is, after all, an exercise in visual classification, for it depicts the perceived difference between two cultures. Cecchi frequently uses images to visualise an abstract quality of a culture or a civilisation, which he often sees reflected in some concrete trait of its landscape or architecture.

In '«Tenet nunc Parthenope»' (1951), for instance, the Neapolitans' sense of the precariousness of all things, and of life's continuous change driven by cosmic forces, is stamped onto their unstable volcanic territory, which puts its inhabitants in communication with the subterranean realms of death. While nature in Tuscany 'nelle sue proporzioni raccolte e nel legame delle pietrose simmetrie, sembra apparecchiata per gli studi e le speculazioni d'intelletti specialmente portati alla prospettica, alla logica e alla statuaria';[67] in Campania 'la

[65] 'prose of reflection'.

[66] 'Sometimes he suddenly constrains his fervent descriptive material within an intellectual design […] but his classification is still an image and the idea is blossoming as in hieroglyphic script'.

[67] 'in its balanced proportions and in the symmetrical cohesion of its rocks seems to be designed for the studies and speculations of intellects with a special disposition to perspective, logic and statuary'.

vita della regione s'imbeve tutta d'un fuoco che dirama e serpeggia attraverso un immenso sistema capillare di arterie e di vene, e ripullula in grotte piene di vapori, in fonti e laghi di fanghiglia, e terme e solfatare' (*SV* 349).[68] Similarly, in 'Chiese barocche' [Baroque churches] (1923), Cecchi compares and contrasts two different approaches to religion through a description of Baroque and Renaissance churches: the former, 'chiese eleganti e terribili come anatomie pietrificate',[69] subdivided into a myriad cells where believers can hide their shame and worship different relics or symbols, embody a worldly and corrupt faith; whereas the latter, 'luoghi di evidenza […] nitide l'atmosfera e le mura come lavate da un vento',[70] where people congregate and sing together, represent instead a loftier spirituality, transparent and untouched by earthly matters (*SV* 440-442). Yet again, in 'Tarsie' [Inlays] (1929), Cecchi juxtaposes two images of polished surfaces: that of the wooden seats of a choir in an ancient church, worn by generations of singers gathering for centuries to perform a ceremony, and that of a table in a café, which the waiter wipes for the next customer. The critical argument that sustains this visual contraposition is the modern loss of continuity and ritual:

> Si è persa la grande poesia del tornare a sedere sempre allo stesso posto. La nostra è una civiltà di sgombero; con gli uomini sempre in fuga e le masserizie sempre in ballo. Il luogo dei nostri salmi, il nostro coro, è forse il caffè; ma il cameriere, volta a volta, annulla ogni presenza e ogni ricordo, passando col cencio fradicio sul tavolinuccio di ferro. (443)[71]

This passage is so metaphorical that indeed it would be difficult to separate reasoning from imagery. The ancient choristers' act of sitting in the same place, metaphor of ritual, is contrasted with the modern act of moving home, metaphor of precariousness; further, the

[68] 'the life of the region is all imbued with a fire which branches out and snakes through an immense capillary system of arteries and veins, and springs up in caves full of vapours, in springs and lakes of mud, and hot springs and solfatares'.

[69] 'churches as elegant and terrible as petrified anatomies'.

[70] 'places of clarity […] the atmosphere and walls as neat as washed by a wind'.

[71] 'We have lost the great poetry of coming back to sit always at the same place. Ours is a civilisation of constant moving; with men always on the run and furniture always packed. The place of our psalms, our choir, is perhaps the café; but the waiter, each time, erases all traces and all memories, wiping the little iron table with a dirty rag.'

transition from the image of the choir to its modern counterpart, the café, also happens via metaphor ('il nostro coro, è forse il caffè'), so that the two terms of the comparison, though set in contrast, are also figuratively joined together.

According to Graham Good, this close interpenetration between objects and ideas is characteristic of the essay genre. He notices that the essay is based on a 'moment of intellectual insight' which orders concrete phenomena into a previously invisible pattern: thanks to this process, 'the ideas are embodied or illustrated concretely at the same time as the object is intellectually illuminated'.[72] For Cecchi indeed images are not only a tool of poetic creation, but also a crucial means to attain and express knowledge, for, as in 'Pesci rossi', they bring about moments of understanding. A vivid account of Cecchi's visual or poetic approach to knowledge is given by Alfonso Berardinelli:

> Il suo saggio si nutre di immagini visive più che di musica argomentativa. Analizza e decifra dipingendo, descrivendo. […] C'è in lui non solo il gusto del vedere, ma la fede nel visibile. Tutto ciò che si può capire, per Cecchi si può, prima ancora, vedere. […] Le idee diventano cose, il pensabile si travasa nel percepibile, le scorribande nei sistemi di pensiero si spostano sulle superfici percorribili del mondo. La filosofia […] in Cecchi si nega in una particolare ascesi dell'occasione e della visione.[73]

In most essays, criticism originates from the sight of an object which enacts within itself some fundamental truth about the world: a universal truth, which nevertheless can be discovered entire in a particular, concrete and limited visual manifestation. Rather than a philosophy *negated* in the accident of vision, as figured by Berardinelli, it is in fact a *philosophy of vision*

[72] Good, p. 18.

[73] 'His essays are built on visual images more than the music of argument. He analyses and deciphers by painting and describing. […] He not only enjoys looking, but he has faith in the visible. Everything that can be understood, for Cecchi can be seen first. […] Ideas become objects, what can be thought about is decanted into what can be perceived, the wanderings into systems of thought are moved to the walkable surfaces of the world. Philosophy […] in Cecchi is negated in a particular ascesis of the occasion and the vision.' Alfonso Berardinelli, *La forma del saggio: Definizione e attualità di un genere letterario*, 2nd edn (Venezia: Marsilio, 2008), pp. 108-109.

– ‘*filosofia dell’immagine*’, as defined by Paolo Leoncini, who considers it a component of Cecchi’s broader ‘*filosofia della natura*’.[74]

The essay ‘Il vasaio’ [The potter] (1936) illustrates particularly well how in Cecchi critical reflection proceeds from observation and is fully integrated with it, as the single image of a potter working at the wheel is thought to contain a philosophical truth about nature. The potter’s perfectly coordinated movements – his foot rhythmically pushing the wheel’s pedal, his right hand shaping the lump of clay as his left hand adds water – are for Cecchi visible evidence of the perfect correspondence between time and form in the process of creation. Artistic creation, doubtless, but also cosmic, as in Cecchi’s imaginative description the potter’s hands, while working on a jar, give shape to embryos of organic life:

> Masse obese e palpitanti rammentavano quelle dei visceri, o di certi cocomeri marini. La rozza argilla veniva assumendo sensuali delicatezze d’epidermide, vellutamenti di mucosa. E in quell’avvicendarsi e perdersi di linee e movimenti, a volte sembrava balenare la curva d’un seno, lo scorcio d’una guancia. (*SV* 1000)[75]

That between rhythm and form is an essential relation, an abstract law that governs natural phenomena, which nonetheless becomes manifest and almost tangible in the figure of the potter:

> Si sarebbe detto che, nel volgere della ruota, nel suo ritmico ondeggiamento, fossero implicite tutte le possibili forme plastiche. […] Con le sue mani e un po’ di creta, da cotesto ritmo, da cotesto tempo, il vasaio estraeva e fissava sempre nuove forme. E questo cangiarsi d’un elemento in un altro: d’un ritmo musicale in proporzioni plastiche e in massicce simmetrie, dava il senso d’un atto davvero creativo, d’un *fiat* miracoloso. (1000)[76]

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[74] Paolo Leoncini, *Emilio Cecchi: L’etica del visivo e lo Stato liberale* (Lecce: Milella, 2017), p. 61.

[75] ‘Obese and throbbing masses reminded of entrails, or of certain sea cucumbers. The rough clay was gradually assuming sensual epidermic delicacies, the velvety feel of mucosa. And in that alternation and dissipation of lines and movements, at times there seemed to flash the curve of a breast, the glimpse of a cheek.’

[76] ‘One would say that the turning of the wheel, its rhythmic sway, implied within itself all possible plastic forms. […] With his hands and a lump of clay, from this rhythm, from this cadence, the potter extracted and fixed ever new shapes. And this changing from one element into another: from a rhythm of music into plastic proportions and solid symmetries, gave the sense of a really creative act, a miraculous *fiat*.’

In 'Il vasaio', reasoning interacts with lyricism in order to convey two opposed forms of knowledge: the critical voice of the narrator slowly articulates his argument about the profound nexus between rhythm and plasticity precisely *as* it describes an image which remains, conversely, very simple and instantaneous, and whose miraculous character, by definition, resists all explanation. Once again, a poetic effect has been produced as a result of a clash.

Cecchi's philosophy of the image can be traced back to various possible sources of inspiration. Paolo Leoncini mentions the ideas of Florentine Neoplatonism, Giordano Bruno and Paracelsus, according to which the imagination is the highest human faculty, superior and antecedent to the intellect as the unifying force that reflects the plastic and cohesive nature of life itself. Leoncini also sees a strong affinity between Cecchi's '*pensiero dell'immagine*'[77] and Shelley's poetical approach to philosophy in *A Defence of Poetry*, at least as interpreted by Cecchi himself, who translated Shelley's work into Italian in 1905 (the translation was then published in 1910).[78] In his introduction to *La difesa della poesia*, Cecchi quotes Shelley's argument about the role played by the poet's metaphorical language in apprehending the relations between things, which are nature's seal and signature; for Shelley, the words representing these relations are 'pictures of integral thoughts'.[79] In Cecchi's version:

> ogni parola è immagine, «finché le parole divengano, col tempo, segni di frammenti o classi del pensiero, invece che pitture di pensieri integri; e allora se nuovi poeti non sorgessero a rinnovellare le associazioni così disintegrate, il linguaggio sarebbe morto a tutti i suoi più nobili uffici nei rapporti umani».[80]

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[77] 'visual thinking'.

[78] Leoncini, *Emilio Cecchi*, pp. 60; 62-63.

[79] Shelley's original passage reads: 'Their [the poets'] language is vitally metaphorical; that is, it marks the before unapprehended relations of things and perpetuates their apprehension, until the words which represent them, become, through time, signs for portions or classes of thoughts instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganised, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse. These similitudes or relations are finely said by Lord Bacon to be "the same footsteps of nature impressed upon the various subjects of the world" – and he considers the faculty which perceives them as the storehouse of axioms common to all knowledge. In the infancy of society every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry […].' Shelley, *Works*, VII, p. 111.

[80] Percy Bysshe Shelley, *La difesa della poesia*, ed. and trans. by Emilio Cecchi (Lanciano: R. Carabba, 1910), p. 8.

Leoncini considers this quotation as evidence that for Cecchi, as for Shelley, the words which conjure up images – the words of poets – lead, for their associative power, to a more profound understanding of the world than the knowledge attained through words that are merely signs or designations of abstract concepts. It is for this reason that Cecchi in his introduction notes and appreciates the philosophical content of Shelley's *Defence*, despite its lack of systematic thought: Shelley's philosophy is to be found in the relations alluded to in his images, for his contribution is 'un pensiero intrinseco alle mediazioni plastico-visive dell'immagine'.[81] Cecchi's recognition of the philosophical import of images may be traced back to the theory of metaphor developed by Giambattista Vico, a lively influence on our author, according to whom metaphors historically constitute the very origin of metaphysics and abstract thinking, because men began to express intangible ideas by drawing analogies to the physical world.[82] In this light, word-images such as *pesci rossi* or *il vasaio* gain a significance which is poetical and philosophical at the same time, thus restoring the link between lyricism and thought that had been drastically severed by Croce and his successors.

While the above theories certainly influenced Cecchi's thinking about the role of figurative language in philosophical knowledge, it must also be pointed out that they place greater emphasis on poetic expression to the detriment of logical analysis, whereas Cecchi strikes a more even balance. A closer and more congenial model may be found in Giacomo Leopardi. Leopardi too affirms the identity between thoughts and images, writing in the *Zibaldone* that 'il poeta incorpora in una immagine il pensiero più astratto' (*Zib*. 1650).[83] Cecchi's *Taccuini* are laced with references to Leopardi, all of which are concerned with his

[81] 'a thought which is intrinsic to the plastic-visual mediation of the image'. Leoncini, *Emilio Cecchi*, pp. 62-63.

[82] April Elizabeth Pierce, 'Towards a New Romanticism: Derrida and Vico on Metaphorical Thinking', *Thesis Eleven*, 123 (2014), 17-40 (pp. 26-33).

[83] 'the poet embodies in an image the most abstract thought'. Leopardi, Giacomo, *Zibaldone*, ed. by Rolando Damiani, 3 vols (Milano: Mondadori, 1997). All subsequent quotations from the *Zibaldone* are from this edition.

mediating position between poetry and philosophy. Among his earlier notes, for instance, he copies out the following passage from the *Zibaldone*:

> «Malgrado quanto ho detto della insociabilità della odierna filosofia con la poesia, gli spiriti veramente straordinarî e sommi […] potranno vincere qualunque ostacolo ed essere sommi filosofi moderni poetando perfettamente. Ma questa cosa, come vicina all'impossibile, non sarà che rarissima e singolare». Leopardi, 25 luglio 1821. (*T* 27-28; *Zib*. 1383)[84]

In another entry which argues against Croce's disapproval of intellectualism in art, Cecchi mentions the *Operette morali* among the works (of prose or verse, indifferently) in which the intellectual element is evoked spontaneously from within, as an essential and necessary component of lyricism. Thinking about Leopardi's dialogues, but also about the late Ibsen, Goethe's *Faust* and the poetry of Michelangelo, Cecchi asks: 'Ora, quando è che si mette il piede sul terreno paludoso dell'intellettualismo? E nella radice stessa di ogni intellettualismo non è liricità? E, senza gli intellettualismi – infine – come si intendono certi poeti, e proprio quelli che, agli uomini, interessano maggiormente?' (*T* 47).[85] He notes that Leopardi, in particular, was never credited with the creation of a moral system by Idealistic criticism, for fear that admitting his contribution to systematic thought would make him less of a poet (*T* 209); Cecchi, on the contrary, relishes precisely what he calls, with a seemingly oxymoronic expression, Leopardi's 'lirico ragionamento' (*T* 432).[86]

Behind Cecchi's appreciation of Leopardi is also an affinity in the way the two authors conceive of the interaction between lyricism and reason: they both express this relationship as one of dependence and destruction at the same time. Leopardi, who associates philosophy with the discovery of truth and poetry with illusion, describes their dynamic relation in the following

[84] 'Despite what I said about the incompatibility of contemporary philosophy with poetry, the truly extraordinary and elevated spirits […] will be able to defeat every obstacle and be supreme philosophers while writing perfect poetry. But this event, as something nearly impossible, will be but extremely rare and exceptional.'

[85] 'Now, when is it that one steps into the muddy land of intellectualism? And at the root of every intellectualism isn't there lyricism? And, without intellectualism – finally – how is one to understand certain poets, and precisely those who interest men the most?'

[86] 'lyrical reasoning'.

terms: 'La ragione ha bisogno dell'immaginazione e delle illusioni ch'ella distrugge; il vero del falso' (*Zib*. 1839)[87] – meaning that reason needs the support of poetic intuition and emotional connection in order to comprehend nature, for man is fully involved in it, before dismissing and destroying that first instinctive knowledge as illusory. Poetry generates illusions because it naturally leans towards beauty, whereas philosophy, whose purpose is to seek the truth, inevitably negates beauty, for truth is never beautiful. Yet, poetry and reason need each other to achieve perfect knowledge: the true philosopher must also be a great poet in order to be able to reason upon nature, which can only be known by transcending rationality (*Zib*. 3383; 1839).[88] Therefore, for Leopardi, poetry and reason are inextricably tied in a dialectical relationship in which both are equally important; Cecchi, on his part, reproduces exactly the same dialectic, but inverts its terms: in his model, it is poetry which ultimately destroys reason, and not vice versa. I will quote again his words in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', which affirm that the critical and humorous framework of the essay 'è come la convenzione scenica che sostiene quella poesia che al tempo stesso la brucia e distrugge' (*SV* 324).[89] Cecchi's version of the paradigm is more positive than Leopardi's, lacking his pessimistic view of knowledge and truth, but for our purpose – studying the polar tension between lyricism and reason, and how this tension is managed in the text – their theories are almost equivalent: the lyrical and the intellectual faculties are mutually dependent, yet they remain distinct and opposed to each other; they are mutually exclusive, yet for Leopardi the exclusion of poetry would be fatal to philosophy, while, for Cecchi, the exclusion of criticism would be the end of poetry.

In Leopardi's theory, however, philosophy and poetry do have one purpose in common: they both aim at generalising and discovering the relations between things, even those that

[87] 'Reason needs the imagination and the illusions she destroys; the true needs the false'.

[88] See also Emanuela Cervato, *A System That Excludes All Systems: Giacomo Leopardi's* Zibaldone di pensieri (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2017), p. 44.

[89] 'is like the scenic convention which sustains that poetry which, at the same time, burns it and destroys it'.

seem most remote, but while reason achieves this end through cold analysis, poetry operates through emotional synthesis (*Zib*. 1650; *Zib*. 3270).[90] Indeed, this synthetic faculty is precisely what makes poetry necessary to philosophical analysis: given that nature is ordered into an harmonic system of relations (*Zib*. 1090), and that this system is predisposed to a general poetic effect – while nothing poetic can be observed in its parts – only the imagination, naturally in harmony with the 'poetic' character of nature, is apt to offer a synthetic view of the world's totality of relations and, therefore, grasp its essence. The role of reason, then, is to analyse the relations intuitively perceived by the imagination (*Zib*. 3241-3242). Remarkably, Leopardi describes the poetic act of discovering the synthesis of nature's relations as a '*colpo d'occhio*', a view at a glance that the poet obtains when his genius momentarily lifts him to an elevated position (*Zib.* 1852-1860; 3269-3270). This metaphor, notably akin to Virginia Woolf's idea that poetry expresses the 'pinnacles' of existence and the generalised and synthetic perspective they offer, highlights a strong faith in the visual as a privileged vehicle of knowledge which, I believe, anticipates Cecchi's use of images in his essays. For Leopardi, poetic practice consists in 'ridur tutto ad immagine' (*Zib.* 1659),[91] and his appreciation of the value of poetry to philosophical knowledge denotes, as Antonio Prete rightly points out, 'la difesa del simbolico, dei diritti del simbolico, quei diritti che nella topica del sapere moderno sono contenuti nel nome della poesia, al di là della sua riduzione a "genere" di scrittura'.[92]

The inclusion of 'poetry' understood in this sense, as writing centred on the symbolic power of images, implies an approach to knowledge that is unsystematic, based on experience rather than organised thought, and where the relationship with *logos* has to go through *pathos*.[93] If the *Operette morali*'s philosophical dialogues are the place where Leopardi practices the

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[90] See Antonio Prete, *Il pensiero poetante: Saggio su Leopardi* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1980), p. 81.

[91] 'reducing everything into an image'.

[92] 'the defence of the symbolic, of the rights of the symbolic, those rights that in the categories of modern learning are contained within the poetry designation, beyond its reduction to a "genre" of writing'. Prete, p. 84.

[93] Prete, pp. 92-93; 95-97.

union between symbolic and critical language,[94] the essay genre embraced by Cecchi, traditionally the platform par excellence of unsystematic knowledge, provides another perfect setting to combine poetic intuition and analytical enquiry. Indeed, following Graham Good's definition, the essay offers 'knowledge of the moment, not more', an insight which stems from the illuminating encounter between a self and an object that, for a short time, 'reciprocally clarify and define each other'.[95] In Cecchi's essays, this illumination has a cognitive value analogous to Leopardi's *colpo d'occhio*: the truth of nature is seen at a glance, poetically, in the form of an image or vision, at the same time as it is minutely analysed by the essayist using the critical faculty.

Overall, the aspect of Cecchi's conception of poetry in prose that is concerned with the fusion of thoughts with images undoubtedly bears the mark of Leopardi's legacy. Cecchi embraces three main ideas derived from Leopardi's *Zibaldone*, in addition to the general view that lyricism and intellectual analysis can and should coexist in the same work: first, the notion that poetry and reason are tied to each other in a dialectic relationship of mutual contradiction and dependence (idea particularly suited to Cecchi's opinion that poetic effects are always produced out of contrast); second, the faith in the visual as the privileged channel of poetic knowledge, which is the necessary condition of all knowledge; this in turn implies that, third, poetry is seen by both these authors primarily as a mode of knowledge, rather than as a form of writing.

I will conclude this section on the 'cucitura dell'idea con l'immagine' (*SV* 323)[96] with an example from Cecchi's essays which I think best enacts a Leopardian integration between poetic and intellectual knowledge for the understanding of a cosmic truth. The essay is titled 'Una fontana' [A fountain] and was published in 1931, although a first draft in the *Taccuini*

[94] Prete, p. 68.
[95] Good, p. 8.
[96] 'idea being sewn to the image'.

dates back to 1922 and many of its reflections and images are anticipated in 'Una galleria di statue' [A gallery of statues] (1923), testifying to the protracted relevance, for Cecchi, of the text's theme (*SV* 1791-92). The object of the essay's enquiry is the ambivalence of time as a source of both permanence and continuous change, and the nature of man's relation to it. The text begins with an image – a fountain – which already contains in itself all the aspects of time subsequently analysed in the text. Yet it must be emphasised that the image of the fountain is not simply a metaphor selected by the essayist for the purpose of clarifying the essay's argument, but the object of a lyrical encounter, a revealing vision: the author is aware of standing before a privileged spectacle that has the 'grazia d'una apparizione' (*SV* 478).[97] In contrast with the static marble of the basin, the water is caught in continuous flow:

> La forza dell'acqua nel rompersi sfavillava in cima allo zampillo; e il poco chiarore che ancor nuotava nell'aria si raccoglieva tutto in quel punto. E subito il fiotto inabissava, spariva nel buio sottoterra. Ma la luce, alla sommità dello zampillo, non sfioriva mai; perpetuandosi, per il nuovo affluire dell'acqua, in uno scintillìo volubile e costante. Così era da secoli, così durerebbe per secoli, con una continuità nutrita d'una impercettibile, infinita mutazione. (478)[98]

So as to indicate the cosmic significance of the vision, the water's arch, fixed and fluid at the same time, is imagined to draw into its cycle all the elements of nature, whose harmonic interactions are seen at a glance: 'Come in uno sguardo fra il tremolare dei cigli, rideva in quella luce la gioia degli elementi, e quasi l'innocente consapevolezza della loro armonia, della loro collaborazione' (478-79).[99]

Not quite in line with Cecchi's own principle of the brief poetic 'fracture', the lyrical incipit of 'Una fontana' stands clearly apart from the rest of the essay. The section that follows,

[97] 'the grace of an apparition'.

[98] 'The force of the water in breaking twinkled on the top of the jet; and the little light that still floated in the air was all gathered in that spot. And right away the spurt sank into the abyss, vanished into the darkness underground. But the light, at the crest of the jet, never faded; perpetuating itself, thanks to the renewed flow of the water, in a changing and constant sparkle. So it had been for centuries, so it would endure for centuries, with a continuity nourished by an imperceptible, infinite mutation.'

[99] 'Like a gaze showing through trembling eyelashes, the joy of the elements smiled in that light, and almost the innocent awareness of their harmony, their collaboration'.

after a space, begins to analyse the experience of the vision and to explain its meaning. This part argues that the incessant life of nature, which animates all the corners of the universe down to its smallest and apparently motionless dimensions, is mostly invisible to us in its totality – we can only glimpse portions of it with the help of a microscope – except for a few exceptional moments when 'quella vitalità nascosta assume una improvvisa evidenza plastica, e le forme delle cose diventano simboli trasparenti' (479).[100] The vision of the fountain is one such moment, to which Cecchi adds the sight of waves, volcanoes and glaciers, images evoking the idea that all existence is unified by a single rhythm, driven by conflicting and consonant forces (480). After this explanation, the third section intensifies the analytical effort with an erudite digression on the history of the representation of water (as a symbol of elemental forces) in Classical, Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque art. It explains why ancient fountains, such as the one seen in the vision, enclose the water in cavities of marble architecture populated by statues: to shape and contain the infinite within human limits (480-81).

The detached and scholarly tone of this section suddenly gives way to the intense emotional involvement of the essay's last part, which resumes the lyrical mode of the incipit. Reason's cold analysis triggers the divergent reaction of subconscious feeling: 'E svagandosi la mente in questi pensieri, in una regione più oscura, immediata al mio essere, sembrò rispondere alla fontana, nel cuore e nelle vene, il sordo tonfo del sangue' (481-82).[101] At this moment, the author comes to realise that he too is being mastered and swept away by the universal passing of time: as per Leopardi's theory, this truth is not fully reached through rational speculation, but is something the poet can only feel through his emotional connection with nature. The author is able to fully understand this aspect of nature because he is completely involved in it:

[100] 'that hidden vitality takes on a sudden plastic clarity, and the shapes of things become transparent symbols'.

[101] 'And as my mind wandered in these thoughts, in a more obscure, immediate region of my being, the fountain seemed to be answered, in my heart and veins, by the deaf pounding of blood'.

> Lo sentii prima con ansia, quasi con ribellione, come se materialmente l'onda mi scavasse, mi rodesse e portasse seco; poi con un cuore più e più sconsolatamente pacato. D'attimo in attimo, l'acqua rinasceva e spariva, uguale e indifferente. E l'occhio che la considerava era già l'occhio d'un altro. Nell'ombra che calava fra le mura, mi pareva ancora di vedere la sua indefessa rapina; ma come se io fossi già arrivato a quella foce: come se io non ci fossi più. (482)[102]

Here the essay concludes, leaving open a wide gap between rationality and lyricism, even though they explore, with different means, the same truth. Reason can explain the meaning of the vision of the fountain in every detail, as well as dissect the relationship of man with time and eternity throughout the history of representation. However, the profound significance of this relationship is ultimately conveyed poetically, through an emotional rendition of the same image that paradoxically constitutes the occasion, and the embodiment, of the very critical structure it is meant to destroy.

## V.3. Reality changing into fiction, fiction piercing reality

My close reading of Cecchi's essays has so far focused on the interaction between lyricism and critical analysis, and on the poetic significance of the resulting polar opposition. Lyricism is usually manifested as an image – either a metaphor or a vision – which 'breaks' the critical and/or humorous fabric of the essay and opens up a different point of view on the theme treated. In some cases, lyricism and criticism are sewn together even more closely when an image, usually an object of experience, is seen as the emblematic (or 'plastic') incarnation of an abstract concept or philosophical truth. Many of the texts selected have shown that lyricism is often connected with the momentary discovery of a reality beyond that of ordinary experience, imaginative or transcendental (not always clearly distinguishable); the convergence of factual

[102] 'I felt it first with anxiety, almost with rebellion, as if the wave was physically digging into me, eroding me and dragging me along; then with a heart ever more hopelessly calm. At each moment, the water sprang up again and vanished, identical and indifferent. And the eye that was contemplating it was already the eye of another man. In the shadow that was falling among the walls, it seemed to me that I was still seeing its indefatigable rapid flow; but as if I had already reached that mouth: as if I was no more.'

and fictional reality, indeed, is the other relevant set of contrasts that, besides that between lyricism and criticism, generates a poetic effect in Cecchi's essays. This opposition, therefore, deserves deeper examination.

As early as 1906 Cecchi, in the article promoting imaginative journalism, 'L'avvenire del giornalismo' [The future of journalism], lucidly articulated the idea that reality and fiction are categories that occasionally blur their boundaries: at one point, 'si passano accanto, si compenetrano, formano una cosa sola',[103] in a process that Cecchi calls 'spiritualizzazione del reale' or 'realizzazione dello spirituale'.[104] The task of the journalist is to insert fiction into reality in order to stimulate a morally useful emotional response in the reader; hence, what is originally a product of the imagination is given 'realtà poetica, emotiva'.[105] In other words, Cecchi argued that fiction becomes real through the emotions it produces, which are no less truthful for having an illusory cause. Cecchi continued to entertain this belief beyond his juvenile polemic against positivism, writing many articles that explore the liminal space between reality and fiction, and the brusque, poetic transitions from one to the other.

The critic Gianfranco Contini noticed this feature of Cecchi's style in his essay 'Emilio Cecchi, o della Natura' [Emilio Cecchi, or of Nature], which was published in 1932 and constituted the occasion, following Cecchi's expression of gratitude for Contini's acute analysis, for the two authors to begin a correspondence which lasted until 1965.[106] In his essay, Contini observes that Cecchi's pieces move from a pragmatic stand:

> Si parte, in Cecchi, da un fondo di praticità: con la quale il meno che s'intenda è l'occasione (la mossa giornalistica), con i suoi inediti sviluppi così logici come lirici, sciolti e progressivamente enunciati.[107]

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[103] 'they move past each other, they compenetrate, merge into the same thing'.
[104] 'spiritualisation of the real' or 'realisation of the spiritual'.
[105] 'poetic, emotional reality'.
[106] Emilio Cecchi and Gianfranco Contini, *L'onestà sperimentale: Carteggio di Emilio Cecchi e Gianfranco Contini*, ed. by Paolo Leoncini (Milan: Adelphi, 2000), p. xii.
[107] 'Cecchi starts from a concrete basis: with which the least we mean is the occasion (the journalistic first move), with its original developments, logical as well as lyrical, loose and progressively stated.'

A piece of concrete information is the premise for logical examination, but also branches off into strands of lyricism: Contini records Cecchi's quick fluctuations 'da pratica a poesia'[108] and notices how the vivid immediacy with which a given object is introduced from the very beginning indicates 'quanto la pratica sia assunta in funzione poetica'.[109] One of the examples Contini gives of these imaginative diversions from the concrete is the following description of a kangaroo from the essay 'Bestie sacre' [Sacred beasts] (1919):

> Per un poco si tenne in tasca i suoi moncherini, fissandomi, con la bocca leprina accomodata all'atto di fischiettare. Ma poi cominciò ad accompagnarsi e sfoderati gli unghioni neri della orribile mano tra d'uomo e d'avvoltoio, si grattava la pancia, come se invece d'una pancia fosse una chitarra. In realtà era una pancia […]. (*SV* 21)[110]

For Contini, the detail of the 'orribile mano' is what animates the apparently innocuous zoo scene into a dramatic spectacle: the humanised paw of the kangaroo 'segna il liricizzarsi della materia',[111] while the opening of the following sentence with 'In realtà' marks the brusque arrest of the fantastical tangent and the resumption of practical discussion.[112]

The lyrical strand, however, resurfaces later with renewed significance, as we discover that the kangaroo's hand was an anticipation of the animal being seen as the emblem of a degraded state of humanity:

> Lo vedevo contro il sole, contro il sole più civico, più domestico: apparizione ributtante nella cui forma era un segno diabolicamente sovvertito della mia forma, confuso agli avanzi e alle rovine d'epoche condannate. (*SV* 21)[113]

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[108] 'from practicality to poetry'.

[109] 'how much practicality serves a poetic function'. Gianfranco Contini, *Esercizî di lettura: Sopra autori contemporanei con un'appendice su testi non contemporanei* (Firenze: Le Monnier, 1947), pp. 128-29.

[110] 'For a little while it kept its stumps in the pouch, staring at me, with its hare-like mouth shaped into the act of whistling. But then it started to accompany itself and having unsheathed the big black claws of the horrible hand between a man's and a vulture's, it scratched its belly, as if instead of a belly it was a guitar. In fact it was a belly […].'

[111] 'signals the lyrical transformation of the subject'.

[112] Contini, p. 129.

[113] 'I saw it against the sun, against the most civil, domestic sun: revolting apparition in whose shape was a diabolically subverted sign of my shape, confused with the relics and the ruins of condemned ages.'

The kangaroo, thus imaginatively draped, is a devilish vision that materialises under the sun: the passage also makes metatextual reference to the essay itself, which is capable of generating drama out of the seemingly unexciting experience of a zoo visit. Contini defines Cecchi's lyrical disposition as 'la perenne suscettibilità del suo senso magico',[114] which is not the product, as in other essayists, of a chain of thoughts and deductions progressively leading the essay to penetrate enchanted regions, but it consists of violent incursions, often set in motion and then abandoned, or reversed back to a familiar track, 'quasi mito allusivo della fragilità di certi incanti'.[115] Sometimes the intrusion of fiction into reality takes the form of visions that are fully imaginative creations, as in the very early essay 'Paesi' [Villages] (1916), where a succession of realistic descriptions of villages from Cecchi's memory culminates with the improbable appearance, among the mountain trees surrounding the last village, of 'figure di dei nani e pelosi, con le mani di rospo' (*SV* 240).[116] Much more frequently, however, the imagination acts to transform a familiar object, seen in the real world, into the manifestation of a spiritual, essential, or otherworldly reality. These are Cecchi's 'apparitions' (the term *apparizione*, indeed, is remarkably recurrent in his essays; both the fountain in 'Una fontana' and the kangaroo in 'Bestie sacre', for instance, are called 'apparitions'): images which are simultaneously objects of experience *and* transcendental, spiritual entities. Apparitions, in other words, are concrete objects, animals or people that, for their emblematic qualities, stand halfway between reality and imagination.

A particularly eloquent account of an apparition is in the piece 'Incontro col peccato' [Encounter with sin] (1935). More than an essay, this is a humorous short story based on a memory from the author's adolescence, which begins with the caricature of an eccentric and precocious school friend and concludes most surprisingly with a horrific vision. Most of the

[114] 'the constant susceptibility of his magical sense'.
[115] 'almost allusive myth of the fragility of certain spells'. Contini, pp. 131-32.
[116] 'figures of dwarf hairy gods, with toad hands'.

piece consists of anecdotes concerning the strange behaviour of the boy, nicknamed 'Guantineri' [Blackgloves], who for a couple of years occupied the desk next to Cecchi, due to the contiguity of their names in the alphabetical order. The two boys' random association, however, towards the end of the story turns into the precondition of a fateful event, as the author recognises that he owes Guantineri the experience of an encounter, which he deems more appropriate to define as 'un'apparizione' (*SV* 1034). The light and humorous tone as well as the verisimilitude of the tale are maintained until Guantineri drags the author inside a pension for actresses and singers, where the girls invite them to stay for a meal. As they sit at the table, however, the atmosphere abruptly changes: 'Ripenso al tono domestico, volgare e innocente di quell'assemblea. Quando, nella penombra del salotto, fra la mensa e la parete, vidi quasi per terra luccicare due occhi' (1035).[117] Here begins the description of an extremely ugly old woman, who looks more like a corpse than a living creature:

> Morta, si sarebbe detto; fuor che per gli sguardi che dardeggiava così supina, accompagnandone il movimento con una smorfia. Per gli altri pareva che non ci fosse, e avrei potuto credere che la vedevo io solo; la vedevo lì, in carne e ossa, ed insieme in un campo allegorico, che si dilatava sugli aspetti delle cose. (1035)[118]

Thus a single figure, a real person and an imaginative projection at the same time, manages to unlock the boundaries of the natural and to make the whole scene become allegorical: the old woman represents 'il volto del peccato'[119] and the visit to the pension, begun as a boys' escapade, is transformed into a descent into the underworld (1036).

A text of the same year, 'Fabbrica di sogni' [The dreams factory] (1935), outlines another figure that incarnates the limit between reality and dream, life and death. The essay narrates the author's visit to a mental hospital, and in many respects it is constructed like an

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[117] 'I think back to the domestic, vulgar and innocent character of that gathering. When, in the semi-darkness of the living room, between the table and the wall, I saw, almost on the floor, a gleaming pair of eyes'.

[118] 'Dead, one would have said; except for the looks she darted around as she was lying thus supine, accompanying their movements with a grimace. To the others she seemed not to exist, and I could have believed that I was the only one seeing her; there I saw her, in flesh and blood, and at the same time in an allegorical sphere, which spread over the aspects of things.'

[119] 'the face of sin'.

ordinary newspaper article, with a large section devoted to pragmatic information about when the hospital was built, how many patients it hosts, and what facilities and activities it provides to keep them occupied. The theme of dream and hallucination naturally fits into this reportage, as different patients are described together with their particular visions and obsessions. At the end of the essay, however, the last patient, who lies mute and paralysed in bed, stands out as particularly emblematic and disturbing:

> Nel suo immobile sorriso idolatrico, mentre la visitano, forse traluce anche la soddisfazione di sentirsi un *monstrum*, un tetro portento.
> Si pensa a quei corpi di santi che dentro a grandi urne di cristallo dormono nelle cripte, sotto gli altari. Una palma, un lumicino votivo, e sembrerebbe una martire.
> […]
> Intorno, quest'atmosfera di allucinazione rappiglia in un silenzio che la fa più irrespirabile; in un sopore che sa di cloralio e di bara. Nell'irrealtà, tesa fino allo schianto, sembra di veder passare in quegli occhi bluastri i ricordi, i sogni di una morta. (*SV* 911)[120]

This woman, undoubtedly real, appears also as a 'monster' in the etymological sense, from the Latin *monstrum*: a prodigious, supernatural phenomenon. The similes that follow, by comparing her body to the corpses of saints preserved in crypts and to the statue of a martyr (note that this is the same image used to describe the girl selling cigarettes in 'Cinematografi poveri', also a transcendental figure), indicate that the paralysed woman wears, to the observer, the semblance of death, nuanced by the unanswered question of religion. In this sense, the woman's dreams are different from the hallucinations troubling the other patients: they are the procession of visions and memories beheld by the souls of the dead.

The concentration of the uncanny element in one single image which stimulates the imagination recalls Lamb's witch in the essay 'Witches, and Other Night-Fears';[121] this

[120] 'In her motionless idolatrous smile, while she is examined, perhaps shines also the satisfaction of feeling like a *monstrum*, a gloomy prodigy.
One thinks about those bodies of saints sleeping inside big crystal urns, beneath the altars. A palm, a votive light, and she would resemble a martyr.
[…] Around her, this hallucinatory atmosphere condenses in a silence that makes it more unbreathable; in a drowsiness that smells of choral and coffin. In the unreality, tense to the point of crashing, one seems to see passing, in those bluish eyes, the memories, the dreams of the dead.'

[121] See Reecer, pp. 209-210.

technique is also given a critical account by Cecchi himself in his study of another British essayist, Max Beerbohm:

> Un effetto caratteristico si ha quando, tra le figure tanto precise, qualche cosa comincia sordamente a smuoversi e slogarsi; ed una fra esse: quella probabilmente che pareva la più logica ed inoppugnabile, si rivela un assurdo, uno spettro; e conferisce magicamente un'esistenza fantomatica e allucinativa a tutta una situazione che l'autore ci aveva fatto prendere per la cosa più solida del mondo. (*SIA* 1: 343)[122]

This method, which strikingly corresponds to Cecchi's use of apparitions, is more synthetically described as 'l'incastro dell'allucinazione sul vero' (343);[123] although on this occasion this type of opposition is not explicitly referred to as an instance of lyricism, we can recognise in the sudden manifestation of the uncanny one of the most powerful unsettling elements that can burn down, according to the argument developed in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', the essay's realistic and intellectual foundations.

An explicit connection between apparitions and poetic creativity is made in the 1943 piece 'Il lume a petrolio' [The oil lamp], which describes the process through which on old oil lamp brings the author's memory back to the country house where he used to go on holiday as a child. Soon, the simple memory of the house gives way to the vision of the surrounding natural landscape: this, however, is not an actual recollection but an archetypal image of childhood that takes the shape of a forest rich in vegetation and life. Cecchi specifies the important difference between the house of his memory and this mythological garden:

> Ma benché legate a tanti affetti, ora mi pareva che queste parvenze non interessassero che una memoria inferiore, una memoria aneddotica; mentre la *memoria poetica e vera* stormiva e balenava là fuori, convitandomi in un mondo di natura dove (in virtù del finto lume a petrolio) s'erano catalizzate le vive realtà e mitologie della prima gioventù. […] Sentivo anzi la pienezza d'un contatto e possesso materiale; quasi si trattasse d'intatte realtà e non già larve del sentimento: realtà naturali, che al medesimo tempo erano miti. […] Dentro le più segrete pieghe

[122] 'A characteristic effect is produced when, among extremely precise figures, something tacitly begins to move and loosen itself; and one of these: probably the one that seemed to be the most logical and indisputable, is revealed to be an absurdity, a spectre; and magically confers a ghostly and hallucinatory existence to an entire situation that the author had had us take as the most solid thing in the world.'

[123] 'the insertion of hallucination into reality'.

> della coscienza, quelle *apparizioni* ridiventate natura segnavano l'ultimo termine verso l'ignoto e l'infinito […] (*SV* 514; my italics)[124]

Apparitions are, therefore, products of 'poetic' creativity – in this case awakened by memory – that stand at the margins of reality and point to what is beyond it. They are, like myths, distilled and imaginative renderings of experience that take on a visible, almost concrete shape. What this passage adds to our understanding of Cecchi's apparitions as analysed so far is their close connection to the inner life of the observer: they are 'larve del sentimento', which means not only that they generate emotion but also that they are themselves projections of feeling.

The link between apparitions and inner life emerges even more clearly from the essay 'In una galleria di statue' [In a gallery of statues] (1923). Here, Cecchi argues that apparitions are not stable images, not even when they consist of statues, which are the objects regarded as most resistant to the passing of time. On the contrary, each time statues are looked at, the changed pattern of thoughts and feelings in the observer slightly alters their surface and gestures:

> Durante la nostra assenza, non il più labile moto dell'anima si produsse in noi senza passare, nell'atto medesimo, in quei marmi. E più che alla placidità statuaria, si vorrebbe pensare a quelle miscele straordinariamente irritabili che cristallizzano dentro la fiala, in modo sempre diverso, ai più lievi turbamenti di temperatura e di luce. (*SV* 250)[125]

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[124] 'But however attached to many feelings, these semblances seemed to me now to interest but an inferior memory, an anecdotic memory; while the poetic and true memory was rustling and flashing out there, inviting me to a world of nature where (thanks to the fake oil lamp) had catalysed the vivid realities and mythologies of early youth. […] I actually felt the fullness of a material contact and possession; as if they were intact realities and not larvae of feeling: natural realities, which at the same time were myths. […] Within the most secret folds of consciousness, those apparitions turned back into nature signalled the last limit before the unknown and the infinite […].'

[125] 'During our absence, the most fleeting movement of the soul was not produced in us without passing, at that very instant, into those marbles. And more than the placidity of statuary, I would rather think of those extraordinarily irritable blends that crystallise inside the phial, in ever different ways, at the faintest changes of temperature and light.'

Not only are apparitions constantly changing, but after each moment's vision their shape dissolves back into chaos, reversing the process of Ovid's coral, which turns from pliant twig to stone:[126]

> Ma all'incontro del corallo di Ovidio:
>
> *vimen in aequore erat, fiat super aequora saxum*,
>
> trascorso l'attimo in cui il mio sentimento s'incontra e solidifica in queste apparizioni, e appena tolto l'occhio di qui, tutto ritornerà, amorfo e impalpabile, nel gorgo delle trasformazioni infinite. (251)[127]

The perfect identity between sentiment and image recalls Benedetto Croce's definition of art as 'lyrical intuition', which indicates the complete merging of feeling into representation, so that an image or a complex of images are unified under a single sentimental impression.[128] Cecchi reaffirms this definition and stresses the fleeting character of poetic representation, which collapses as soon as it emerges.

There is a striking similarity between the above passage of 'In una galleria di statue' and Woolf's famous description of Mrs Ramsay's dinner party in *To the Lighthouse*. At the culmination of the dinner, when all the guests finally seem to form a cohesive group around the table, enjoying each other and the food, Mrs Ramsay looks at the scene as an eternal creation defeating time: 'there is a coherence in things, a stability; something, she meant, is immune from change, and shines out […] in the face of the flowing, the fleeting, the spectral, like a ruby' (*TL* 114). Likewise, for Cecchi the statues in the gallery represent 'il limite che mi conteneva nell'ordine, al di là del quale era l'arbitrio e la morte' (*SV* 249).[129] Remarkably, both

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[126] 'And even till this day the same nature has remained in coral so that they harden when exposed to air, and what was a pliant twig beneath the sea is turned to stone above'. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. and trans. by G. P. Goold and trans. by Frank Justus Miller (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), IV. 750-52.

[127] 'But contrary to Ovid's coral:
*vimen in aequore erat, fiat super aequora saxum*,
past the moment in which my sentiment meets and solidifies into these apparitions, as soon as I look away from here, everything will go back, formless and impalpable, to the vortex of infinite transformations.'

[128] Benedetto Croce, *Breviario di estetica: Quattro lezioni* (Bari: Laterza, 1958), pp. 30-35.

[129] 'the limit which contained me into order, beyond which were arbitrariness and death'.

texts mark with poetry the moment in which the vision or apparition takes shape: lines from 'Luriana Lurilee' by Charles Elton, a poem about the passing of time and life's perpetual transformation, are read aloud at Mrs Ramsay's table, while Cecchi quotes Ovid's *Metamorphoses* on the changing nature of coral. Woolf's passage and Cecchi's essay also share the stone metaphor: Woolf, who often associates the image of the precious stone or magnet with poetry, compares the dinner party scene to a ruby, while Cecchi's apparition materialises in the statues' marbles, which in turn are likened to coral. In both texts this apparent solidity has very brief duration, for Cecchi's statues become amorphous as soon as their spectator looks away, and the dinner party's ruby composition ceases to exist once Mrs Ramsay leaves the room:

> With her foot on the threshold she waited a moment longer in a scene which was vanishing even as she looked, and then, as she moved and took Minta's arm and left the room, it changed, it shaped itself differently; it had become, she knew, giving one last look at it over her shoulder, already the past. (*TL* 121)

The poetic vision, even when it consists of a physical object or scene, is inextricably tied to the eye – and consequently, the feeling – of the observer: the dinner party shapes itself into a coherent composition out of Mrs Ramsay's own sense of accomplishment, and the statues' outlines are modelled on Cecchi's memories.

This close bond between self and image suggests that poetry endeavours to mould into shape not only the fluidity of the external world, but also the confused landscape of inner reality. Alfonso Berardinelli rightly notes that 'al posto dell'espressione di uno stato d'animo troviamo in Cecchi la descrizione di qualche luogo e forma visibili',[130] but Paolo Leoncini perhaps better grasps the reciprocal influence between visual reality and interiority that animates Cecchi's writing:

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[130] 'instead of the expression of a state of mind we find in Cecchi the description of some visible place and shape'. Berardinelli, p. 109.

> L'interiorità si «mescola» alla creazione, diventa creazionale nella dimensione del tempo, è «azione e passione» che modifica la percezione: la «realtà visiva» non è oggettiva, ma partecipa del nostro destino; è movimento, tempo, correlazione.[131]

Thus, inner life modifies perception, bringing imagination and reality so close to each other that they almost coincide. In other words, imagination subtly intrudes into reality, making a physical object embody so well the feeling it inspires that the reader may doubt whether it actually exists or is just an imaginative projection. For Cecchi, the moment of imagination's intrusion, in which an emotion becomes visible and even concrete, is a lyrical experience.

This kind of lyricism is particularly well exemplified by the essay 'Visitatori' [Visitors] (1924), in which Cecchi gives an account of the feelings of horror connected to the sight of two creatures that break into his house at night, first a thief and then a *scolopendra* (a species of centipede). In both cases, Cecchi reports the facts of these encounters, trying to give an accurate and realistic description of his nocturnal visitors. The thief wears brown clothes and a mask, but no shoes, and is drenched in rain; the *scolopendra* is very small, white and tender for having just come out of the egg. These images, however, soon get imaginatively distorted by the frightened mind of the author: the thief 'aveva qualche cosa di una cimice gigantesca, una larva fuor dell'umano. Era la rivelazione d'un'incredibile forma d'orrore' (*SV* 258),[132] while the animal, though small and frail, appears as an agent of boundless and eternal power:

> Voltatomi, essa girava sul pavimento, che pareva *sterminato*; girava e girava a *larghi* cerchi, con quell'*infinito* brulichìo dei nodelli e delle gambe; e a un tratto s'era fermata là in mezzo; ed era rimasta immobile, *interminabilmente*, senza l'inflessione di una giuntura, o il minimo fremito delle sottilissime corna. (261; my italics)[133]

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[131] 'Interiority "mingles" with creation, becomes an element of creation in the dimension of time, is "action and passivity" which modifies perception: "visible reality" is not objective, but participates in our destiny: it is movement, time, correlation.' Leoncini, *Emilio Cecchi*, p. 68.

[132] 'had something of a gigantic bug, an inhuman larva. He was the revelation of an incredible shape of horror'.

[133] 'When I turned, it was moving around the floor, which looked boundless; around and around drawing large circles, with that infinite bustling of the joints and the legs; and all of a sudden it stopped there in the middle; and remained motionless, interminably, without bending a limb, and without the minimal quiver of the thin horns.'

The image of the *scolopendra* is clearly influenced by the author's memory of the thief which transforms it into the very incarnation of nocturnal terrors and obsessions. The author's exaggerated reaction to the sight of the animal ('Quel minuscolo mostro così facile a schiacciarsi, in realtà, nulla, nulla mai, l'avrebbe potuto schiacciare!; 261)[134] pushes the creature to the very limits of the real: it is physically present in the room, but acts as a vision that suddenly gives shape to an amorphous mass of entangled fears. The *scolopendra*, indeed, is not the cause of these feelings of terror but merely the channel through which they become visible, their 'lyrical' manifestation. Significantly, before the entrance of the animal, the disparate noises that animate the house in the darkness seem to compose a pattern of relations in which the author feels himself caught, as if they were a musical anticipation of the vision's emergence from chaos:

> Le ore trascorrevano, finché la fantasia si trovava presa in una trama paurosa. I brividi e i sussulti della casa, gli scricchiolii dei legni che si ritirano, quelle cavernose sinfonie dell'acque nei depositi, il razzolare d'un cane nei terreni limitrofi, assumevano una spaventosa evidenza lirica, creavano un poema di terrore. (260)[135]

This passage marks the transition to a different level of reality in which what is usually intangible and formless finally becomes intelligible, leading to interpret the subsequent appearance of the *scolopendra* not quite as an ordinary event but as another instance of 'evidenza lirica'.

The peculiar function of Cecchi's images has been well defined by Paolo Leoncini, who calls them 'pictures': epiphanic events of nature occurring outside the coordinates of realism and history. The latter are pushed to the background in order to leave at the forefront 'i

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[134] 'That tiny monster so easy to crush, in fact nothing, nothing would ever be able to crush it!'

[135] 'The hours passed, until the imagination found itself caught into a fearsome net. The shivers and tremors of the house, the creaking of shrinking wood, those cavernous symphonies of water in the tanks, a dog scratching about in the neighbourhood, took on a frightful lyrical clarity, created a poem of terror.'

riferimenti visivo-plastici'[136] that constitute the lyrical edge of ordinary reality.[137] In this polar dynamic, images, especially the so-called *apparizioni*, stand out as the chief agents of lyricism, as they channel the intrusion of imagination and feeling into concrete reality, unifying both the material and the immaterial worlds under a single vision. Like the images analysed in the previous section, which give synthetic representation to an intellectual meaning, these *apparizioni* are also gnoseological tools for the interpretation of reality, inner as well as outer. However, this kind of knowledge, in line with the instantaneous views described in '«Saggio» e «prosa d'arte»', lasts but a moment, and the vision is soon dissolved in the chaotic flow of ordinary perceptions. Fortunately, the individual images that bloom all over Cecchi's essays do not exhaust all the poetic significance of the visual in his work. Above the level of short-lived visions and metaphors, poetry manifests itself also as an abstract design, the visualisation of a system of relations which holds the text, and by implication life's experience, into a significant whole by coordinating its different elements. This superior level corresponds to Cecchi's concept of the '*arabesco*', which for its close affinity to Virginia Woolf's idea of poetry as 'pattern', will be treated together with it in the next chapter.

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[136] 'the visual-plastic references'.
[137] Leoncini, *Emilio Cecchi*, p. 40.

# VI. Woolf's 'pattern' and Cecchi's '*arabesco*': poetic effects of pure form

This chapter explores the area where Virginia Woolf's and Emilio Cecchi's multi-layered ideas about the essence of poetry beyond verse converge, coming together into the notion of significant shape or abstract pattern. Both authors deemed that a work of art which is held together into a unified whole by an abstract design, also understood as a system of internal relations, accomplishes a poetic effect, regardless of the actual medium expressing it. They identified this design or ordering principle as poetry itself, and believed that it reflected the most profound structure of reality, the metaphysical law sustaining and unifying the confused world of appearances.

The aspects of Woolf's and Cecchi's theories of poetry discussed so far already treated the contemplation of a universal or transcendental reality, but considered it from the point of view of human inner life and expression: they focused on the emotions felt by the self, individual or collective, when coming into contact, via solitary epiphanies or shared knowledge, with a cosmic truth. This new side to Woolf's and Cecchi's conceptions, instead, looks at the poetic dimension which is found beyond the self – a world of purely formal relations which speaks the language of music and vision rather than of words, and into which human experiences and emotions are caught like pieces of an abstract mosaic. Both Woolf's 'moments of being' and Cecchi's 'apparitions' are, therefore, not only poetic experiences in themselves, but also channels for the self to access this superior dimension and become aware that each epiphany is part and manifestation of a wider network of relations. Thus, a poetic effect can simultaneously be produced by specific moments or images in the text and by the total abstract design of the work. For Cecchi, paradoxically, this double dimension implies that lyricism, first identified as a principle of rupture, for it unsettles the familiar frameworks of

ordinary reality and rational thinking, at a higher level becomes, on the contrary, an agent of composition and unity.

In the first part of the chapter, focused on theory, I will trace the origins of the idea that poetry corresponds to pure form, on the one hand, in the aesthetics of the art critic Bernard Berenson, who theorised that the formal elements of a work of art have aesthetic value independent of content; on the other hand, in the legacy of philosophical idealism, as promulgated by Roger Fry in Britain and Benedetto Croce in Italy. In the second part, devoted to textual analysis, I will show how Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* and Cecchi in a few selected essays, which I have classified as 'decorative-lyrical', have constructed their works according to purely formal rules, in order to achieve poetic effects and raise their prose above the level of mimesis.

Looking at Woolf's and Cecchi's theories of poetry as pattern together reveals a shared point of concern: the need to recompose the perceived disorder of reality, and the variety of its individual manifestations, into a superior universal unity. It is remarkable that Cecchi, in writing the preface to the first Italian translation of *To the Lighthouse* (1934), summarised his appreciation of the novel precisely along these lines: 'Quanto alla Woolf, il nostro discorso può raccogliersi nei termini seguenti: se l'epoca d'oggi è senza regole, dispersiva, siano almeno misurate, terse, leggiadre le forme in cui cerchiamo di comporre tale dispersione' (*SIA* 2: 33).[1] But perhaps even more meaningful is a subsequent comment, which clearly shows that Cecchi associated the formal unity of composition of *To the Lighthouse* with a 'poetic' mode of writing: 'Sui nuovi, tristi pensieri, [Virginia Woolf] ha tentato «versi» di dignità antica' (33).[2] The following analysis endeavours to illuminate Woolf and Cecchi's re-discovery of the idea of poetry as ordered form within the intrinsically disordered and fluid medium of prose.

[1] 'Regarding Woolf, my argument can be summed up in the following terms: if our age is without rules, incoherent, let at least be measured, clear, graceful the forms in which we try to compose such dispersion'.

[2] 'On our new, grim thoughts, she attempted "verse" of antique dignity'.

### VI.1. The poetic pattern and the theory of Bernard Berenson

In order to introduce the concept of poetry as significant form and follow its development in the writings of Woolf and Cecchi, I will start by juxtaposing two texts that eloquently articulate the two authors' theories and, considered side by side, bring into focus the nature of their similarities. The first text is the opening of the last section of *To the Lighthouse*, when Lily Briscoe has just come back to the holiday house of the Ramsays, after a ten years' time-lapse. Since her last visit, everything has changed: the old circle of family and friends that used to gather in the house has been reduced by the death of some of its members, and Lily feels that with the death of Mrs Ramsay, in particular, the original bond between them all has been broken. On the morning of her return, she perceives reality as 'aimless' and 'chaotic', with nothing making sense any more, neither coming back to the house, nor arranging the long postponed excursion to the Lighthouse (*TL* 160).

These reflections lead Lily to think about art as a way to bring order back into reality, and although she is a painter, her first considerations fall upon language, as she is hearing Mr Ramsay reciting the poem 'The Castaway' by William Cowper:

> And he shook his head at her, and strode on ('Alone' she heard him say, 'Perished' she heard him say) and like everything else this strange morning the words became symbols, wrote themselves all over the grey-green walls. If only she could put them together, she felt, write them out in some sentence, then she would have got at the truth of things. (160-61)

The view of composition in language emerging from this passage is that of an ordering force which, by combining different elements into a concise sentence (the words come from a poetic line, but by using the word 'sentence' Woolf seems to imply that a poetic principle of organised synthesis is potentially active in all writing), manages to grasp and enclose 'the truth of things'. Immediately afterwards, though, Lily turns this process in her mind into an act of visual composition:

> Going to the Lighthouse. But what does one send to the Lighthouse? Perished. Alone. The grey-green light on the wall opposite. The empty places. Such were some of the parts, but how bring them together? she asked. As if any interruption would break the frail shape she was building on the table she turned her back to the window lest Mr. Ramsay should see her. She must escape somehow, be alone somewhere. Suddenly she remembered. When she had sat there last ten years ago there had been a little sprig or leaf pattern on the table-cloth, which she had looked at in a moment of revelation. There had been a problem about a foreground of a picture. Move the tree to the middle, she had said. (161)

The poetic function of bringing different elements from the world of experience into meaningful relation with each other equates, for Lily, to the building of a 'shape', so that her instinctive reaction is to attempt a design with her fingers on the table. In this sense, it is easy to understand how the sight of 'a little sprig or leaf pattern' on the table-cloth ten years before could have been so revealing: it meant the sudden comprehension of a hidden order or outline connecting things with each other. It is noteworthy that the 'sprig or leaf pattern' inspires Lily's picture on this abstract level rather than in the more obvious descriptive, illustrative sense: while undoubtedly the sprig and the leaf are elements of a tree, the pattern on the tablecloth suggests to Lily not to *draw* a tree but to *move* a tree to the middle. The problem she needs to solve in order to complete her picture is not of content but of arrangement, of relations among its components, as she herself makes explicit in the course of her reflections: 'There was the wall; the hedge; the tree. The question was of some relation between those masses' (161).

It is evident from the way the question is posed, starting from the issue of linking together the disjointed words of a poem, that it concerns not only the visual arts but the sphere of art in general. According to Lily's point of view, writing and painting ultimately share the same processes and aim: they both attempt to find and uncover the abstract pattern that governs the relations between the apparently disconnected and chaotic objects of experience. As I will demonstrate in the course of this chapter, this abstract pattern coincides with one of Virginia Woolf's definitions of poetry, conceived in the most pure and mystical sense, far above all material distinctions between prose and verse, and between writing and other artistic mediums.

The visualisation of poetry as a pattern or shape is recurrent in Woolf's writings throughout her career; talking about her need to vary writing styles, for instance, in 1933 she declares in her diary: 'Looming behind the P.s [*The Pargiters*, early title for *The Years*] I can just see the shape of pure poetry beckoning me' (*D* 4: 145). Obviously, the change Woolf anticipates is not from a work of prose to a work of verse, but from a type of fiction based on facts to a type of fiction that embodies that essential and profound 'shape' which constitutes the backbone of reality.

A similar definition of poetry is found in the work of Emilio Cecchi. One text, in particular, written in London for *La Tribuna* in 1919 and then published in *Pesci rossi* (1920), shows significant points of contact with the passage from *To the Lighthouse* just analysed. Born as a review of the performances of two Restoration comedies, *The Provok'd Wife* by John Vanbrugh and *The Beaux' Stratagem* by George Farquhar, Cecchi's 'La Commedia come Danza' [Comedy as Dance] develops as an essay about the presence of poetry in the theatre. This does not imply that Cecchi is discussing poetic drama: the two comedies combine prose and verse, but the essay does not even mention these textual features because its focus is on performance. Cecchi invites his readers to value a theatre which uses its artistic tools, such as the coming and going of characters and the succession of scenes, according to a non-mimetic plan:

> C'è un *gong* che suona a martello per levar di scena un marito e una moglie ormai rappaciati. Ed è indispensabile che qualcuno faccia vedere che se invece in teatro c'è la poesia, l'andare e venire dei personaggi non è subordinato a giustificazioni e non dipende da un giuoco di espedienti, tanto più assurdi quanto più probabili, ma da un disegno ritmico come il disegno di una danza. (*SV* 95) [3]

[3] 'There is a *gong* which rings insistently to take away from the scene a wife and a husband now reconciled. However it is indispensable that someone shows that if in the theatre there is poetry, the coming and going of characters is not subjected to justifications and does not depend on a game of expedients, the more absurd the more probable, but on a rhythmic design like the design of a dance.'

Adopting a visual and musical lexicon, Cecchi here defines poetry as a ‘rhythmic design’ which, in a theatrical performance, controls movement on stage, precisely as the steps of dancers are controlled by a choreography. Cecchi stresses that this design is abstract, purely formal, because it is not determined by the contents of the play nor does it fulfil realistic requirements. Moreover, movement is only one of the aspects of a performance that poetry should govern: diction, pauses, colours, costumes, scenography, the contrasts between characters – in short, all its elements – should be put in relation to each other as parts of the same design. It does not matter how prosaic, that is, matter-of-fact the individual details of the play are, such as its words, because poetry is not about the parts but about their organisation into a system:

> Il teatro è la rivelazione eccellente di rapporti e prospettive simili nell’ordine lirico e plastico, e le parole nel dramma, ma anche nel dramma scritto che si legge a casa, sono soltanto una parte. Il dramma può esser tagliato nel materiale più empirico. Ma come l’architettura che sembra la più pratica delle arti perché aderisce alla realtà vissuta, e costruisce le case dove si mangia, dove si opera e si riposa, e poi è invece una delle arti più astratte: il dramma anche più prosaico, se è un dramma, risolve sempre in un’astrazione di rapporti, in un giuoco di gravitazioni e attrazioni, in un arabesco che nei maggiori tragici col progresso del loro lavoro si vede diventare sempre più nudo ed evidente. (98-99)[4]

Assessing the poetic quality of a play at this abstract, architectural level entails a conception of poetry which is so immaterial as to have nothing to do with the dramatist’s choice of words in themselves:

> se la recitazione può aggiungere qualcosa, è nel contribuire con le sue immense possibilità di suggestione a isolare e potenziare quel giuoco di rapporti, quell’architettura e quell’arabesco, che quasi sempre nel dramma scritto restano impigliati sotto le soluzioni verbali – che il poeta aggiunge come estensioni e commenti di situazioni in sé sufficienti e come note psicologiche e scientifiche, in

[4] ‘The theatre is the excellent revelation of correspondences and perspectives that are similar at a lyrical and plastic level, and the words of drama, even in the written drama that is read at home, are only one of its aspects. A play may be cut out of the most empirical material. But in the same way as architecture which seems the most pragmatic of the arts because it adheres to real life, and erects the buildings where people eat, work and rest, and instead is one of the most abstract: likewise a play, even the most prosaic, if it is drama, is always resolved in abstract relations, in a game of gravitations and attractions, in an arabesque that in the greatest tragic playwrights, with the progress of their work, looks more and more bare and evident.’

> calce a una invenzione lirica ch'egli è stato capace di dare e alla quale spesso sembra incapace di credere. (99)[5]

There could be no neater distinction between this view of poetry and what is commonly understood as a poetic use of language involving attention to sound and rhetoric: the poet's lyrical invention stands either above or underneath the level of words (Cecchi's inconsistency regarding lyricism's 'position' in relation to writing is indicative of its supremely abstract nature), which are merely an addition to the artistic core of the work.[6]

Woolf's and Cecchi's texts, although they belong to different genres, fictional and non-fictional, and despite focusing on different branches of art, share an important argument. They both identify the essence of art in a design, which Woolf calls 'shape' or 'pattern' (*TL* 161) and Cecchi calls *disegno ritmico*, *architettura*, or *arabesco* (*SV* 95; 99). They employ these terms to visualise what is an abstract system of relations between different elements rather than an actual shape, thinking of the ordering force holding the system together – the design itself – as pure poetry. Poetry thus conceived is completely detached from verse (though of course it can happen in verse) as it is a concept which transgresses the boundaries between the arts, potentially finding expression through all mediums, from painting to performance, insofar as the works in question obey, in their profound essence, a non-mimetic law.[7]

For what reason, however, does an aesthetic theory revolving around the key concept of 'poetry', but embracing all artistic fields, borrow so much lexicon and imagery from the

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[5] 'if acting can add anything, it is the contribution, with its immense possibilities of suggestion, to isolating and strengthening that game of interactions, that architecture and arabesque, which nearly always in written drama gets caught underneath the words – which the poet adds as extensions and comments to situations in themselves sufficient, and as psychological and scientific notes, at the bottom of a lyrical invention that he has been able to offer but often fails to believe in.'

[6] Cecchi's theorisation of a play's architecture or arabesque displays striking similarities to T. S. Eliot's theory of dramatic levels, according to which verse drama possesses an invisible 'under-pattern' made of rhythm, myth, symbols and tone, which hints at a superior reality beyond character. However, Eliot's theory was not formulated until 1934, so it is unlikely to have been the source of Cecchi's ideas. See Cuda, p. 118.

[7] Significantly, spatial form and pure form are two critical categories that have long been used in modernist studies to indicate, respectively, synchronic structure in literary works and abstraction in the visual arts, both associated with poetry as the quintessence of instantly apprehended form. See Cara L. Lewis, *Dynamic Form: How Intermediality Made Modernism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), pp. 11-13.

visual arts? Woolf's close connections with the painters of the Bloomsbury group, first and foremost her sister Vanessa Bell, are well known, together with her friendship and intellectual exchange with the art critic Roger Fry, who was the first to promote the stylistic innovations of the French post-Impressionists in London.[8] Likewise, Cecchi was surrounded daily by painters and sculptors, and was an art critic himself, who devoted several works to Italian art history, focusing especially on the Florentine Renaissance and the nineteenth century (*SV* li-liii). Biographical circumstances, therefore, played an important role in influencing Woolf's and Cecchi's understanding of the interdependence between literature and the visual arts. The convergence of their ideas, however, is more deeply rooted in a precise and common theoretical background: the aesthetics of the American art historian Bernard Berenson, who influenced Cecchi directly and Woolf indirectly, through the mediation of Roger Fry.

Berenson, who developed a close friendship with both Cecchi and Fry,[9] did not argue that literature and painting shared the same methods and effects; quite the opposite.[10] But his criticism introduced Cecchi and Fry to the powerful idea that, in painting, formal elements such as lines, colours and masses, and the relations between them, have autonomous aesthetic value, since they are capable of giving pleasure independently from the contents and ideals represented in the artwork. In his 1897 book *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (which Cecchi read in English and then translated, at Berenson's request, for the first Italian edition in 1936), Berenson distinguishes between two classes of elements that simultaneously coexist in a work of art, Decoration and Illustration: 'By Decoration I mean all those elements

[8] See Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), pp. 287-92.

[9] Despite their shared friendship with Berenson, there is no evidence that Cecchi ever met Roger Fry in person, although a 1957 article devoted to the Bloomsbury group, a review of Clive Bell's book *Old Friends* (1956), shows awareness of Fry's role in promoting the French Impressionist and post-Impressionist painters in London, and mentions his biography by Virginia Woolf. In this article, Cecchi considers Woolf the most important figure in the Bloomsbury group (*SIA* 2: 11-15). Among the Bloomsbury intellectuals, Cecchi met in person Lytton Strachey (in 1930), T. S. Eliot (in 1946), and Virginia'a widower Leonard Woolf (in 1946 or 1947), and recorded his conversations with them in articles then collected in *Scrittori inglesi e americani* (2: 20-24, 125-29, 254-55).

[10] See S. P. Rosenbaum, *Edwardian Bloomsbury: The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group*, 3 vols (Basingstoke; London: Macmillan, 1994), II, 197.

in a work of art which appeal directly to the senses, such as Colour and Tone; or directly stimulate ideated sensations, such as, for instance, Form and Movement'.[11] On the other hand,

> Illustration is everything which in a work of art appeals to us, not for any intrinsic quality, as of colour or form or composition, contained in the work of art itself, but for the value the thing represented has elsewhere, whether in the world outside, or in the mind within.[12]

Since ideals change over time, it follows that the Illustrative value of a work of art is ephemeral, whereas its Decorative part is, according to Berenson, essential and permanent, because Decorative elements stimulate universal psychic processes.[13]

It is crucial to underline that Decoration and Illustration are closely entangled, or better still, they are two points of view on the same image, so that the fact that Decorative elements, taken in themselves, are abstract, by no means implies that they compose a piece of abstract art. This point will be especially important to keep in mind later, as we observe the repercussions of this theory in literary works. Therefore we should not judge as incongruous Berenson's claim that, in order to bring out fully the Decorative aspect of Renaissance religious art – unquestionably representational – he would need to be 'vexing the reader with descriptions which, to be exact, should be couched in the jangling vocabulary of geometry'.[14] His analysis, by way of example, of the 'Betrayal of Judas' by Duccio di Buoninsegna is revealing of how Decoration shapes, and even assists, Illustration:

> What compactness and dignity are given to the mass in which we find Christ, by the two tufted trees that surmount it! […] See how this tree serves, not only to converge all the lines upon His head, but helps, by being in continuous upward movement with Him, to heighten His figure. And what a glamour of beauty is lent to the scene by the lances and torches of the soldiers – lines that are and are not parallel – an effect so easily attained, yet counting for so much […].[15]

[11] Bernard Berenson, *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance* (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1909), p. 5.
[12] Berenson, p. 10.
[13] Berenson, pp. 14-15.
[14] Berenson, p. 29.
[15] Berenson, p. 30.

In the same picture, the viewer can consider the representation of Christ at the moment of his betrayal, and appreciate the Christian message embodied in that image, but he or she can also see the tree as a mass, the lances and torches as lines, and Christ's head as the point of convergence of those lines. Going back to Lily Briscoe's painting in *To the Lighthouse*, we can now better understand the implications of moving a tree to the middle, for it would cause a significant change in the abstract pattern governing relations on canvas, without the picture itself being necessarily abstract. According to the same logic, Cecchi in 'La Commedia come Danza' calls even a street an 'astrazione', because he sees it not only as an ordinary street but also as an abstract mechanism in which all people and objects are related and have an impact on each other, to the point that 'anche una tinta rabbrividisce e trascolorisce ad un grido' (*SV* 98).[16] Clearly, both authors are wearing Berenson's bifocal lenses, but his theory of the Decorative versus the Illustrative was obviously not received without going through a process of transformation, which also involved the contributions of other thinkers.

### VI.2. From Roger Fry's aesthetics to Virginia Woolf's visual poetic theory

Roger Fry is likely to have first met Berenson during a trip to Florence in 1897, the year *The Central Italian Painters of the Renaissance* came out, and the two art critics became friends the following year.[17] Inspired by Berenson's distinction between Decoration and Illustration, Fry began to nurture the idea, subsequently developed in his famous collection of essays *Vision and Design*, that a viewer's reaction to pure form is independent from his or her response to the content of pictures.[18] But there is a significant shift between Berenson's definition of Decorative elements and Fry's understanding of 'pure form'. While according to Berenson the

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[16] 'even a tint shivers and changes colour at a cry'.

[17] Ernest Samuels, *Bernard Berenson: The Making of a Connoisseur* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979), p. 316.

[18] Rosenbaum, II, 197, 203.

formal components of a work of art are essential and permanent because common to all human beings are the psychic processes that guide perception, pure form for Fry is timeless and universal because it reflects the ideal, fundamental reality that lays behind the surface of appearances.[19]

In her biography *Roger Fry* (1940), Woolf indeed underlines her friend's belief since youth in a spiritual reality which is usually buried under the seemingly aimless flow of daily life. She quotes a letter in which Fry expresses a feeling very close to Woolf's own experience of 'moments of being': that 'at any moment the surface may dissolve and the reality appear, whatever that reality may be…' (*RF* 46). This hidden reality is also revealed in art through the contemplation of form, which brings the viewer in touch with a dimension transcending his or her own self. In another letter quoted in the biography, Fry explains that 'the emotions resulting from the contemplation of form' are 'more universal (less particularised and coloured by the individual history), more profound and more significant than any of the emotions which had to do with life' (184). In other words, the contemplation of a painting's formal elements provokes in the viewer that very perspective shift from the particular to the general that, according to Woolf's theory, constitutes the cardinal function of poetry. Indeed, Fry's aesthetics of pure form, inspired by the visual arts, is soon extended to music and, crucially, poetry. Fry expresses his ideas about the analogy between painting and poetry in a 1913 letter to Lowes Dickinson, which is quoted too in Woolf's biography:

> I'm continuing my aesthetic theories and I have been attacking poetry to understand painting. I want to find out what the function of content is, and am developing a theory which you will hate very much, viz. that it is merely directive of form and that all the essential aesthetic quality has to do with pure form. […] I think that in proportion as poetry becomes more intense the content is entirely remade by the form and has no separate value at all. You see the sense of poetry is analogous to the things represented in painting. I admit that there is also a queer hybrid art of sense and illustration, but it can only arouse particular and definitely conditioned

[19] Berenson, p. 15; Rosenbaum, II, 205.

> emotions, whereas the emotions of music and pure painting and poetry when it approaches purity are really free abstract and universal. (147)

In Fry's view, 'pure form' is the essential quality of the three arts – painting, poetry and music – which seek to achieve the utmost detachment from man's ordinary, and personal, experience of the world. Significantly, Fry excludes novels from this pure triad, because their business is to deal with psychological issues (*RF* 209). Moreover, a key ingredient of novels is temporality, a reason why the Bloomsbury painters, influenced by Fry's aesthetics, came to think of fiction as a more corrupt form of art, unable to match the instantaneous, timeless quality of painting and poetry.[20] As it is well known, however, Roger Fry's aesthetics and his belief in the interrelation of the arts inspired Woolf to defeat this prejudice and experiment with poetic effects of pure form in *To the Lighthouse*.[21]

As Fry employed terms borrowed from the visual arts, such as 'design' and 'texture', for the analysis of literary works (*RF* 194), statements portraying poetry as a shape or a vision pointing to a pattern behind appearances – an ideal reality – appear consistently in Woolf's essays, diary and letters.[22] Some of these remarks directly refer to the existence of an abstract order governing relations in poetry or in novels with poetic traits. For instance, in the essay 'Jane Austen', belonging to the first *Common Reader* (1925), Woolf appreciates a poetic quality of Austen's unfinished novel *The Watsons*, namely the fact that the reader 'can dwell with extreme satisfaction upon the more abstract art which, in the ball-room scene, so varies

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[20] Rosenbaum, II, 210.

[21] Criticism on how Fry's ideas about the interrelation of the arts influenced Woolf's fiction, especially *To the Lighthouse*, includes, among others: Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism, and the Novel: James, Lawrence, and Woolf* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), pp. 3-69; Geneviève Sanchis Morgan, 'Performance Art and Tableau Vivant – The Case of Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay', in *Virginia Woolf: Texts and Contexts*, ed. by Beth Rigel Daugherty and Eileen Barrett, pp. 268-73.

[22] It is likely that Woolf was also inspired by Clive Bell's theory of 'significant form' as explained in his book *Art* (1914). The theories of Fry and Bell, who were both close to Woolf, overlap in such a way that it would be hard to determine who had the biggest impact on her. Fry was the first to introduce notions of formalism to the Bloomsbury group, but Bell increased their popularity and definition. See Mark Hussey, 'Significant Form and Aesthetic Emotion', in *Secrets of Creativity: What Neuroscience, the Arts, and Our Minds Reveal*, ed. by Suzanne Nalbantian and Paul M. Matthews (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 336-50 (p. 339).

the emotions and proportions of the parts that it is possible to enjoy it, as one enjoys poetry, for itself, and not as a link which carries the story this way and that' (*E* 4: 150). Here, the poetic feature stressed is purely formal, because it has nothing to do with the progress of the plot, neither does it concern the more profound 'discrimination of human values' that the novel offers, to use Berenson's lexicon, as its 'illustrative' component (150). Rather, what brings the novel to the level of poetry is the expert arrangement of the work's various elements according to an abstract law of proportions.

More definitely visual is Woolf's analysis of Spenser's *The Faery Queen* in the homonymous essay (1935), in which she describes the author's ability to make the world and its objects look sharper 'under the more intense ray of poetry': instead of a quantity of details, which is a prosaic feature, 'we see the bone and the symmetry' (6: 491). It should be noted that while the first comment about Jane Austen's novel identifies a poetic pattern governing relations *within* the work, the second observation regarding *The Faery Queen* indicates that there is a symmetry in the world *outside* the literary work that poetry brings to light. This analogy shows that, like Roger Fry, Woolf sees such a correspondence between art and world that the formal order inherent in a work of art is never artificial or superimposed, but always a reflection of an equivalent harmony discoverable in the real world. Reality itself is therefore for Woolf 'a thing I see before me; something abstract; but residing in the downs or sky; beside which nothing matters; in which I shall rest & continue to exist' – and her most 'serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered', otherwise called her 'abstract poetic' books, are committed to grasping that reality (*D* 3: 196, 131, 185).

Despite the pattern being intangible, all the more so in a literary work which is not composed of visible masses, lines and colours, Woolf often imagines it not only as a design one could draw, as we have seen in the *Lighthouse* passage at the beginning, but also as a solid object. Her most recurrent metaphors for poetry – the gem, the rock, the globe – all point to

something extremely hard and concrete. This might seem counterintuitive, but is a successful visualisation of the idea that poetry manages to capture, make whole, and embody precisely that immaterial pattern that in the world of appearances forever escapes. Thus, in the essay 'Reading' (1919) Woolf makes a similar point as later stated in 'The Faery Queen', that poetry conveys a sharp and definite view of the world ('As with a rod of light order has been imposed upon tumult; form upon chaos'), but here this abstract ordering force materialises and becomes visible, so that poetry is defined as 'something that has been shaped and clarified, cut to catch the light, hard as gem or rock' (*E* 3: 153). Likewise, Woolf describes a poem as a solid object in 'A Letter to a Young Poet' (1932), in which she complains that contemporary poems fail to connect their various elements organically. Significantly, what Woolf points out is a formal problem of relations between the parts of a whole, which causes, metaphorically, a poem to 'break': 'The poem is cracked in the middle. Look, it comes apart in my hands: here is reality on one side, here is beauty on the other; and instead of acquiring a whole object rounded and entire, I am left with broken parts in my hands' (*E* 5: 311).[23]

But perhaps the most perfect and complete portrayal of poetry in visual terms is found in *To the Lighthouse*, in the course of Mrs Ramsay's interior monologue as she reads one of Shakespeare's sonnets:

> How satisfying! How restful! All the odds and ends of the day stuck to this magnet; her mind felt swept, felt clean. And then there it was, suddenly entire shaped in her hands, beautiful and reasonable, clear and complete, the essence sucked out of life and held rounded here – the sonnet. (*TL* 131)

This passage encapsulates all the nuances contained in the conception of poetry as pattern suggested so far. There is the idea of an ordering force, a 'magnet', that gathers scattered elements and brings them into unity and completion. The metaphor of the magnet is particularly

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[23] This kind of poetic solidity, which is a representation of a mystical reality, should not be confused with the other solidity that Woolf reproaches to the triad of 'materialist' novelists Wells, Bennett and Galsworthy in the essay 'Modern Novels', and which consists in making fiction rely heavily on facts and material details (*E* 3: 32-33).

illuminating because it effectively conveys the concept of an abstract force which, at the same time, can be visualised as a solid object. Further, the passage expresses the correspondence between poetry and reality, and the conviction that what the sonnet embodies in its microcosm is nothing less than the whole 'essence' of life.

Understanding Woolf's association of a poem with a solid object, with all its parts closely connected to each other, is crucial to qualify as 'poetic' her approach to writing her own novels. In the essay 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future' (1927), Woolf describes 'the poetic dramatist of the future' as if he was a sculptor who treats his material like a solid, unified mass: 'Instead of enumerating details he will mould blocks' (*E* 4: 438-39). Frequently in her diary she uses the metaphors of painting, sculpture or architecture to illustrate the process of writing. Often her remarks refer to the composition of *The Waves* because this is a book with a most 'elaborate design', in which each mark forces her 'to think of its relation to a dozen others', 'always stopping to consider the whole effect' (*D* 3: 259). Significantly, Woolf's conception of *The Waves* is visual rather than narrative, as she refers to it as a solid form: 'All the time I shall attack this angular shape in my mind. I think the Moths […] will be very sharply cornered' (219). In a later comment she appears again in the role of sculptress, intent in the process of removing material and polishing: 'I begin to see what I had in my mind; & want to begin cutting out masses of irrelevance, & clearing, sharpening & making the good phrases shine' (303). At times a stone or a statue, at times a piece of architecture which 'will need re-building, yes, not only re-modelling' (302), *The Waves* strikes us as one of the prose counterparts of the sonnet-magnet delineated in *To the Lighthouse*.

### VI.3. From Benedetto Croce's idealism to Emilio Cecchi's *decorativo-lirico*

An identification of poetry with form is also prominent in Cecchi's writings, particularly if we look at his reinterpretation of Berenson's concept of Decoration. Cecchi met Berenson in 1912

and since then the two critics developed an intellectual liaison that lasted until Berenson's death in 1959.[24] In an article devoted to Berenson's theory written in 1914, Cecchi relates its fulcrum, the difference between Illustration and Decoration, by offering his personal understanding of the latter as the 'lyrical' component of a work of art:

> Si potrebbe anche dire che l'elemento *decorativo* è il fondo lirico, originario; isolato da tutti i rapporti colturali. E l'elemento *illustrativo* è quanto rifluisce, da questo centro originario, verso la realtà psicologica e storica. (*PP* 321)[25]

As with Fry's reading of Berenson, it is possible to recognise here a distinctly idealistic take on the American art critic's theory, evident in the idea of a 'centro originario' from which historical reality derives. Indeed, Cecchi's association of Decoration with poetry may be due to the influence of the idealistic philosopher Benedetto Croce, who in a 1952 article in *Lo Spettatore Italiano* – overtly a restatement of ideas already expressed earlier – argues that Berenson's illustrative and decorative elements can also be distinguished in literature: for example, in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, they mark the difference between the poem's didactic, oratorical parts and its more authentic but infrequent 'poesia'.[26] Cecchi cites this article in his 1953 piece on 'Berenson canonizzato' [Berenson canonised], which reaffirms the importance of Berenson's theory and underlines Croce's identification of Decoration with absolute poetry ('poesia integrale'), a trait potentially to be found in the creations of poets and painters alike (*PP* 342-43).

Certainly there are major differences, to which I shall return below, between Cecchi's and Croce's aesthetic ideas and interpretations of Berenson – most importantly, as we know, Cecchi rejects Croce's categorical separation between the 'poetic' and the 'unpoetic' sections

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[24] Enrico Riccardo Orlando, 'Emilio Cecchi: i «Tarli» (1921-1923)' (doctoral thesis, Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, 2017), pp. 60-61 < http://hdl.handle.net/10579/10301>.

[25] 'It could also be said that the *decorative* element is the lyrical, original foundation; isolated from all cultural relations. And the *illustrative* element is what flows out, from this original centre, towards the reality of psychology and history.'

[26] Benedetto Croce, 'Schede, VII', *Spettatore italiano*, 5.10 (October 1952), 422-27 (p. 422).

of a literary work (*RC* 54-62) – but a reminiscence of Croce's thought can be seen in Cecchi's conception of poetry as the essential principle of art (all the arts), pointing to an ideal reality beyond the historical and ideological background which produced the work.[27] Cecchi's idealistic reinterpretation of Berenson's theory is also evident in his finding defective Berenson's explanation of the origin of aesthetic pleasure in psychic processes that are merely a common physical reaction to the sight of masses and lines (*PP* 343); on the contrary, according to Cecchi, the decorative element in a work of art bestows universal aesthetic emotions because it expresses some essential and permanent meaning about the world.[28] Overall though, as Cecchi himself points out in a 1963 article in the *Times Literary Supplement*, writing about his critical models in retrospect, 'There is no conflict' between his own critical attitude, 'essentially dependent upon that of Vico and Croce', and 'the study of other critics who derive from different strains': among which he names especially Berenson, admired by Croce despite his empiricism.[29]

From the combination of Berenson's critique of the visual arts and Croce's idealism, therefore, is born Cecchi's own concept of *decorativo-lirico*: a visual understanding of the essence of art which is applicable well outside the realm of painting. As mentioned in Chapter 5, the identification of art, or poetry, with vision was already a key component of Croce's aesthetics. Most of the lexicon that Croce uses to define art belongs to the sphere of the visual, as the following passage from *Breviario di estetica* [Manual of Aesthetics] makes apparent:

> io dirò subito, nel modo più semplice, che l'arte è visione o intuizione. L'artista produce un'immagine o fantasma; e colui che gusta l'arte volge l'occhio al punto che l'artista gli ha additato, guarda per lo spiraglio che colui gli ha aperto e riproduce in sé quell'immagine. «Intuizione», «visione», «contemplazione», «immaginazione», «fantasia», «figurazione», «rappresentazione», e via dicendo, sono parole che ritornano di continuo quasi sinonimi nel discorrere intorno all'arte,

[27] See Benedetto Croce, *Aesthetica in nuce* (Bari: Laterza, 1946), pp. 5-8.

[28] This idea seems to recall Fry's aesthetic theory; however it is more likely that Cecchi, although aware of Fry, was influenced by Croce on this point, given the immense resonance of Croce's idealism in the Italian context at that time.

[29] Emilio Cecchi, 'Is Empiricism Too Parochial?', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3213 (September 1963), 731-32 (p. 731).

> e che tutte sollevano la nostra mente al medesimo concetto o alla medesima sfera di concetti, indizio di universale consenso.[30]

Croce describes art in general, though the main focus of his analysis is literature, as a complex of images. These images are for him, however, simply objects of the imagination: scenes first born in the mind of the author and then reproduced, through words or painting, in that of the reader/viewer. Any text, indeed, evokes a series of images, but from a Berensonian perspective applied to literature such figures still belong to the sphere of Illustration.[31] This implies that the artistic 'vision' theorised by Croce, though ideal and metahistorical, is not abstract: the images born through intuition are never considered in their purely formal components, nor are they a visualisation of an immaterial system of relations. In fact, in defining art as representation Croce does not want to call attention to the visual *per se*, but rather to the immediate and intuitive character of artistic expression, where conscious reasoning has no part and significant images and scenes originate spontaneously in the mind of the artist. In contrast, Cecchi's *decorativo-lirico* is a concept based on the intrinsic values of vision, suggesting that if he read Berenson through the lens of Croce's idealism, he also partly reinterpreted Croce in the light of Berenson's theory, thus coming to see that ideal representation could consist not only in figurative images but also in pure and abstract form.

Cecchi's formal understanding of poetry is initially delineated in his early critical work *I grandi romantici inglesi* (first published in 1915 with the title *Storia della letteratura inglese del secolo XIX* [History of English literature in the nineteenth century]). Here, especially in his analysis of the poetry of Coleridge, Cecchi explains the affinities he sees between poetry and

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[30] 'I will immediately say, in the simplest way, that art is vision or intuition. The artist produces an image or phantom; and he who relishes art turns his gaze towards the point that the artist has indicated, looks through the fissure that the artist has opened to him and reproduces that image within himself. "Intuition", "vision", "contemplation", "imagination", "fantasy", "depiction", "representation", and so on, are words that come back continuously as quasi-synonyms in conversations about art, and all of them direct our minds to the same concept or to the same sphere of concepts, sign of universal consensus.' Croce, *Breviario di estetica*, p. 12.

[31] For a description of the nature of the images object of artistic intuition in Croce's aesthetic theory, see Croce, *Aesthetica*, pp. 5-6, where he specifies that they are representations of people, objects, attitudes, gestures, utterances etc.

painting and expresses his pleasure at comparing them, offering a modern, original reaffirmation of Horace's famous saying '*ut pictura poësis*' (*GR* 21). An echo of Berenson's concept of Decoration can be perceived in the following critique of Coleridge:

> Anche nella sua poesia massima, il Coleridge ha, essenzialmente, del pittorico; ma è un pittorico, come presto vedremo, architettonico, costruttivo. Poco egli vi descrive, perché vigorosamente rappresenta; non ha la freddezza per descrivere; la sua vera poesia è uno schema di colori smaglianti e di movimenti di danza. (107)[32]

It stands out from this passage that for Cecchi vision in poetry is not a matter of descriptive power but is about constructing 'linee architettoniche',[33] that is, designing the work so that it conveys – here Cecchi borrows the term from Croce – 'una totale intuizione ben determinata' (*GR* 208).[34] This idea of structural unity is more profound and abstract than what is generally understood by cohesion: here, for instance, Cecchi with architecture means that different elements in a poem should interrelate as lines, colours and background do in painting. Accordingly, he compares the style of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner* to a piece of oriental art, for the poem's concise narrative parts act, in his view, like a set of sharp and supple lines that give movement and definition to an infinite, monotonous background (*GR* 132-34).

The identity between poetry and form is also illuminated by Cecchi's evaluation of myth and by his explanation of why the rediscovery of myth always accompanies poetic revivals. In *I grandi romantici inglesi*, in the context of his critique of Keats' *Hyperion*, Cecchi argues that myth is an example of pure form in literature, as the nude is in painting and sculpture, because they are both aesthetic abstractions of, respectively, human experience and the body, set free from illustrative (particular, temporal) elements (*GR* 437-38):

> Al nudo nell'arte plastica, corrisponde in poesia il mito, che libera traverso un'elaborazione inconscia le forme essenziali dell'esperienza umana; ed elimina il

[32] 'In his greatest poetry, too, Coleridge has, essentially, a pictorial quality; but it is a pictorial, as we shall see, of an architectural, constructive kind. Little he describes, because he represents vigorously; he does not have the aloofness to describe; his true poetry is a pattern of bright colours and dance movements.'

[33] 'architectural lines'.

[34] 'a well-defined total intuition'.

> descrittivo psicologico, la naturalità impressionista. Nel mito, direi, la forma è potenziata, duplicata: l'artista vive in superbo distacco [...]. (438)[35]

The influence of Croce's idealism on this early work is evident, particularly in the desire to see art completely purified from illustrative details: an aesthetic principle that Cecchi will soon question in order to adopt a more inclusive approach, which values the discernment of mythical outlines in everyday scenes. Anyhow, at this stage it is interesting to note that in regarding myth as the literary equivalent of the nude in art, 'l'arabesco supremo', and in its recovery a poetic effort to transcend the 'illustrativo romanzesco' (*GR* 437-38),[36] Cecchi shows a remarkable affinity with some of Roger Fry's ideas, perhaps due to Berenson's mediation. It was indeed in the same years (1913) that Fry expressed his theory about pure form being the guiding principle of those works of poetry and painting intending to rise above 'a queer hybrid art of sense and illustration' (quoted in *RF* 147).

Pure form, however, is not only a dimension of art but of reality as a whole: as in Woolf's theory of the poetic pattern, in Cecchi too art and life correspond to each other to such an extent that he considers poetic both the decorative elements of a work of art, and the discovery of those elements in the real world. In a very interesting passage of the *Taccuini* (*c.* 1934), [37] for instance, Cecchi relates the experience of perceiving the *decorativo-lirico* in a few still-life scenes observed in the homes of various people, all strangely fascinated by ornamental aquatic plants. In the first scene, set in an austere and wealthy house, Cecchi describes a big bowl, full of water to the brim, containing an entire submerged wood:

> rami di corallo, conchiglie verdi come foglie pietrificate, spugne vermiglie come entragni, trine di madrepore, bissi, e chiome di morte sirene, nido di perle. È incredibile il senso di sospensione, di silenzio e di non so quale splendido orrore, che si spandeva da quella vista sovranamente quieta, come di cose scorte dall'altra

[35] 'To the nude in the visual arts, corresponds in poetry myth, which liberates through unconscious processing the essential forms of human experience; and eliminates the descriptive psychological element, or impressionistic naturalism. I would say that, in myth, form is enhanced, doubled up: the artist lives in superb detachment [...].'

[36] 'illustrative-novelistic'.

[37] The entry is undated, but based on surrounding notes should be of around 1934. The passage was already part of a 1924 article on D'Annunzio and was subsequently reused for another essay in 1939 (*T* 619).

> parte della esistenza, in una sorta di lucida, platonica, e pur materiale immortalità. (*T* 510)[38]

Cecchi here is describing in detail a real aquarium, but at the same time he is isolating a purely formal feature, that of motionless intricacy, which he thinks has a permanent, ideal, 'platonic' value. Intricacy is not only described explicitly, but is suggested by the words' sounds via the alliteration of the consonant *r* in the list of aquatic creatures, most audible especially when joined to dental consonants: 've*r*miglie come en*tr*agni, *tr*ine di ma*dr*epo*r*e' (my italics). Cecchi believes this pattern must have some universal meaning, as he finds it repeated in many other, more humble houses where the poor people of Tuscany like to keep the black ramifications of an aquatic plant imprisoned in a glass bottle:

> Era la stessa suggestione, trasportata dal fantastico ornamentale allo squallido e macabro; la vita elementare, contemplata in immobili attorcimenti; segno, tuttavia, che aspetti siffatti, i quali sembrano ricercatissimi, capziosi e perversi, oscuramente interessano anche creature senza lettere.
> Infatti, sta in impressioni di questo genere il fondamento di un piacere decorativo, di una suggestione ornamentale, in senso pienamente lirico, i quali certo non ebbero campo più eletto che nella Firenze del Cinquecento.
> Vedi idee sulla lirica platonica del Cinquecento. (*T* 510)[39]

In the form of arrested convolution, thus, the 'decorative-lyrical' aspect of these still lives lays bare the elemental skeleton of life, whose universal significance is confirmed by the fact that people from all social backgrounds are invariably fascinated by the 'suggestione ornamentale' of aquatic plants. Reality no less than art is capable of such decorative suggestion, and Cecchi immediately links the two by comparing these reflections on domestic aquariums to his ideas about sixteenth-century platonic lyric poetry.

[38] 'coral branches, seashells green like petrified leaves, sponges vermilion like entrails, madrepores' laces, byssus threads, and hair of dead mermaids, nest of pearls. It is incredible the feeling of suspension, silence and who knows what splendid horror, emanating from that majestically quiet spectacle, as if of things glimpsed at the other side of existence, in a sort of lucid, platonic, and yet material immortality.'

[39] 'It was the same suggestion, transported from fantastic ornamental display into a seedy macabre; elementary life, contemplated in motionless intricacy; sign, however, that such forms, which seem very sophisticated, captious and perverse, are obscurely appealing also to uncultivated creatures.
Indeed, in this kind of impressions is the foundation of a decorative pleasure, of an ornamental suggestion, in a fully lyrical sense, which surely never had more distinguished setting than in sixteenth-century Florence.
See ideas about sixteenth-century platonic lyric poetry.'

In the notebook entry that follows, Cecchi makes similar remarks about the suggestive power of pure form with regard to the ornamental details of Florentine baroque architecture, in a short paragraph titled '*Astrazione decorativa*' [Decorative abstraction]. Here, he praises 'La astrattezza, il rapimento delle forme, in un'arte allusiva invece che descrittiva e figurativa',[40] of more mysterious and far-reaching significance (*T* 510-11). The opposition between abstract pattern/architecture and description is ever central to Cecchi's aesthetic ideas, as he clearly explains in a letter to Benedetto Croce dated 1915 concerning 'la questione dell'"architettonica e del frammento"'.[41] Cecchi complains about the principles then in vogue among literary critics in the following terms:

> Giacché, ora, di Dante veggono: "quando ne' pleniluni sereni" e ciò che rientra nella sensibilità per dir così naturalista e impressionista, e niente altro. E quella funzione di rapporti che dà il peso alle immagini e l'*allure* allo stile, cioè i caratteri più intimi alla poesia, l'architettonica, in una parola, viene scambiato *tout-court* con la sagrestia, e la morale nel senso pedante e sagrestano: la coltura di questi nuovi esteti! (quoted in *SV* 1737)[42]

Of course, these comments do not by any means imply a rejection of description – in fact Cecchi's own pieces are primarily descriptive – but stand simply against an evaluation of details in isolation, without taking into account their relations to each other and to the whole, as it is in these links that the authentic value of poetry is to be found. With reference to the visual arts, Cecchi had affirmed in a very early note (1912) that this system of relations is to be perceived instantly as a 'movimento poetico, o giro di forze' (*T* 68),[43] an image that very much recalls the attracting and ordering force of Woolf's sonnet-magnet.

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[40] 'The abstraction, the ecstasy of forms, in an art which is allusive instead of descriptive and representational'.

[41] 'the issue of "the architecture and the fragment"'.

[42] 'Because, now, of Dante, they see: "when in the clear full moon nights" and what belongs to a naturalistic and impressionistic sensibility, so to speak, and nothing else. Instead that relational function which charges images with significance and gives *allure* to style, that is, the most essential traits of poetry, in one word, its architecture, is mistaken *tout-court* for puritanism, and for morality in the pedantic and clerical sense: the culture of these new aesthetes!'

[43] 'poetic movement, or vortex of forces'.

Overall, looking at the various ways in which Cecchi employs and defines the words *lirico* and *poesia* in his unsystematic body of work, it can be concluded that two main ideas of lyricism appear to coexist in his thought: on the one hand, an epiphanic lyricism that is tied to subjectivity and represents the intrusion of imagination, spirituality, memory and emotion into ordinary reality; on the other hand, the *decorativo-lirico*, which represents the profound formal structure of reality that exists beyond subjectivity, to which the self belongs. These two ideas, though seemingly contradictory, are connected, because the epiphanic lyricism is precisely the experience that allows the self to acquire knowledge of the world as a unified system of formal relations. They are, however, also crucially different, for while the first lyricism acts as an agent of disruption of the factual and critical order of reality, classically constructed by the essayist, the *decorativo-lirico* represents the very essence of order, but of a superior kind – the abstract, metaphysical architecture of the world that the artist can intuitively grasp once the previous human order is destroyed.

As epiphanic lyricism is sustained by the rational scaffolding it burns down, by a similar dialectic of opposites decorative abstraction may emerge out of realistic representation, at the same time as it negates it. All art works, as Cecchi explains in his *Taccuini*, obey architecture, like a law of gravity, but they display architectural beauty only when they are aware of it: 'tutte le opere sono nella forma, perché se no non esisterebbero neppure; ma non tutte, solo le supreme, sono coscienti' (*T* 195).[44] Abstraction and mimesis are thus views or aspects of the same reality that coexist but may be stressed differently by different works of art:

> Decorativo è l'elemento lirico, puramente, privato di tutti gli elementi storici; se l'illustrativo è l'elemento letterario. Applicare queste idee al romanzo (illustrativo).

[44] 'all works are in the form, because otherwise they would not even exist; but not all of them, only the supreme, are conscious of it'.

> Il dramma è lo stato decorativo, di un'arte che nel romanzo ha il suo stato illustrativo, di sbozzo, in fondo. (*T* 192)[45]

This very early note (1913) is interesting because it shows how Cecchi sees the categories of *decorativo-lirico* and *illustrativo-romanzesco* in literature as originally tied to distinctions of genre, even though they also function independently. Decorative elements are called 'lyrical' to signify their opposition to the distinctive features of the novel, which due to its prominent realistic tradition is seen as primarily a mimetic genre. The lyric, instead, is viewed as a fundamentally non-mimetic genre, for according to Cecchi it does not imitate but creates an almost 'material' object of interrelated words. This is explained in a 1916 note: 'Nella lirica, la parola si carica immediatamente di contenuto, diventa carnale. Al grado di esaltazione della lirica, corrisponde la realizzazione, la materializzazione immediata, concreta, visibile in ogni parola e nell'intreccio delle parole' (*T* 269).[46] Besides bearing resemblance to Woolf's visualisations of poems (and poetic novels) as solid objects or sculptures, Cecchi's definition proves to be still alive in current debates about the nature of the lyric. Jonathan Culler, for instance, also argues that the lyric is fundamentally non-mimetic, although it can present some fictional elements: in his view, a 'normalizing novelizing' model to understand the lyric would downplay all those components – such as its ritualistic dimension, the materiality of its language, its intertextual relations – that are 'not imitated from ordinary speech acts'.[47]

Along the spectrum that connects novelistic Illustration to lyrical Decoration, drama occupies a particularly interesting position because it manages to emphasise the features of both. According to Cecchi, drama is overall a decorative art because, despite the fact that on

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[45] 'Decoration is the lyrical element, purely, stripped of all historical elements; if Illustration is the literary element. Apply these ideas to the novel (illustrative). Drama is the decorative status of an art that in the novel has its illustrative status, its sketch stage, after all.'

[46] 'In lyric poetry, the word immediately fills with meaning, acquires a body. To the degree of exaltation of lyric poetry corresponds its immediate, concrete realisation, materialisation, visible in each word and in the woven pattern words'.

[47] Jonathan D. Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 118-19; 122-23.

the surface it resembles human experience, it is actually governed by formal correspondences.[48] More precisely, drama can be understood at two levels simultaneously: as a reproduction of daily life, in which this art is almost dissolved ('si annulla per la sua stessa perfezione'),[49] and as aesthetic abstraction which is distilled out of the very empirical material it denies (*T* 245; 269). Cecchi's interest in the hybrid character of drama confirms his inclination towards mixed forms and chronologically corresponds to his own youthful attempt at writing a play, on which he worked between December 1913 and January 1914 (*SV* 1721). Although the play was never finished, many of Cecchi's later essays will display theatrical or choreographic traits, endeavouring to offer a parallel expression of decorative and illustrative elements. The contiguity of the poetic and the prosaic perspectives, indeed, is a factor to be kept in mind in relation to both Woolf and Cecchi, as we proceed to the analysis of how their theories of pattern and *arabesco* have been used to generate poetic effects in some of their creative works.

## VI.4. Creating the pattern: formal poetic effects in prose

The texts I am going to discuss, the novel *To the Lighthouse* and some of Cecchi's 'decorative-lyrical' essays, have a strong visual component. Not only do they lay particular emphasis on visual descriptions, but by stressing decorative elements such as line, mass, shape and colour, they aim to uncover the abstract, fundamental aspect of the reality being depicted. In both authors, the function of these abstract details is also to encourage the reader to appreciate the wider architecture of the work, in which abstract relations run beneath the mimetic surface of

[48] Another note in the *Taccuini*, like the essay 'La commedia come danza', compares drama to architecture: 'teatro: stile piano, naturale. Come l'architettura di una casa. Non sforzo. Lirismo vi proviene non dalle parole, ma dai rapporti e gravitazioni di masse e necessità. Il dramma bisogna che abbia una illusione realistica, connessa alla sua odierna natura di invenzione psicologica'

[drama: plain, natural style. Like the architecture of a house. No effort. Lyricism comes not from the words, but from the relations and gravitations of masses and forces of necessity. The play needs to have a realistic illusion, connected to its current nature of psychological invention]. (*T* 269).

[49] 'is annulled due to its very perfection'.

the text. The question of how to make a literary text enact formal relations analogous to those performed by music and the visual arts engaged both Woolf and Cecchi in the same years, and they found to this problem different solutions, in harmony with the different genres they were practicing. Some of their reflections, however, were strikingly similar: in what sense, for instance, can a character, a specifically literary element, function like a shape or a colour? This question, central to understanding the design of *To the Lighthouse*, is best illuminated by one of Cecchi's essays, 'Il vestito da povero' [The poor man's dress], which like the novel is concerned with explaining the formal affinities between life, the visual arts, and literature.

In 'Il vestito da povero' (1925), Cecchi argues that the 'profession' of the beggar has an artistic role comparable to that of the dramatic poet for his sense of scene: by choosing the location and the exact spot in which to place himself to beg, and by selecting the people to be asked for money, he creates around him, only by virtue of his own acts and distinctive costume, a living representation of the structure of society. This scene is poetic and metaphysical because the beggar suddenly, 'con la muta e fulminea eloquenza delle apparizioni',[50] makes visible an essential pattern of social relations:

> Nel gran banchetto sociale occorre che qualcuno si segga, con quel tanto di ornato che attira e cresce l'evidenza, sull'infimo scalino; ove nelle scene degli epuloni veneti dipingevano il nano con i levrieri e la bertuccia. Qualcuno deve fornire la macchia scura del quadro; senza di che non sarebbero gerarchie e architetture di toni e risalti. All'uomo che esce di casa a pancia piena, qualcuno deve rammentare l'uomo senza casa e a pancia vuota. (*SV* 231)[51]

In this passage, a scene of life is compared to a dramatic scene, which is in turn compared to a painting, in order to convey an idea of balanced composition that involves not only images, but representative figures and roles that acquire significance in relation to each other, like the

[50] 'with the mute and rapid eloquence of apparitions'.

[51] 'At the great social banquet someone must sit, with just enough ornament to attract and increase visibility, on the lowest step; where in the Venetian scenes of feasting aristocrats were painted the dwarf with the greyhounds and the macaque. Someone must provide the painting's dark blot; without which there would be no hierarchies and architectures of tones and emphases. To the man who gets out of the house with a full stomach, someone must point out the homeless man whose stomach is empty.'

characters in Shakespearean drama (231). Most importantly, the text claims that the presence of the beggar is necessary to the creation of the scene not only because it gives it sociological meaning, but for purely formal reasons of contrast and balance: 'Qualcuno deve fornire la macchia scura del quadro'.[52]

Lily's explanation of her style of painting in *To the Lighthouse* runs along similar lines. When Mr Bankes asks her what the triangular purple shape in her picture is meant to represent, she replies that it depicts 'Mrs Ramsay reading to James', although it does not look like a human shape at all:

> But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? He asked. Why indeed? – except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness. […] A mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence. A light here required a shadow there. (*TL* 58-59)

Here, as in Cecchi's essay, is the elucidation of how composition can be governed by rules that are intrinsic to formal expression – the need to contrast light with darkness – and entirely non-mimetic. This, however, does not mean that the object of representation, mother and child, is irrelevant or unrelated to these compositional rules: mother and child are in fact crucial to the picture, but they have gone through a process of extreme generalisation and abstraction aimed at expressing their pure *relation* to another part of the picture, rather than their likeness to individuals. Reading Lily's explanation in the light of the extract from Cecchi's essay is helpful precisely to understand how what she tells Mr Bankes regarding painting can be applied to literature. In Cecchi's argument, the beggar is not a colour, but a person in the flesh who, through his acts and relationships, uncovers a meaningful pattern of reality: it is in this sense that he performs as 'la macchia scura del quadro' (*SV* 231). Similarly, the characters of a literary text, even though they cannot be, obviously, abstract shapes, may be created so as to form abstract relations with each other and with other elements of the text as shapes or colours

[52] 'Someone must provide the painting's dark blot'.

do; they may be representations of real people whom the artist sees as components of a metaphysical vision.

Thus, Lily's attempt at translating people into related shapes for her painting mirrors Woolf's effort, in the novel, to grasp the pattern holding together different elements of her childhood. As Hermione Lee notes, her first plans for the novel consist of 'lists and inventories of ingredients that […] would have to be held in balance and brought to the boil' (*TL* xii). One of these plans, contained in her diary, states the following:

> This is going to be fairly short: to have father's character done complete in it; & mothers [sic]; & St Ives; & childhood; & all the usual things I try to put in – life, death &c. But the centre is father's character, sitting in a boat, reciting We perished, each alone, while he crushes a dying mackerel […]. (*D* 3: 18-19)

Considering, for instance, among these elements, Woolf's mother and father, it can be noticed that *To the Lighthouse* sets out to represent them as Mr and Mrs Ramsay in two ways simultaneously:[53] from a prosaic point of view, by narrating their words, feelings and behaviours; from a poetic perspective, by abstracting from these details a purely formal pattern of opposition and balance between masculinity and femininity, that affects the structure of the whole novel. In an essay devoted to 'La Woolf e il «personaggio»' [Woolf and the 'character'] (1950), Cecchi perceptively observes that Woolf's characters live on in the reader's imagination 'più come temi musicali (talvolta, come la signora Ramsay, temi addirittura magnetici), che come strutture descrittive: ciò che frattanto costituisce una loro forte superiorità estetica' (*SIA* 2: 41).[54] Ralph Freedman in his study on the *Lyrical Novel* argues that the abstract pattern of the lyrical novel can coexist with the novel of manners thanks to a double imaginative process requiring both emotional involvement and detachment: 'The picture of life and

[53] Although *To the Lighthouse* should not be considered straightforwardly as an autobiographical novel, it is true that Woolf's own feelings for her mother and father do constitute much of her inspiration for the book, and that writing about them helped her exorcise their memory. For details about how autobiographical material was revisited for *To the Lighthouse*, see *TL* xxx-xxxiv.

[54] 'more as musical themes (occasionally, like Mrs Ramsay, even magnetic themes), than as descriptive structures: a fact which meanwhile constitutes an aspect of their strong aesthetic superiority'.

manners is sensuously apprehended, and then converted into a design. Sensibilities and awareness, as well as men and times, are rendered as components of a *depersonalized* vision'.[55]

To reflect this double mode of apprehension, the assembling of *To the Lighthouse* proposes to give simultaneously the contrasting impressions of fragmentation and of strength (*TL* xii), which once again are best explained through Lily's reflections on painting:

> Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. It was to be a thing you could ruffle with your breath; and a thing you could not dislodge with a team of horses. (*TL* 186)

Applying this logic to the novel, we may interpret its evanescent surface as the accumulation of 'scenes, and names, and sayings, and memories and ideas', which is the raw material that Lily too keeps evoking to summon her vision ('evanescent', because apparently fluid and impermanent), while its iron structure would correspond to the design emerging from the way this impalpable material is organised – 'this other thing, this truth, this reality, which suddenly […] emerged stark at the back of appearances' (172-74). Analogous to this idea is Roger Fry's distinction, explained in his lecture 'Sensibility', between 'the artist's feeling for organization, the faculty that directs the general relations of a design, the correspondences and contrasts of different parts' and 'his sense of the texture of his design'.[56] It must be pointed out that in literature, as in painting, there is no actual separation between texture and design, for the emergence of one over the other is purely a matter of focus: a close, detailed reading of a text will reveal its texture, while a more generalised look at the work as a whole will uncover its design. Given that poetry is, for Woolf, chiefly defined as a perspective shift from the particular to the general, the poetic aspect of *To the Lighthouse* resides in its design, which becomes

[55] Freedman, p. 243.
[56] Roger Fry, *Last Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939), p. 24.

apparent only once the reader has completed the novel and is therefore able to look back at it in its entirety, holding it, metaphorically, at a distance.

The system of relations I am going to describe in the following paragraphs as constituting the pattern of *To the Lighthouse*, based on my reading and on the interpretation of other critics, by no means intends to exhaust it. What I aim to show with my analysis is not in fact a single rigid pattern, but rather a reading method which the novel itself explains and invites using the metaphor of painting, and through which multiple patterns of relations may be discerned. Indeed, the design of a good work of art, its system of relations, is never too simple or fixed: as Roger Fry perceptively notes in 'Sensibility', a picture with a very straightforward design – for instance, a perfect symmetry – is capable of giving but a very short-lived pleasure, for the observer would understand its relations all at once and then cease to be interested. A more complex design, on the contrary, leads the observer to endlessly go back to it and discover new relations:

> But balance about a centre line is capable of provoking a number of questions and affording a number of answers, and in a great work of art we get a conviction that we could go on with our endless sequence of such questionings going down to the minutest particulars of the picture and forever having them resolved. For our satisfaction we do not even need to formulate the questions; we are conscious of endless numbers of relations about each of which the picture would yield a convincing answer if we pressed it.[57]

It is very interesting that Fry, as an example of a design that generates multiple relations, chooses to mention precisely the 'balance about a centre line', because this is just the design Woolf envisioned as the unifying factor of *To the Lighthouse*.

Indeed, in a famous letter of 1927 Woolf clarifies to Fry what she means by a symbol in terms that may have been inspired by his theory of design:

> I meant *nothing* by The Lighthouse. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the

[57] Fry, p. 30.

> deposit for their own emotions – which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. (*L* 3: 385)

The role of the lighthouse within the design of the novel is key to understand what is meant by 'pure form' in literature. In line with Woolf's explanation, the image of the lighthouse is a purely formal device in the sense that it has no specific content: it can be described as an empty, extremely generalised (and therefore poetic) metaphor which, like a magnet, attracts different meanings, thus structuring around itself all the other elements of the book. The metaphor of the waves in *The Waves* is another instance of a purely formal, magnet-like device, which gathers together several ideas, even, sometimes, in contrast with each other: the waves represent now the background of indifferent nature, now the characters' impulse of life and struggle against death, now the power of death to crush human beings, now the monotonous flow of ordinary reality, now the emergence of meaningful 'moments of being' – everything reflected, stylistically, in the wave-like regular rhythm of the novel's sentences. Within a different design, the image of the lighthouse functions in a similar way, serving also, though less prominently than the waves, a rhythmical purpose, especially in the section 'Time Passes', where the ten years' time lapse intervening between the first and the second sojourn in the Ramsays' holiday house is marked by the lighthouse's regular strokes.

Recognising the broad reach of this metaphor, many critics have noted how the lighthouse serves as an aesthetic centre that connects all the main characters and gives direction and purpose to the narrative.[58] The novel starts with the announcement of the plan to do an expedition to the lighthouse and ends with the accomplishment of that plan ten years later. As the novel mirrors its own process of composition in Lily's painting of her picture, it naturally follows that the family's landing at the lighthouse also coincides with Lily's final brushstroke,

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[58] A comprehensive account of the most relevant critical interpretations of the Lighthouse as a structural element is found in Suzanne Bellamy, 'The Visual Arts in To the Lighthouse', in *The Cambridge Companion to To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Allison Pease (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 136-45.

which by drawing a line down the middle of the canvas re-enacts the purely formal role of the lighthouse metaphor in the book. Also the pattern of interaction between Mr and Mrs Ramsay is directed by the lighthouse, as the couple's various divisions are set out at the beginning over their disagreement about whether the weather will allow a trip to the lighthouse the next day, and are fully reconciled at the end when Mr Ramsay finally carries out the long-postponed expedition as a tribute to his late wife's memory. The sense of accomplishment attached to the image of the lighthouse, around which the whole novel revolves closing in a circle, makes it comparable to the role of the sonnet form as felt by Mrs Ramsay after reading one of Shakespeare's sonnets: that of an ordering, magnetic force, which gathers and unifies the 'odds and ends' of experience into a complete, 'rounded', closed composition (*TL* 131).

If, therefore, the whole novel can be imagined as contained into a rounded shape, its completion marked by a climax of emotion – one of those 'moments of being' that Woolf considered as fecund sources of poetry – then we can also recognise a whole pattern of correspondences linking the overarching novel composition to a series of smaller-scale moments of being, also compared to works of art, that rhythmically punctuate the narrative. This network of epiphanies is recognised by Lily as she ponders over 'the vast, the general question which was apt to particularise itself at such moments as these' (*TL* 175):

> The great revelation [about the meaning of life] perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsay bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsay saying 'Life stand still here'; Mrs. Ramsay making of the moment something permanent (as in another sphere Lily herself tried to make of the moment something permanent) – this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing […] was struck into stability. (175-76)

Lily here realises that her own creative process in art, that involves composition as a 'putting together' of experience, is matched, in life, by Mrs Ramsay's continuous efforts to draw

different people, her family and friends, together harmoniously. As Freedman puts it, 'Mrs. Ramsay is also an artist […] as the ordering spirit of the family'.[59]

Therefore, we can draw a symmetry between the completion of Lily's picture at the end of the novel and the dinner party scene which constitutes the culmination of the first section: Mrs Ramsay's work of art, in which 'the faces on both sides of the table were brought nearer by the candle-light, and composed […] into a party round a table', conscious of making a 'hollow' of order 'against that fluidity out there' (106). The intense emotion of rest and stability that the success of the dinner party and the completion of Lily's picture both inspire, marking the novel's two main climactic moments, is the same feeling Mrs Ramsay experiences on other occasions: when she reads Shakespeare's sonnet, and in the knitting scene, when she looks at the 'long steady stroke' of the lighthouse (70). As I described in Chapter 2, in this scene the strokes of the lighthouse mark the rhythm of Mrs Ramsay's interior monologue, perfectly coinciding with its three climaxes, short sentences that break off from her train of thought like poetic lines: the biblical reminiscence 'We are in the hands of the Lord', the metaphor 'a bride to meet her lover', and the ecstatic exclamation 'It is enough! It is enough!' (70-72).

This perfect correspondence between the rhythm of the light strokes and Mrs Ramsay's moments of being, considered alongside the fact that, as we have seen, such epiphanies recur throughout the novel, suggests that a rhythmical pattern regulates the coming together of life's chaotic flow into instantaneous compositions. The purely formal design of the novel, therefore, includes rhythm as a unifying force: on the one hand, because ordered compositions are glimpsed/made intermittently; on the other, because their succession in the course of life's experience gives to reality as a whole (and to the work of art which reflects it) a sense of cohesion. Rhythm and form are thus deeply connected: rhythm produces form, as the stroke of the lighthouse traces a pattern 'upon the carpet in the darkness' (144-45), and form produces

[59] Freedman, p. 238.

rhythm, as an extremely simplified shape – for instance, the lighthouse itself seen at such a distance that it can barely be distinguished – is reduced to an 'eye opening and shutting' (202). Therefore, one way to conceptualise the novel, in extremely abstract terms, could be as a complete, rounded shape, the result of an all-comprising artistic vision centred around the lighthouse, containing within itself the rhythmical beat of smaller revelations/compositions that mirror the order of the whole.

*To the Lighthouse* trains the reader to constantly change focus in order to appreciate the full spectrum of the work, from its prosaic end composed of subtle changing impressions, to its abstract poetic end. Often the novel offers a double description of the same image, one that is mimetic and detailed and another that is abstract and synthetic. As Hermione Lee perceptively observes, 'Lily's visionary translation of life into shapes is the culmination of a similar process carried on throughout the book, which constantly reiterates a tension between simple and complex shapes'.[60] Marianna Torgovnick notes that a clear example of double perspective is based on variations of distance and involves the changing nature of the lighthouse, depending on whether it is seen from across the bay or in close proximity.[61] A similar law affects the depiction of characters: according to Lily, 'one way of knowing people' is 'to know the outline, not the detail' (*TL* 211), so that she often visualises her friends as shapes – Mrs Ramsay wearing to her eyes, for instance, 'the shape of a dome' (58) – or as a 'symbolical outline' transcending 'the real figures', as when Mr and Mrs Ramsay seem to her 'the symbols of marriage' (80). However, it is important to remember that these are conceptualisations that use visual or musical metaphors: a novel can describe or evoke shapes, but does not actually *make* them; as for rhythm, language can certainly produce it – and some passages of *To the Lighthouse* are indeed very musical – but the idea of rhythm we are analysing goes beyond

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[60] Hermine Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Routledge, 2010), pp. 131, 137.
[61] Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts*, pp. 136-42.

linguistic cadence. Therefore we need to return to and explore further the question: what is it meant by shape and rhythm in fiction? What are they essentially made of?

Relations, has been the answer provided so far. But what are exactly the elements that are being related into a design? Woolf asked herself precisely this question, which probably arose from her ongoing discussions with Roger Fry. In 1924 she wrote to him a letter in which she argues that pure form in literature is something very different from what is meant in the visual arts:

> I'm puzzling, in my weak witted way, over some of your problems: about 'form' in literature. I've been writing about Percy Lubbock's book, and trying to make out what I mean by form in fiction. I say it is emotion put into the right relations; and has nothing to do with form as used of painting. (*L* 3: 133)

Therefore, she considered emotions to be the raw abstract matter of fiction, which had to be coordinated to form a pattern. Accordingly, we can think of rhythm in *To the Lighthouse* as the repetition of the same (or similar) emotion. This is what Lily seems to suggest when she tries to pin down in her mind the essence of the relationship between Mr and Mrs Ramsay:

> I will marry you, she might have said, with her hand in his; but no more. Time after time the same thrill had passed between them […]. For in the rough and tumble of daily life, with all those children about, all those visitors, one had constantly a sense of repetition – of one thing falling where another had fallen, and so setting up an echo which chimed in the air and made it full of vibrations. (*TL* 215)

If the recurrence of an emotion can create a rhythm in Mr and Mrs Ramsay's marriage, then we can see that also the rhythmical succession of 'moments of being' in the novel is nothing but the repetition of the same strong emotion, a feeling of rest and order. This is an ideal, loose kind of rhythm, not a matter of strict regular intervals: simply, as the above passage indicates, emotions by coming back – in fiction as in life – can give to experience a sense of consistency and significance. In this sense, rhythm plays a purely formal role in *To the Lighthouse*, for the arrangement of some emotional events into a sequence acts as a unifying and ordering force and creates a pattern of correspondences.

Similarly, it is by expressing emotions through scenes that the novel metaphorically creates shapes. Freedman, recalling Woolf's analysis of the poetry of 'situation' or 'scene' in 'Phases of Fiction' (1929), summarises this poetic effect as the method by which 'moments congeal into scenes that portray states of mind'.[62] Hermione Lee points to a diary entry in which Woolf associates the process of understanding her own feelings for the composition of the novel precisely to 'making shapes': 'I [...] got down to my depths & made shapes square up' (*D* 3: 203). Accordingly, certain significant scenes in *To the Lighthouse* function as shapes by constituting 'focal points for strong emotions' (*TL* xxi-xxii). Indeed, following Lily's gaze as she paints, the novel insists on two particularly emotionally relevant scenes: the scene of Mrs Ramsay knitting a stocking by the window, and that of Mr Ramsay sitting in the boat, sailing to the lighthouse. The titles of the novel's first and last sections, 'The Window' and 'The Lighthouse', reflect this emotional focalisation, for it is around these scenes that the narrative weaves the complex and contrasting feelings Mr and Mrs Ramsay have for each other and inspire in the other characters, which are also caught in their 'magnetic field'.[63] In other words, the scenes of the window and the lighthouse encapsulate two different ranges of emotions, connected with Mrs and Mr Ramsay respectively, that the novel is constantly trying to put into relation, all the while describing its own process: this is why, as Hermione Lee observes, Lily's 'problem of design in her painting [...] is also the problem of understanding the relations between the Ramsays', which are represented, on canvas, by the relations between two shapes (*TL* xviii).

The problem of Lily's design, which troubles her almost until the end of the novel, is expressed as her failure to achieve 'that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary' (*TL* 209). The contrast and balance between

[62] Freedman, pp. 194-95.
[63] Freedman, p. 229.

two opposite forces represents another pattern of relations discoverable in *To the Lighthouse*, which enriches and completes the unified and 'rounded' design created by Mrs Ramsay's and Lily's 'moments of being'. Starting with the opening discussion about whether it will be possible to go to the lighthouse the next day, the novel traces a wide course of division and reconciliation between husband and wife in which the harmony reached after the dinner party at the end of the first section anticipates their final symbolic reunion when the expedition is eventually accomplished. Freedman interprets the opposition between Mr and Mrs Ramsay as a function of the novel's poetic process of abstraction:

> On the level of poetry, the Ramsays' marriage is a duel of opposites represented by the contrasting images of window and lighthouse. Through these two motifs, the marriage becomes more than itself. Lily Briscoe perceived it as a unity of opposites – an equivalent in life to the balanced composition she sought to achieve on her canvas.[64]

Among the couple's various differences stands out the contrast between Mrs Ramsay's creative energy ('the whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her') and the 'sterility of men', which is reflected in Mr Ramsay's irritable character (*TL* 91). Indeed, while Mrs Ramsay is constantly trying to bring people together and see that they get on with each other – effort that culminates in the dinner party, her masterpiece, and in the engagement of Paul and Minta – Mr Ramsay represents instead, with his tempers and egotism, an element of disharmony, despite his wish to protect his family. In 'The Lighthouse' section, he also unwillingly constitutes an obstacle to Lily's creativity, since as soon as he approaches her canvas she is unable to continue painting: 'You shan't touch your canvas, he seemed to say, bearing down on her, till you've given me what I want of you' (*TL* 164). This explains why Lily sees Mr Ramsay as an opposite force to her picture, the more so considering that the painting has been so far an attempt at depicting Mrs Ramsay, who in Lily's mind embodies the essence of artistic composition.

[64] Freedman, p. 233.

The opposition between husband and wife is also reproduced by the structure of the novel – the section 'The Lighthouse' being constructed as an inverted mirror of 'The Window'. In the first section, the expedition to the lighthouse fails, while in the second it succeeds; in the first, Mr Ramsay does not want to embark on the journey, upsetting his children, while in the second he forces his reluctant children to go; in the first, Lily is unable to finish her painting, while in the second she succeeds. The sense of converging forces is intensified by the crossing directions of the characters' gaze: while in the first section Mrs Ramsay looks at the lighthouse from the drawing-room window (where Mr Ramsay stops to look at her as he paces up and down the terrace), in the second Mr Ramsay, having reached the lighthouse, looks back at the island where the house is. At the moment of landing, his figure interestingly resembles the shape of the lighthouse itself, 'very straight and tall […] as he sprang […] on to the rock' (224), a detail which confirms husband and wife, together with the window and lighthouse scenes and sections representing them, as opposite focal points that complement each other. This is the reason why Lily too has to turn her gaze from the window to the lighthouse in order to finish her picture, as she finally realises that to complete the portrait of Mrs Ramsay she needs to include her husband: 'Mr Ramsay? She wanted him' (219). Hence her final brushstroke: which means completion and fulfilment, but also, given that Mr Ramsay is so often identified with the disruption of creativity, a break in the unity of the design. A negative association may in fact be also attached to this final mark, which Hermione Lee rightly connects to the 'savage break of narrative down the middle of the book' represented by the section 'Time Passes', with the disruption to family life brought by the death of many of its members and the war (*TL* xxxvii).[65]

[65] Woolf describes the plan for the section 'Time Passes' in her diary as 'this impersonal thing, which I'm dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the consequent break of unity in my design' (*D* 3: 36).

The tripartite structure of the novel, therefore, is another consequence of its design: that balance about a centre line that Roger Fry deemed so rich of potential formal relations. *To the Lighthouse*, in particular, explores the formal role of the centre line in a composition in three ways: as a catalyst of stability and completion; as the point of convergence and balance of opposite forces; and as an agent of rupture. In the specific context of prose fiction, a centre line may consist in a metaphor so vast that, like the lighthouse, is not attached to any definite meaning and precisely for its ability to attract different meanings assumes a purely formal role: the ordering principle of composition itself. The other abstract elements – stability and completion, the convergence of opposite forces, rupture – which can be readily visualised in a painting, in fiction are nothing but emotions: the feeling of rest and order that arises during a 'moment of being', the contrasting emotions inspired by different characters and the feelings they have for each other, and finally the shock brought about by death, war, and the lack of creativity. These emotions are the confused, subtle, blurred substance that the centre line 'shapes up': brings to definition, holds in balance and makes universal. The rounded composition that results from this careful ordering process, in Woolf's view, is analogous to poetry in its effects, despite being a novel in form, because it produces the same emotion of rest and stability that poems inspire by encapsulating essential meaning. The ultimate affinity between poetry, painting and fiction in *To the Lighthouse* is confirmed by the fact that precisely a poet, Mr Carmichael, is standing by Lily's side as they witness the landing at the lighthouse: 'They had not needed to speak. They had been thinking the same things and he had answered her without her asking him anything' (*TL* 225).

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While *To the Lighthouse* composes an abstract pattern by using the ingredients characteristic of the novel's genre, such as character and narrative, Cecchi's decorative-lyrical essays, due to their different size and purpose, privilege description and hence rely more directly on visual

elements for the construction of their designs. Characters, if present, are flattened to the grade of figures that populate a tableau, and narrative is either completely absent or very slim, substituted by the succession of different observable scenes. Cecchi's essays, even before they appeal to the critical mind, appeal to the eye: behind the decision to prioritise the visual is his persuasion that the image, as a vehicle of knowledge and expression, is superior to the written word. Cecchi declares this explicitly in an extract on the painting compositions of Greek vases:

> Più o meno, la poesia illustrò le stesse favole, dette le stesse rappresentazioni di vita […]. Ma almeno una parte di ciò che la parola (e parola lontana, di lingua morta) può appena suggerire, la plastica l'ha serbata intatta, e la rinvergina in aspetti più evidenti di quel che sarebbe a vederci dinanzi persone e cose in carne e ossa.
> La parola è opaca di sapori dottrinali, di filtrazioni umanistiche, di sedimenti del tempo. Un disegno, una pittura, anche mediocri, ritengono maggiormente della carnale immediatezza con la quale sbocciarono sotto al pennello. Ed integrano la parola. (*SV* 787-88)[66]

Cecchi's awareness that the visual arts can leave a more universal and lasting impression led him to reflect on the limitations of writing as a medium, especially when required to convey knowledge which originated in an act of vision. Paolo Leoncini calls this lifelong interrogation, central to Cecchi's career, 'il *limite* del dire'[67] and describes it as an enquiry about 'le potenzialità e i limiti della parola verbale, nelle sue modalità metaforiche, rispetto al «vero», all'assoluto, all'origine, all'infinito',[68] and about how to express in words 'una percezione visivo-plastica che deriva dalla facoltà corporea dello sguardo'.[69]

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[66] 'More or less, poetry illustrated the same stories, gave the same representations of life […]. But at least a part of what the word (and a distant word, of a dead language) can just barely suggest, plastic art has preserved it intact, and revives it in aspects that are even more distinct than if we saw before us people and objects in the flesh.
The word is clouded by doctrinal flavours, humanistic filtrations, sediments of time. A drawing, a painting, even mediocre, retain more of the physical immediacy with which they blossomed from beneath the paintbrush. And they integrate the word.'

[67] 'the *limit* of saying'.

[68] 'the potential and limitations of the word, in its metaphorical modalities, compared to the "real", the absolute, the origin, the infinite'.

[69] 'a visual-plastic perception that derives from the bodily faculty of sight'. Paolo Leoncini, Valter Leonardo Puccetti, Massimo Schilirò, 'Tra il verbale e il visivo: Cecchi dal classico al postmoderno', *Ermeneutica letteraria*, 16 (2020), 11-16 (p. 11).

In other words, for Cecchi the truth, the absolute, always manifests itself in plastic form: the fundamental pattern of existence is visible, stamped in certain images and scenes that strike the essayist's eye as charged with universal significance. He tries to transpose these images on the page, attempting to reproduce their power of suggestion, but – and here is perhaps the core difficulty of translating vision into words – this power stands not in their appearance but in their decorative aspect, in the way they affect perception as abstract networks of shapes, colours, lines. Cecchi's decorative-lyrical descriptions, therefore, combine mimesis with the exaltation of decorative elements: his scenes are depicted in detail, but at the same time they show patterns of regularity or contrast – for instance, as a result of the way gestures and poses are repeated, emphasising certain shapes or lines, or in the manner colours are arranged. Even more important to Cecchi's decorative designs is movement: some scenes, apparently taken from real life, seem to have been set in motion by an invisible director who coordinates all the figures' movements as if parts of a choreography. Dance, indeed, is for Cecchi a supremely formal, non-mimetic act which reunites many abstract elements, such as poses, lines, motion and rhythm, into a single composition that shows how they are interconnected. Such depictions purposefully blur the boundaries between nature and art, for if the essence of nature is form, form is also art. The following analysis seeks to uncover the texts' decorative-lyrical patterns, finding support in Cecchi's own critical discussion of the images he describes. His pieces, as essays, constantly analyse their own visions: the same function that Woolf, in *To the Lighthouse*, assigns to Lily, who acts both as a character and as the novel's built-in critical eye.

As *To the Lighthouse*, through Lily's gaze, invites the reader to switch focus and see reality in its formal, abstract elements, Cecchi's descriptions likewise intend to provoke a perspective shift aimed at extracting the decorative-lyrical aspect of a scene. In 'Passi sulla neve' [Footsteps in the snow] (1917), the change of perspective on a landscape is caused by the snow, metaphorically compared to a callous 'decoratore' [decorator]:

> Uccide il colore; e con un procedimento di meticolosa pazzìa, con uno stilizzamento capriccioso e matematico, comincia a riportare tutte le cose sopra il suo schermaglio bianco, ridotte ai loro magri elementi disegnativi. (*SV* 12)[70]

The text signals the perspective shift from Illustration to Decoration by stating that the viewer is in front of a 'traduzione o mascherata della realtà'[71] in which the objects of the landscape have not essentially changed but have become more evident, crystallised, reduced to their elementary meaning, fit for the gaze of a child (12-13). The process of abstraction operated by the snow, thus, has uncovered how all reality, even a seemingly innocent snowy landscape, is at the bottom locked in an infernal design of privation and necessity (14).

A similar account of how reality is revealed by its geometrical structure is in the very short piece 'Campanili' [Bell towers] (1917), first published in the same year as 'Passi sulla neve'. This piece is more inherently lyrical than the first because it not only conveys in words that the world is sustained by a geometrical design, but it is itself structured around a repeated abstract form. The reflection is centred on the idea that the bell tower of a church is the axis of the world and therefore makes the narrator become more distinctly aware that the earth is spherical:

> Quante volte un campanile mi rende conto della rotondità della terra. […] Allora non manca nulla all'illusione che effettivamente esso fori la scorza del mondo; come lo stecco, che al tempo de' tempi, il maestro passava attraverso la mela e poi faceva prillare tra le dita, per darci una immagine viva dell'asse. E mi viene in mente di distendermi supino là sotto, con gli occhi alla banderuola e alle nuvole; e mi pare che, come uno con la testa poggiata all'albero d'un gran bilanciere orizzontale, e i piedi sul cerchio, sotto di me sentirei frullare, fragoroso volano, la macchina terrestre. (*SV* 198)[72]

[70] 'It kills colour; and with a meticulous and crazy procedure, with a whimsical and mathematical stylisation, begins to reproduce all things on its white screen, reduced to their skeletal design elements.'

[71] 'translation or masquerade of reality'.

[72] 'So many times a bell tower makes me aware of the rotundity of the earth. […] Then, nothing is missing to the illusion that in fact it pierces the crust of the earth; like the stick that, a long time ago, the teacher used to pierce through an apple and make spin between his fingers, to give us a lively image of the axis. And it occurs to me to go and lie down face upwards under the tower, looking at its flag and at the clouds; and it seems to me that, like one with his head leaning on the arm of a big horizontal balance wheel, his feet on the circle, I would be able to hear the engine of the earth spinning below me like a noisy flywheel.'

The first image of the bell tower infixed in the crust of the earth designs a geometric shape – the sphere revolving around its axis – which is repeated again and again in the successive similes, providing architectural unity to the whole piece. Indeed, the stick and the apple, and the clock's balance wheel with its arm, are nothing but illustrative reproductions of the same design. The piece ends with the narrator seeing another bell tower and realising, as a consequence, the 'indisputable absurdity' that the world has multiple axes.

The method of abstract expression explained above is applied in a more complex and subtle way to a later essay, 'Esiliata' [Exiled] (1929). This piece consists in the representation of the beauty and fading of a woman almost without any physical description, so that Decoration can prevail over Illustration. As soon as he introduces this woman of mysterious and elementary beauty, the narrator declares: 'Non tenterò la descrizione. Son fatiche che non approdano a nulla' (*SV* 466).[73] To the description of the woman's facial features, he substitutes the depiction of the lost primordial landscape which used to be the dwelling of ancient poets:

> Si pensava alla solennità dei monti, alla dolcezza dell'aria, al cristallo della luna. Nel suo viso sembrava riflettersi il lento mutare di un giorno deserto e inaccessibile agli umani. (466)[74]

Symmetrically, at the end of the essay Cecchi uses another image of a remote landscape to describe the woman after an illness has spoilt her beauty:

> Nei luoghi percossi dal fulmine vapora un funereo incanto, come un fiato dalla regione dei morti e delle stelle. Un che di simile è rimasto sulla creatura visitata da tanto dono di bellezza. Luccica fra le ceneri una sbiadita polvere d'astri. (469)[75]

The two landscapes connect the beginning to the end of the essay, making it as still and self-contained as a painting: despite the passing of time, the closing description restates the idea

[73] 'I won't attempt to describe her. It's an effort that doesn't lead to anything'.

[74] 'One would be reminded of the solemnity of the mountains, the sweetness of the air, the crystal of the moon. On her face seemed to be reflected the slow passing of a desolate day inaccessible to human beings.'

[75] 'In places struck by thunderbolt lingers a funereal spell, like an exhalation from the region of the dead and the stars. Something similar is left on the creature visited by such a gift of beauty. A pale stardust glimmers among the ashes.'

that the woman's beauty has an otherworldly and inaccessible quality. Indeed, the woman always appears aloof and detached even from herself, as she seems unaware of either her attractiveness or, later, her desolation; moreover, it is impossible to communicate with her because she is mentally deficient and can only say very basic and obvious things. The core of the essay is therefore the concept of closed and unapproachable, exiled beauty, which Cecchi expresses both at the level of content and, more importantly, at the abstract level of pure form ('*Astrazione decorativa*', *T* 510).

Indeed the introversion, or 'gelosia di solitudine'[76] of such beauty (468), especially at the time of suffering, is formally represented by a curved line. The process is analogous to that described in 'Campanili', and consists in juxtaposing several images that, in their decorative aspect, all replicate the same abstract form, in order to intensify its power of suggestion. Cecchi starts by mentioning the curve of the woman's shoulders, which is then repeated in a series of folding movements displayed in subsequent scenes:

> E su quei velluti *la curva* delle spalle, che un tempo ricordavano le spalle della Venere Capitolina, dava una pena intollerabile, come a vedere una donna che *si rannicchia* percossa. (468; my italics)[77]

The curve of the woman's shoulders immediately evokes the bent body of a woman who is being beaten, which in turn reminds the narrator of the posture of a girl crying by the road whom Cecchi once met during a walk in the mountains:

> Mi ero trovato dinanzi a una giovane che, deposto il fastello alto come una croce, piangeva *buttata a terra*, in un groppo di ciocche bionde, come se, *rovesciata* nel pianto, volesse respingere da sé l'universo. (468, my italics)[78]

[76] 'jealousy of solitude'.

[77] 'And above those velvet clothes the curve of her shoulders, which once used to remind me of the shoulders of the Capitoline Venus, inspired an intolerable pity, like that felt at the sight of a beaten woman bending her back.'

[78] 'I found myself before a girl who, having laid down her bundle as high as a cross, was crying thrown onto the ground, in a lump of blond hair, as if, knocked over by her crying, she wanted to ward off the universe.'

Going back to the woman of his portrait, Cecchi reaffirms that also her anguish when struck by disease 'quietamente *si chiudeva* in una solitudine altrettanto gelosa' (468; my italics),[79] until in the final scene she is depicted while, having gone out to take some air on a terrace, she holds herself tight against the cold, once again expressing introversion: 'Rabbrividendo all'accostarsi della sera, ella *si raccoglie* mirando fra gli alberi le screziature del tramonto' (469; my italics).[80]

The above analysis has shown that the piece, despite containing illustrative elements of description, is poetically constructed upon an abstract system of lines drawn by acts or movements that respond to each other in order to convey the meaning of exiled beauty. 'Esiliata' therefore appears to be the creative enactment of the following aesthetic reflections that Cecchi recorded in his *Taccuini* exactly at the time of composition of the essay (1928-29):

> Qualche altra volta ho scritto che io sono un feticista; e che la vita per me si inscrive in immagini; in *erme* che stanno in certi luoghi e limiti, con un gesto immutabile. Ma direi, piuttosto, che invece di immagini e figure spiegate, questo per me è vero nel senso di atti, linee; qualche cosa che avesse la vivezza di sentimento di una frase musicale, investita nella evidenza plastica di una linea. La vita che culmina in riconoscimenti istantanei e acutissimi: momenti visionarî; e la sua storia, in fondo, si potrebbe costruire segnando questi. […] Una architettura di atti, con la quale coincide un significato fondamentale, un mistero […]. (*T* 449)[81]

We can recognise here an echo of Cecchi's conception of poetry as the architectural unity of purely formal elements, which are specified to include not only visual motifs but also acts and music.

Indeed, consistently with the affinity between poetry and choreography explained in 'La commedia come danza', Cecchi sees an identity between line, movement, and rhythm

[79] 'silently shut itself into an equally jealous loneliness'.

[80] 'shivering as the evening approaches, she folds herself admiring beyond the trees the variegated colours of sunset'.

[81] 'Some other time I wrote that I am a fetishist; and that life for me is inscribed in images; in sculptures that stand at certain places and edges, with an immutable gesture. But I would rather say that instead of images and full figures, this is true for me in the sense of acts, lines; something having the sentimental vivacity of a musical phrase, embodied in the plastic evidence of a line. Life culminating in sudden and acute recognitions: visionary moments; and its history, after all, could be reconstructed by documenting these. […] An architecture of gestures, coinciding with a fundamental meaning, a mystery […].'

which is often emphasised in the essays devoted to expressing the *decorativo-lirico*. For example, the essay 'Mercato a Littoria' [Market in Littoria] (1937) argues that markets have a poetic quality because they are recurrent human rituals: like Woolf's intermittent 'moments of being', rituals with their regular cadence mark 'un ritornello, una rima, nel ritmo quotidiano' (*SV* 898).[82] This ritualistic aspect is underlined by the description of the market as an enclosed space, like the 'proscenio'[83] of a theatre: the setting of a staged spectacle, rather than a disorderly event, despite its chaotic appearance (*SV* 897). The musical refrain metaphor has its visual counterpart in the geometric (and circular) regularity of the surrounding countryside, which with its fences, walls, roads and channels describes a round wheel that seems to be moving ('il paesaggio ruota lentamente in serene raggere'; 898):[84] indeed, movement is the very force that shapes this landscape and gives it its peculiar rhythm, as the rush of bicycles in the streets 'pareva che continuamente ridisegnasse il paesaggio nelle sue ampie volute, ne raffinasse i contorni' (899).[85] In this formal description, design, movement and rhythm are therefore closely bound together, and also suggest that there is a profound affinity between the human effort to control and order nature – in setting up rituals, for example, and shaping the landscape – and the activity of the artist: 'Ma l'invenzione di un pittore, d'un poeta, suscita in un attimo forme che, nella sua oscura fatica, il mondo avrebbe messo secoli a produrre e riconoscere. E come l'arte e il pensiero, così l'azione' (900).[86]

Movement and rhythm often constitute the architectural structure of Cecchi's decorative-lyrical essays. Some of these pieces consist in descriptions of closed systems whose elements interact in a choreographed way – or so they are presented by the author. Among

[82] 'a refrain, a rhyme, in the daily rhythm'.
[83] 'proscenium'.
[84] 'the landscape turns slowly in serene rays'.
[85] 'appeared to be continuously redrawing the landscape in its wide coils, refining its outline'.
[86] 'But the invention of a painter, of a poet, raises in an instant forms that the world, in its obscure endeavour, would have taken centuries to produce and become conscious of. And as with art and thought, so it is with action'.

these systems, aquariums are, for Cecchi, particularly revealing of the lyrical essence of reality, as we have already been able to notice from his reflections around the intricate patterns of water plants and their platonic significance. Another example is provided by the essay 'Aquarium' (first published in *La Ronda*, 1922): a minute description of the various aquatic animals displayed in the tanks of a museum. Their colours, shapes, and behaviours are of course very different according to species, but at a purely formal level this varied description is unified under the same dynamic pattern, which alternates rhythmical, repetitive motion with stasis. All the creatures depicted either repeat the same action over and over again, just to find themselves at the point where they began, or do not move at all. Some fish swim down to the bottom of the tank and then bounce back to the surface; others, significantly compared to a disciplined 'corpo di ballo',[87] sprint from the back of the tank to the front glass (called 'boccascena',[88] in keeping with the dance metaphor), then return to their initial positions with a pirouette (*SV* 246). A big shrimp is endlessly chasing a fish, which is ever taking refuge in a new cranny in the rocks in order to sleep, but keeps being disturbed and dislodged. Among these and more of such monotonous spectacles, a stark note of horror is given by a group of morays which keep entangling and disentangling their tails, interminably, 'in un amplesso sterile' (247).[89] In what is effectively a carefully arranged composition, a moving picture, the dynamic scenes are counterbalanced by the description of some solitary and motionless creature, which generally also provides a tonal contrast – a black blot among the colourful display of the other fish. Whether through stillness or pointless movement, the decorative-lyrical aspect of the aquarium consistently expresses what the author sees as a universal truth, God's strange form of entertainment: life's 'paralitica dannazione'[90] for which all desires are always frustrated (248).

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[87] 'dance troupe'.
[88] 'proscenium'.
[89] 'in a sterile embrace'.
[90] 'paralytic damnation'.

A description of marine life is also the subject of ‘Animali d’argento’ [Silver animals] (1929), a review of the nature documentaries of Roberto Omegna. The painterly and abstract qualities of the natural scenes represented in this essay are even more accentuated than in ‘Aquarium’, partly because this time they are mediated by the eye of the filmmaker, who has already arranged them into artistic compositions: Cecchi considers these documentaries as ‘quadri, indimenticabili, ch’egli [Omegna] compone con i più strani modelli e armonizza di luci favolose’ (*SV* 498).[91] With the exception of a shoal of sea-horses, whose shapes are presented as neatly outlined, ‘aspramente stampati nella cartilagine’ (499),[92] Cecchi’s descriptions tend to emphasise the most abstract qualities of the documentaries’ succession of natural scenes, such as effects of light, colour, and movement. Movement, in particular, is associated by Cecchi with a musical theme:

> Ogni tanto, un brivido più intenso percorre cotesto popolo di larve e di embrioni, segnandovi dentro come il gesto di una volontà, d’un desiderio. E la specie del gesto è sì elementare che, piuttosto che a qualcosa di visibile, si pensa all’accenno di un suono, a un brevissimo tema musicale.
> È quello stesso tema che torna e si colora quando poi ci ritroviamo in caverne e in anfratti, dall’alto dei quali cola una schiumosa luce rembrandtiana. (500)[93]

In this passage is an effective rendition of the disembodied ‘gesture’ Cecchi describes in his *Taccuini*, a line of movement which is also identified as a musical phrase. This essential identity between motion and music, united in a theme which is also tinged with colour as the camera lens moves on to the caves, can only be conceived from a point of view of extreme formal abstraction. The almost imperceptible shiver that animates this submerged world, still embryonal and amorphous, is for Cecchi the elemental expression of life’s fundamental

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[91] ‘unforgettable paintings, which he composes with the strangest models and harmonises with fabulous lights’.

[92] ‘sharply stamped on the cartilage’.

[93] ‘Now and then, a more intense shiver traverses this population of larvae and embryos, marking within them something like the gesture of a volition, a desire. And this gesture is of such an elemental kind that, rather than a visible thing, it brings to mind the hint of a sound, an extremely brief musical theme.
It is the same theme that comes back and is coloured when later we find ourselves in caves and crannies, a foamy Rembrandtian light pouring down from the top.’

greediness and longing: he also visualises it as a 'ritmo di danza',[94] which becomes a proper, complicated choreography in the love-fighting scene of the mantises. The insects' dance is also depicted as an interaction of colours: 'una vasta e crepitante scintillazione di tenero verde e d'argento' (500).[95] Therefore, at an essential level the whole of nature – here represented by the seahorses, the indistinct vegetation found in caves, the mantises – is coordinated by the same abstract impulse of pure vitality and desire which comes across as gesture, rhythm, music, dance, colour and shape: all of them, indeed, are aspects of each other and fundamentally the same thing.

It may be due to this archetypal unity of relations that Cecchi calls the world shown in the documentaries 'vera plastica delle origini' and 'piena poesia boreale' (499).[96] Certainly, in line with Cecchi's idealistic view of lyricism, the images displayed on screen express a universal truth:

> [O]ggi la mantide, l'asteria, l'infusorio sembrano stamparsi in cifre ed emblemi di una verità più misteriosa del nulla; illustrando l'insaziabile furia, l'orrore miracoloso d'una vitalità universale e disperata.
> Ci si sente legare in una trama misteriosa ed immane; come se il nostro corpo si popolasse d'un brulicame di esistenze simili a quelle […]. (501)[97]

It is important to note that the network of relations discovered in the decorative-lyrical essays, being universal, encompasses the author himself, who becomes aware of the whole system and of his involvement in it through an act of vision. This is why the noun *plastica* and the adjective *plastico* are key terms in Cecchi's work: for the observing self to intuitively grasp the existence of an abstract pattern of relations governing the universe, this has to become visible to him through a meaningful image or scene, as the realities of greed and desire animating the natural

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[94] 'rhythm of dance'.
[95] 'a vast and rustling sparkle of tender green and silver'.
[96] 'true plastic of the origins' and 'full boreal poetry'.
[97] 'Today the mantis, the sea star, the Infusoria seem to stamp themselves into codes and emblems of a truth more mysterious than nothingness; illustrating the insatiable fury, the miraculous horror of a universal and desperate vitality.
One feels caught into a mysterious and gigantic net; as if our own body became populated with bustling lives like those […].'

world, previously hidden, become 'plastiche in maniera allarmante'[98] thanks to the film documentaries (501). Many of Cecchi's *apparizioni* are revealing in this sense, as for example, choosing among the pieces analysed in Chapter 5, the image of the fountain in 'Una fontana' (1931): the cyclical movement of the fountain jet, which combines permanence and change, becomes 'evidenza plastica'[99] of the passage of time in the universe, and is therefore replicated in other images of cyclical processes, such as the wave and the glacier (*SV* 481-82).

Visions of this kind constitute a particular type of epiphany that Cecchi, in a brief and obscure note of his *Taccuini* (c1933), defines *apparizione plastica*:

> *Vaso di fiori*, nella mia stanza, nella «camera incisoria». Definire qualsiasi situazione con una projezione, uno spaccato geometrico, un prisma di linee di forza costruito su una di queste apparizioni plastiche. Il decorativo-lirico. Tutta la storia di me e del mondo, orientata, imperniata, su una simile proiezione. (*T* 500)[100]

The image evoked in this annotation, which depicts an object within a geometrical field, recalls the paintings of the Metaphysical movement, which driven by Carlo Carrà and Giorgio De Chirico had a strong impact on the culture of the 'Return to Order' after the avant-gardes that characterised the interwar period. Indeed, Cecchi's insistence on the values of plastic forms and architectural design echoes the ideas theorised by Carrà and De Chirico between 1916 and 1922 in the magazines *La Raccolta*, *Valori plastici*, *La Ronda* and *Il Convegno*, all periodicals to which Cecchi also contributed. As showed by Simona Storchi's detailed review of their writings, Carrà and De Chirico promoted a recovery of the pictorial *plasticità* and the architectural principles of the Italian early Renaissance tradition, and employed this style to capture the transcendental, platonic aspect of ordinary things, glimpsed in a moment of metaphysical insight. The very first issue of *Valori plastici* [Plastic values] (1918-1922), for

[98] 'plastic in an alarming way'.
[99] 'plastic evidence'.
[100] '*Vase of flowers*, in my room, in the "engraver's lab". Define any situation with a projection, a geometric cross section, a prism of lines of force built upon one of these plastic apparitions. The decorative-lyrical. All the history of me and the world, oriented, centred, on such a projection.'

instance, a periodical contemporary to *La Ronda* and similarly engaged in the reaffirmation of classical values, contained a poetic prose piece by Carrà, ‘Il quadrante dello spirito’ [The quadrant of the spirit] which, together with an illustration of his painting significantly titled *L’ovale delle apparizioni* [The oval of apparitions], sought to express the enigmatic, spiritual essence of the physical world.[101]

With a similar philosophical attitude, in 1923 Cecchi published in *Il Convegno* one of his most elaborate pieces, ‘La giornata delle belle donne’ [The day of beautiful women], which endeavours to illustrate the presence of reality’s hidden structural forces through the account of an intensely visual, theatrical spectacle. ‘La giornata delle belle donne’ is a celebration of women as observed by the narrator going about their usual activities from the morning to the evening of a single day, in an unspecified city. The text ostensibly presents itself as a carefully crafted composition, a staged allegory, as indicated by the theatre and dance metaphors which, from the very beginning, present the women as performers of a choreographed ritual:

> Sullo scacchiere delle vie assolate, sui mulinelli del vento, travolte da un dolce delirio danzavano più che non camminassero. La realtà diventava scenica; e la città era tutta animata d’armonici festoni e figure di contraddanza.
> Come al batter di mani d’un maestro di ballo, all’alba tutte accorrevano alle finestre. Le finestre si spalancavano una dopo l’altra. E cominciava l’eterno rito dei corpi che ogni mattina si rituffano nell’aria e nella luce. (*SV* 270)[102]

As we have seen in ‘Mercato a Littoria’, all rituals are for Cecchi poetic activities because they impose form on reality and transcend time. Correspondingly, the women who populate this unnamed city are also sometimes seen as timeless, sacred mythical figures – myths being the

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[101] Simona Storchi, ‘Metaphysical Writing and the “Return to Order”: Artistic Theorization and Modernist Magazines Between 1916 and 1922’, in Erica Bernardi, Antonio David Fiore, Caterina Caputo, and Carlotta Castellani (eds.), *Metaphysical Masterpieces 1916-1920: Morandi, Sironi, and Carrà*, monographic issue of *Italian Modern Art*, 4 (2020) < https://www.italianmodernart.org/journal/articles/metaphysical-writing-and-the-return-to-order-artistic-theorization-and-modernist-magazines-between-1916-and-1922/> [accessed 15 January 2021].

[102] ‘On the chessboard of the sunny streets, in the whirlwinds, overpowered by a sweet delirium they were dancing more than walking. Reality became scenic; and the city was all animated by harmonic garlands and contradance figures.

As to the clap of a dance master’s hands, at sunrise all of them rushed to the windows. The windows swung open one by one. And the eternal ritual of bodies that every morning plunge back into the air and light began.’

abstracted 'forms' of human behaviour, and therefore a trait of poetic writing – and are referred to as nymphs, idols, or goddesses. One of them, in particular, plays a crucial epiphanic role, because she makes the author-narrator conscious that reality is all connected by a network of mysterious affinities:

> Anche prima che la divinità gli si fosse svelata, uno sentiva toccarsi da misteriose affinità ed elezioni; e annullandosi in una perplessa beatitudine per non fraintender tali inviti e non intralciarli, si faceva degno, finalmente, che apertosi un sipario d'aria, gli balzasse incontro, leggera e indubitabile, di fondo a chi sa quale eternità, la donna e la dea; e, legatolo al filo d'uno sguardo, se lo tirasse dietro [...]. (272-73)[103]

This figure presents all the features of an *apparizione plastica*: described indeed as an *apparizione*, she reveals to the narrator that the city is traversed by a sort of magnetic field, in which he is himself caught, and which coordinates the movements of all the other women. The narrator is pulled towards this goddess 'come un ago magnetico' (272-73):[104] initially she seems to be the source and centre of this energy, also considering that the narrator finds her at the geometric centre of the city ('dove la città concentricamente s'affina e sublima'; 272),[105] but in fact she is just the means through which these lines of force and attraction become evident to him. The other women are simultaneously agents and victims of these forces, which generate a kind of order in the tumultuous city:

> Si muovevano questi esseri in un disordine ordinato; come cose travolte da una corrente che, variamente atteggiate, le riconduca sempre negli stessi punti. E mentre sembrava ch'ella perdesse qualcosa di sé per cederlo ad altre bellezze, ne riceveva qualcosa che non aveva. E quando, in fine, era misteriosamente sparita, la sua scomparsa era quasi senza rammarico. (273)[106]

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[103] 'Even before the divinity was revealed to him, one felt touched by mysterious elective affinities; and melting away in a state of perplexed bliss in order not to misunderstand certain invitations and hinder them, one became worthy that, finally, following the rising of a curtain of air, leapt towards him, light and indubitable, from the far end of who knows what eternity, the woman and goddess; and that she, having tied him to the thread of her gaze, pulled him along [...].'

[104] 'like a magnetic needle'.

[105] 'where the city concentrically refines itself and sublimates'.

[106] 'These creatures moved in an ordered disorder; like things swamped by a current that, in various poses, always brought them back to the same spots. And while it seemed that she was losing something of herself to

Using this passage as a key to interpret the organisation of the whole piece, we can notice that the text's non-narrative succession of crowded and chaotic scenes insists on some recurrent details, as if an accent was always falling on the same places, weaving a pattern of correspondences, an 'ordered disorder'.

The above passage states that the women are 'variamente atteggiate', that is, they take different attitudes or poses, but some of these acts, and some parts of their bodies, are recurrently emphasised, exactly like elements of a choreography. A proper 'architecture of acts', therefore, gives 'La giornata delle belle donne' a purely formal structure, thus making it, according to Cecchi's criteria, a poetic text, especially if we consider the lyrical value he places on gestures. The women, individually or as a group, perform a ritual, an offering of bodies, whose firmness and glowing whiteness under the sun – undeniably an allusion to classical sculpture – is repeatedly underlined, in contrast with the light and colourful fabrics of their clothes: 'Certe con una pellegrina sottile come l'aria, di sotto alla quale usciva più duro e lucente l'avorio delle braccia' (274).[107] The women's naked arms play the most prominent role in this choreography from the very beginning, when they are described twice with an emphatic poetic construction: 'Carica le braccia d'erbe e di stoviglie' and 'nuda le braccia gagliarde' (270-71).[108] On two occasions, the women's arms are shown in the act of holding something (270; 271-72), while in three more scenes they are portrayed lifted up as the girls brush or adjust their hair (271; 274; 277). Further, the narrator twice describes the women's shoulders, of dazzling whiteness as they emerge from their ever-falling and revealing clothes (275; 278),

give it up to other beauties, she received from them something she did not have. And when, eventually, she mysteriously vanished, her disappearance was almost without regret.'

[107] 'Some of them wearing a mantle as thin as air, from under which the ivory of their arms came out harder and shinier'.

[108] Literally 'Laden her arms with herbs and dishes' and 'naked in her strong arms'. This type of poetic inversion comes from Latin and consists in changing the position of an adjective that logically belongs to a complement (in these examples 'carica' [laden] and 'nuda' [naked], both attributes of 'braccia' [arms]) so that it precedes, rather than follows, the relevant complement and is grammatically matched, instead, to the subject of the sentence (the woman).

and often, of course, draws attention to their eyes, in whose sudden glances is concentrated the women's magnetic force (271; 272-73; 275).

Different scenes also relate to each other according to setting: the tumultuous street scenes, in which the women's spinning movements ('turbinanti le ninfe esplodevano fuor della folla neutra, come colpi da una cortina di fumo'; 274)[109] resemble not only a dance, but also a mythical love hunt, are counterbalanced with more quiet and reserved scenes that take place behind windows. The initial view, through a window, of a woman brushing her hair in the morning is matched, at the end of the piece, by the description of the women falling asleep in the darkness behind half-closed shutters, while the only afternoon interior scene shows, by contrast, a man waking up from his siesta in a lonely room. The text is rich in such imperfect symmetries and mysterious connections, including recurrent images of fruit and flowers and a calculated arrangement of colours. For instance, there are regular touches of gold, often in combination with a dark colour: shining vividly at the margins of black shadows (270), on the hand of a woman wearing a wedding ring (272), in the decorations of a black hearse (272), in the dark eyes of the main goddess (273), and in the jewellery worn by all the women-idols, who are thus given an air of sacredness (275). The significance of these flashes of gold may be precisely to add preciousness to the piece's daily scenes and thereby contribute to the ceremonial atmosphere, but beyond that, at a purely formal level, their function is to harmonise the whole composition and create relations of similarity and contrast.

Such formal devices encourage the reader's eye to move back and forth instead of reading sequentially, as if the text was an object: indeed, if it were not for the crucial role played by dance and theatre in the formal conception of the piece, I would say that 'La giornata delle belle donne' could be reimagined as an allegorical tapestry that combines different scenes, connecting them to each other through multiple visual echoes. The text does evoke the art genre

[109] 'Whirling, the nymphs exploded out of the neutral crowd, like shots from a curtain of smoke'.

of the allegory at the end, when the closing of the summer's day is for a moment associated and confused with a winter's night:

> E, come in un'allegoria, il Verno mischiava a quelli dell'Estate i suoi doni: le frutta nei vetri erano impolverate di zucchero e neve, quasi per una brinata intempestiva; e le spalle e i torsi muliebri, grassi, gelidi e luminosi come trionfi di camelie, emergevano da una tenebra di pellicce e mantelli piumati. (277-78)[110]

This passage contains many of the recurring visual details mentioned in the above analysis: the images of fruits and flowers, the women's shoulders, the sculpture metaphor to describe their bodies, and the contrast between their white flesh and their dark clothes. However, it also displays a markedly poetic language in the usual sense, with the use of the kind of literary lexicon traditionally found in poetry, such as 'Verno', 'torsi', and 'muliebri'. These terms certainly contribute to the overall poetic effect, but at a surface level: as 'estensioni e commenti'[111] to the architecture, the network of relations, the 'arabesco', which constitutes the true lyrical invention of the work (*SV* 99).

Networks of relations extend beyond the design of individual essays and create connections between separate pieces. Margherita Ghilardi, in introducing her curated edition of the essays, underlines that Cecchi's criteria for arranging his articles when he re-published them in book collections were never chronological, but thematic (and, I would add, visual, since certain images return), and privileged patterns of contrast and affinity. His book collections were unitary and harmonic projects, with some essays being pre-destined to publication in volume even before their appearance in newspapers. However, what is even more interesting about this reordering process is that in some of the collections' later editions Cecchi seemed to have acted the opposite way and introduced, instead, more disorder: the disorganisation of previous architectures involved, in Ghilardi's words, reducing the space

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[110] 'And, as in an allegory, Winter mixed his own gifts with those of Summer: the fruit behind glass were dusted with sugar and snow, as if due to an untimely frost; and the women's shoulders and busts, fat, icy and glowing like triumphs of camellias, emerged from a dark cloud of furs and plumed mantles.'

[111] 'extensions and comments'.

devoted to ‘poetry’ in order to add more markedly colloquial, informative or critical essays (*SV* xvii-xviii; xxiii-xxiv). Ghilardi explains this voluntary regression into partial disorder in an illuminating way by recalling a piece called ‘«Quia imperfectum»’ [Why imperfect], which Cecchi names after an essay of Max Beerbohm that bears the same title. Here, Cecchi writes about the artist’s fear of perfection, giving the example of Navajo women’s textiles, whose design carries a deliberate fracture or flaw:

> Questa mi sembra una profonda lezione d’arte: vietarsi, deliberatamente, una perfezione troppo aritmetica e bloccata. Perché le linee dell’opera, saldandosi invisibilmente sopra se stesse, costituirebbero un labirinto senza via d’uscita; una cifra, un enigma di cui s’è persa la chiave. (*SV* 587)[112]

In his first review of *To the Lighthouse*, Cecchi describes the novel as a classical work, a finely woven fabric, unitary in rhythm and tone (‘*tempo*’ and ‘*tono*’), all details concurring to evoke a general atmosphere of desolate sorrow, ‘ch’è la gran nota lirica del libro’:[113] yet, as in the Navajo textiles, he finds in the episode of the loss of Minta’s brooch on the beach, ‘una impercettibile screpolatura, una bolla di superfluità, o come in una statua l’ombra d’una menda o d’un artifizio di fonderia’ (*SIA* 2: 25-30).[114]

These comments are a powerful reminder that, for Cecchi, pure form in literature is not something rigid but organic – ‘il libro [*To the Lighthouse*] cresce su se stesso, con una sorta di fatalità vegetale’ (*SIA* 2: 25)[115] – and contains in itself also a principle of disorder. In his second review of *To the Lighthouse*, Cecchi observes that the novel strikes a perfect balance ‘tra la freschezza dell’espressione e la lirica ragione dell’argomento’ (*SIA* 2: 31).[116] The meaning of this statement is subject to interpretation, but I think it recalls the way Lily wants her painting

[112] ‘This seems to me a profound lesson of art: to forbid oneself, deliberately, a perfection that is too arithmetic and fixed. Because the lines of the work, closing invisibly upon themselves, would constitute a labyrinth without a way out; a cipher, an enigma whose key has been lost.’

[113] ‘which is the great lyrical note of the book’.

[114] ‘an imperceptible cracking, a bubble of superfluity, or like in a statue the shadow of a blemish or of a foundry artifice’.

[115] ‘the book grows upon itself, with a kind of vegetable fatality’.

[116] ‘between its freshness of expression and the lyrical reason of the theme’.

to be: ‘feathery and evanescent’ on the surface, but ‘clamped together with bolts of iron’ beneath (*TL* 186), leading Hermione Lee to reflect that fragmentation is part of the novel as much as its unity is (*TL* xii). In this constant dialogue between order and disorder, which both Woolf and Cecchi seem determined to keep alive, we can best comprehend the significance of choosing to create poetic effects in prose, as opposed to the visible and recognisable, but remote from life’s experience, perfection of the poetic form.

# Conclusion

> 'Where exactly does the mountain end and where do the plains begin? Where does the savannah begin and the desert end? We cut the world into large slices. We think of it in terms of concepts that are meaningful for us, that *emerge* at a certain scale.'
>
> Carlo Rovelli, *The Order of Time*

Poetic effects arise from the prose continuum, but no definite line separates them from it: brought out of context they fade away. They emerge as 'poetic' out of their interaction with the 'prosaic', from which, at an elementary scale, they are formally indistinguishable. Both Woolf's and Cecchi's definitions of poetry, stripped to their core, are fundamentally relational: for Woolf poetry consists in a perspective shift, which of necessity implies a dynamic between two perspectives, while for Cecchi the spark of poetry can only be produced by the tension between two opposite poles. These two definitions are remarkably complementary: Woolf's concept of the perspective shift, applied to Cecchi's essays, helps us to better appreciate how Cecchi combines rational and intuitive modes of knowledge, in order to illuminate his topics from a prosaic and a poetic point of view simultaneously. Cecchi's image of the two electrical poles, in turn, allows us to become better aware that in Woolf's novels, too, the poetic perspective is always dependent on and in contrast with the prosaic: Woolf manages the transitions from one to the other so subtly and gradually that the reader can barely perceive it, but the tension is there, and it can be noticed more clearly after reading Cecchi's essays, where the clash between the two perspectives is obvious and uncomfortable.

My close reading of the texts of both authors has shown that poetic effects in prose, though generated by elements of style, are not attached to a single set of devices. This means that a full understanding of the way poetic effects act upon hybrid texts requires much more than tracking the presence of some of verse's techniques, or recognising that some passages of

a work of prose present the same density of meaning and emotional intensity usually associated with poetry. In Woolf's as well as in Cecchi's works, poetic effects are not the result of a superficial imitation of poetic language: what these prose texts seek to recreate is not what poetry looks like, but what it represents to their authors, based on their experience of reading certain poetic traditions and on the ideas around the essence of poetry beyond verse circulating at their time, in their respective countries. This is the reason why cultural discrepancies, as well as convergences, are so important to bring into focus in enquiries of this kind, which prove more effective when considering more than one language and context.

By comparing Woolf's and Cecchi's perceptions, we have been able to follow the trajectories of the post-Romantic idea of poetry as epiphany across different genres, expressed through various stylistic patterns: experienced by some of the characters in Woolf's novels as moments of insight into aspects of universal human condition, in Cecchi's essays lyrical epiphanies unsettle the texts' matter-of-fact fabric with unexpected imaginative and transcendent views. The reading of Leopardi led Cecchi to interpret lyrical epiphanies also as a form of philosophical knowledge that simultaneously assists and overthrows the rational faculty. The importance of poetic drama in English culture is reflected in Woolf's association of the poetic perspective with dramatic speech, and is consequently manifested in her experimentation with soliloquising and choral voices in her fiction. The question of the spoken word and the choral possibilities of poetry remain unexplored in Cecchi's work, which focuses instead on poetry's lyrical and visual aspects: undoubtedly more appropriate to his shorter, non-narrative pieces, but also a consequence of Croce's influential theorisation of art as the lyrical merging of feeling and image. Finally, Woolf's and Cecchi's proximity to the art critics Fry and Berenson inspired them to develop a shared notion of poetry as abstract design, which most interestingly resumes the traditional view of the poem as an ordered composition – the very aspect that both Woolf and Cecchi as prose writers were moving away from – but

reinterprets it in abstract terms as an invisible ordering principle, compatible with the novel's and the essay's apparent commitment to casual details and impressions.

By making fiction and journalism perform some of poetry's tasks, both Woolf and Cecchi endeavoured to reduce the gap they perceived was widening between poetic expression and lived experience. By bringing poetry, with its universal statements, into narrative, Woolf sought to diminish its aloofness and make it reach a wider audience through a more popular literary genre. Similarly, Cecchi moved lyrical expression from the narrow platforms of specialist literary reviews – where it was already done in prose, but in a prose which was broken, obscure, wildly experimental – to the mainstream channels of daily newspapers. In doing so, both authors radically innovated in their respective genres, making the novel and the essay or article convey what was not expected from them.

Woolf's and Cecchi's experimentation with the interplay between poetry and prose belongs, as it is well known, to a wider modernist tendency to challenge received forms and blur generic boundaries,[1] hence it would be interesting to enquire whether other authors of the period similarly addressed the question of poetry in prose in terms of perspective shifts and textual polarities. More crucially, this study wishes to encourage more cross-cultural investigations into the notion of poetic style in prose, mindful of the fact that this descriptive category, which sounds either exceedingly technical or, on the contrary, extremely vague, is in fact linked to a rich landscape of localised, if unstable, ideas that vary according to literary period and context. Important research has been done and is ongoing in the field of comparative literature to trace the variances, as well as the intersections, of key words and concepts relevant to the humanities across different languages and cultures, with the purpose of increasing awareness of the cultural specificity informing the very critical categories scholars use.[2] In-

[1] Lewis, p. 3.

[2] I refer specifically to studies of the scope of *A New Vocabulary for Global Modernism*, ed. by Eric Hayot and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016) and the *Dictionary of*

depth analyses of individual authors can profit greatly from the methods and perspectives offered by these new multicultural overviews.

*Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) <10.1093/acref/9780190681166.001.0001>.

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*D* *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell, assisted by Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977-84)

*E* *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986-2011)

*JR* *Jacob's Room*, with introductions by Lawrence Norfolk and Elisabeth Bronfen (London: Vintage, 2004)

*L* *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson, assisted by Joanne Trautmann, 6 vols (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975-80)

*MB* *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind and Hermione Lee (London: Pimlico, 2002)

*ND* *Night and Day*, ed. with an introduction by Suzanne Raitt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

*O* *Orlando*, ed. with an introduction by Michael H. Whitworth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

*RF* *Roger Fry: A Biography*, ed. by Diane F. Gillespie (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995)

*ROO* *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2000)

*TL* *To the Lighthouse*, ed. by Stella McNichol and Hermione Lee (London: Penguin, 1992)

*VO* *The Voyage Out*, ed. with an introduction by Lorna Sage (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992)

*W* *The Waves*, ed. with an introduction by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015)

### Works by Emilio Cecchi

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*PP* *Piaceri della pittura: Saggi e note di critica d'arte con 47 tavole* (Venezia: Neri Pozza, 1960)

*RC* *Ricordi crociani* (Milano: Ricciardi, 1965)

*SIA* *Scrittori inglesi e americani*, 2 vols (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1962-64)

*SV* *Saggi e viaggi*, ed. by Margherita Ghilardi (Milano: Mondadori, 1997)

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