



INSTITUTIONEN FÖR
SPRÅK OCH LITTERATURER

TANGLED IN A GOLDEN MESH

Synesthesia in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and
To the Lighthouse

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Essay/Degree Project: 15 hp
Program or/and course: EN1311
Level: First cycle
Term/year: VT/2022
Supervisor: Joe Kennedy
Examiner: Maria Olaussen
Report nr:

Title: Tangled in a Golden Mesh – Synesthesia in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*

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Abstract: While synesthesia is generally considered to be a subjective representation of one's perception of the world, this essay seeks to problematise and to extend the notion of synesthesia solely being a trait of subjectivity, suggesting that it also works as a method of connection. In the literary field of modernism, the idea of merging the senses into an all-encompassing experience has been prominent and widely explored. By examining the use of synesthetic aesthetics in Virginia Woolf's novels *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), this essay contributes with knowledge on how Woolf's use of synesthesia works as a means of unification on multiple levels. It gives insight on how her personal understanding of perception affects her depiction of impressions; how her vanguard use of sound and noise works in relation to geographical place; and emphasises her persistent search for a mutual foundation of understanding regarding one's private, internal experience of reality.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf; synesthesia; synesthetic aesthetics; *Mrs Dalloway*; *To the Lighthouse*; modernism

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1. Introduction

“Instead of remembering here a scene and there a sound, I shall fit a plug into the wall; and listen in to the past” (67), wrote Virginia Woolf in her memoir, *A Sketch of the Past*, 1939. To Woolf, sound and other senses are virtually inseparable and seem to form an undisputable union. The constant pursuit of creating an all-encompassing depiction of an impression, apprehended through the subjective perception of one’s reality, is demonstrated across her wide-ranging catalogue of writing; through essays, articles, diaries and works of fiction. The unswerving aspiration to convey that internal experience as extensively as possible, to, and through, all senses, is one of the greatest attributes of her writing. Woolf aims to make us not only see, hear and feel, but to make us see what is heard, hear what is seen and feel what is perceived.

By the incorporation of this sensory union, Woolf aids the reader in arraying the impressions of the world not in a straight line, but in a circling, infolding movement, since “life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (*Modern Fiction*, 160). This encircling understanding of perception is an essential part of her fiction. In *Mrs Dalloway*, the ever-flowing presence of sound is not only audible but made visible and almost tangible. The “leaden circles of Big Ben” (4), the “ring of sound” of St Margaret (49) and the “rivulets” of the voice of an old woman (81) consist of as much sound as they do vision; whereas colour, movement and geometrical form are what represent the quest of reaching the inner core of another human being in *To the Lighthouse*. Here, the urge to comprehend and portray what one perceives coincides with another core interest of Woolf’s; the complexity of communication, and particularly the translation of a private experience into a public one. In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf uses the image of a “golden mesh” (50) to describe this state of confusion regarding the understanding of another human being, allowing the image to become a substantial place where perceptions get “tangled”, “half-way to truth” (50). While Woolf’s attention towards the struggle of communication is palpable, much of her writing goes beyond the mere aspect of struggle, and attempts to illuminate the fact that we are also, in some way or another, connected to each other. The belief in the power of unification appears to be endless and Woolf persistently creates internal and external links between her characters. These links may be sounding objects placed within a limited geographical place, working like irresistible forces of impulses to collectivity; they may consist of a purely internal tingling of intuition, a feeling of connection that Clarissa experiences as she

becomes aware of the death of Septimus; or they may be presented through the image of a thread that constantly, endlessly is being weaved by someone, everyone; intertwining the lives of the citizens of London

and they went further and further away from her, being attached to her by a thin thread” ... which would stretch and stretch, get thinner and thinner as they walked across London; as if one’s friends were attached to one’s body... by a thin thread, which ... became hazy with the sound of bells, striking the hour or ringing to service, as a single spider’s thread is blotted with rain-drops, and burdened, sags down.

(111)

If life is a “luminous halo” in which all impressions are merged with sounds, movements, colour and vision, it is Woolf’s mission to capture these impressions as encompassing as possible. Writing colours and sounds as much as letters, Woolf accomplishes what she herself sought after in the visual art; regarding the paintings of Walter Sickert, she states: “when he paints a portrait, I read a life” (2021: 67). When Woolf writes a life, the reader is shown more than a portrait; they are shown a unifying, synesthetic portrayal of all the impressions that exist within the halo, all the impressions that may, or may not, get “tangled in a golden mesh” of perception.

2. Theory and Method

Synesthesia is as a neurological phenomenon where two or more senses are coupled. The most commonly known cross-pairing is probably that of sound and colour, but the pairings could regard all the senses. It was an important part of both late Romantic and Symbolist thought during the nineteenth century and visual artists aspired to simulate synesthetic associations in their audience through their work, since “synaesthetic associations were thought to result from a heightened state of aesthetic awareness in the perceiving subject” (Brougher et. al., 15). The idea of an art that explored the merging of the senses was also prominent during the beginning of the twentieth century. In visual art, precursors of the abstract movement like Wassily Kandinsky and František Kupka attempted to “endow their canvases with the emotional intensity, structural integrity, and aesthetic purity that they attributed to music” (Brougher et. al., 25). Daniel Albright suggests that during the twentieth century there was “a deep concord among artistic media” (2000: 6) and claims that “for one stream of Modernism...the arts seem endlessly interpermeable, a set of fluid systems of construing and reinterpreting, in which the

quest for meaning engages all our senses at once. Thinking is itself looking, hearing, touching – even tasting” (2000: 6-7).

Although different streams of modernism have aspired to create an all-encompassing sensory experience or sought to use different types of art mediums, this does not automatically indicate the use of synesthesia. Both Aestheticism and literary impressionism encompass several aspects that allude to synesthesia, without necessarily featuring synesthetic language or synesthetic characters. One attribute that can be ascribed to Aestheticism, is the belief that the power of art may contain a key to a deeper understanding of the world and ourselves. This could be achieved, as the poet Robert Frost states according to Daniel Albright, by making the artwork a "momentary stay against confusion” (2015: 189). Accordingly, one of the cornerstones of literary impressionism is the intertwining of the senses – both these aspects imply synesthesia, yet could be accomplished without the actual use of the trait. An example of how one’s synesthesia could be used in a medium of art is to be found in the works of the composer Olivier Messiaen. To him, colour and music were closely linked and he actively sought to translate his synesthetic colours into music: “certain sound complexes and sonorities are linked to complexes of colour, and I use them with full knowledge of this” (Messiaen 41). Messiaen created a theoretical system of modes¹ which corresponded to his synesthetic colours, and instead of solely defining them from the aspect of traditional Western music theory, he both thought of them and used them as colours: “My modes have neither a tonic nor a final; they are colors. The classical cords have attractions and resolutions. My chords are colors” (Messiaen 49).

However, synesthesia is a palpable device located in texts of writers associated with literary impressionism. It is to be found in Joseph Conrad’s preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”*, which could be read as a tribute to synesthetic aesthetics, where he states that “all art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its highest desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotion”. It can be recognised in the sense-memories of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* and the time-transferring aspects “that seeks tirelessly to capture every conceivable contour of human experience” (Watt 1). It is also apparent in the liminal narratives of Virginia Woolf, in which she places the reader in between the “granite and rainbow” of things, a phrase often recurring in Woolf’s texts, and one she used to name a collection of essays (Albright 2015: 202). Woolf’s writing seems to display a constant

¹ A musical mode may be described as a framework for a musical scale and concerns the melodic and harmonic characteristics and behaviours of the scale.

interchange between the inside of her characters and their meeting with the outside world or “the granite of things, the inviolable understructure of form perceived at the bottom of reality, and to the rainbow, the sensuous enchantment of the surface” (Albright 2015: 202). Woolf creates a vessel between the internal and the external and her searching attitude towards the human experience of reality frequently results in a “disconcerting mutability to the outside world” (2015: 192). Synesthesia is one of the literary and aesthetic devices Woolf uses to create this vessel – she experiments by using all senses, letting them merge and interlace with each other. Holly Earl places Woolf’s use of synesthesia “in modernism’s broad shift in focus from outer, rational, and objective reality to inner, nonrational, and subjective consciousness” and asserts that

across the ensuing decades her understanding of the phenomena is gradually democratized: a sort of aesthetic epiphany in her early writing, in her later work it functions as an expression of a reordered phenomenal world that is accessible to all... a fundamental element of phenomenological reality stripped of modernity’s atomizing effects.

(464)

Earl points to Woolf’s use of synesthesia as something that is “accessible to all”, more precisely referring to *Between the Acts*, but I claim this to be a useful way of reading work written at least as early as the 1920s. Correspondingly, Kathleen Marie Higgins states that, when hearing music, we become “aware of a connection with a larger reality” resulting in a chain-reaction in our other senses. If we enjoy the music, we reply with moving our bodies and “we experience our perception of sound in the case of music as connecting us to the very world that we experience through the range of our senses” (113).

This connects to a statement in Conrad’s preface that speaks of a place in us “which is a gift and not an acquisition – and, therefore, more permanently enduring”. It is a place of intangibility that neither can be touched, seen, nor fully grasped by others; nor perhaps entirely known by ourselves. It is an abstract place where matters of the heart dwell, a place of elusive substance; yet what it lacks in palpability, it makes up for in sensitive and ethereal values. Enclosed by a corporeal structure whose utmost layer is what touches the outside world, this inner place also continuously encounters the outside sphere, though its meeting is less tangible, more obscure. Conrad does not believe this side of humankind to be “dependent on wisdom” due to its everlasting quality. Although Conrad claims that wisdom is something ever-changing, reliant on a consistently forsaking, examining and dismantling attitude, one could argue that this everlasting internal quality is a kind of emotional intelligence of sensitive and intuitive values – because a possibly innate “permanently enduring” side of man does not equal

stagnation or lack of development – it is free to evolve alongside the course of one’s life. Conrad suggests that this is the quality of human beings for the attention of which the artist should plead, and though it is hard not to view this part as undoubtedly internal and subjective, Conrad underlines that it also encompasses traits that bind “together all humanity”. From his point of view, it seems that our innermost core may form a ground of mutual understanding, as well as being a centre of individuality. This duality is explored by Woolf through two of her recurrent themes – the perception of the world and the constant struggle of human understanding with its accompanying complexity of interaction.

To examine the question of subjectivity and objectivity concerning perception of reality, one must try and answer the question of what an “outer reality” may be. According to Richard Cytowic there is no such thing as an objective reality: “reality isn’t something that exists outside oneself. Encased in the silent darkness of the skull, the brain weaves your inner umwelt into a story, the reality of your subjective world” (101-102). It is undeniably difficult to find a clearer example of subjective outlook on the world than synesthesia, yet it is as difficult to claim that what we perceive is completely and utterly subjective. Without a somewhat shared viewpoint of the perceived world, it would be impossible to speak about collective experiences such as the feeling of a “tension in a room”. Gernot Böhme calls this space *atmosphere* and claims that “atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way” (20). Atmospheres are subjective in the sense that they must always be experienced and perceived through the senses of an object. However, by referring to the art of stage setting whose purpose is to induce a specific emotion in an audience, Böhme also points to the fact that “atmospheres are a typical intermediate phenomenon, something between subject and object” (29) and something that must contain a level of objectivity in itself – which also suggests that there is an “intersubjectivity” (30) to atmospheres. While they may be experienced individually, it is possible to expand the subjective experience into a universal understanding since we can share and link our experiences with one another.

Although synesthesia is indubitably an idiosyncratic trait, the main argument of this study proposes the perspective of synesthesia working as a connector, not a divider. This essay examines Woolf’s use of synesthesia as a linking device that is “accessible to all” and aims to problematise the individualistic perception of synesthesia. This is explored in Woolf’s novels *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*, and more precisely through the characters of Lily Briscoe, Clarissa Dalloway and Septimus Smith, as well as through Woolf’s more general use

of synesthesia in terms of presenting an atmosphere, and using synesthetic associations as connectors of the city of London.

3. *Mrs Dalloway*

The incessant presence of sound and noise in *Mrs Dalloway* is one of the most prominent features of the novel. Woolf allows urban noises and domestic sounds to function on multiple levels, both as a backdrop to the narrative, but perhaps more importantly as a connecting device that permeates both characters and places. Kate Flint states that in the early nineteenth century, noise was “seen as synonymous with urban modernity” (185) and that in a city like London, “the potential sources of unpleasant noise were almost endless” (186). According to Flint, Woolf differs in comparison to her contemporaries concerning her attitude towards city sounds. In the 1920s, as her writing moves into more experimental grounds – especially regarding illustration of the human consciousness – her incorporation of city-noise is celebratory; and this attitude is, out of all her fictional work, most noticeable in *Mrs Dalloway* (187). Woolf’s affirming use of city-sound is to be found already in the beginning of the novel, through the delight of Clarissa, as she steps out in the street to buy flowers. In her meeting with London, the reader is instantly connected to the soundscape of the city, flowing in from different directions

In people’s eyes, in the swing, tramp and trudge; in the bellow and the uproar; the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass band; barrel organs; in the triumph and the jingle and the strange high singing of some aeroplane overhead was what she loved; life; London; this moment of June.

(4)

The sounds and noises of the city seem to be omnipresent and multi-layered; there is one level of noise, created by the people and vehicles on the streets, as well as another level pending from above, consisting of the “strange high singing” of an aeroplane. The celebratory stance that Flint is proclaiming is evident in Clarissa’s explicit love of this clamorous atmosphere; to her, this is what constitutes life. Ahead of this conglomeration of city-noises, the sound of a single item is heard, making Clarissa feel “a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense” (4). This seems to be a constant reaction stimulated by the striking of Big Ben, appearing “even in the midst of the traffic, or waking at night” (4). Woolf’s use of sounding

objects that work as connectors between the characters are exemplified through a car back-firing, an aeroplane, and a singing old woman, but the most prominent connector of the novel is that of Big Ben, whose announcement of the time is what – more than any other thing – affects both the characters' inner processes and actions. This linkage between sound and human being is perhaps most distinctly displayed when Clarissa, accompanied by the tones of the clock, sees her old neighbour through the window: “Big Ben struck the half hour. How extraordinary it was, strange, yes, touching to see the old lady ... move away from the window, as if she were attached to that sound, that string” (126). Clarissa envisages her neighbour being merged with the sound which prolongs into a physical, active response: “she was forced, so Clarissa imagined, by that sound, to move, to go” (126). Melba Cuddy-Keane states that “Big Ben also figures as unconscious networking: its soundwaves expand over the city and into the sky beyond, bringing a multiplicity of listeners into temporal harmony as an aural community” (2019: 15). While the sounding of Big Ben has a great influence on each character's individual actions, its main purpose seems to be one of unification. Although its striking has the evocative power of initiating inner and outer processes in its audience, its sounding also merges them into a collective; nudging their senses towards the same direction. As Cuddy-Keane proposes, this also takes place on a meta-level, creating a communal concord based on the notion that they all hear the same thing, at the same time, within a limited geographical place.

To enhance this essential connector, Woolf adds a synesthetic image: “the leaden circles dissolved in the air” (4). It is as if neither the sound itself is sufficient, nor its implicit motivating force. Big Ben may be seen as a representative of city-life, a specific geographical place and a teller of time. In addition, Woolf fuses the sound of the clock with nature, giving it a synesthetic shape that, mixed with clouds and the sound of other clocks, becomes an almost tangible tendril, drifting away like the lingering smoke of an aeroplane, until it finally disperses in the sky

It was precisely twelve o'clock; twelve by Big Ben, whose stroke was wafted over the northern part of London; blent with that of other clocks, mixed in a thin ethereal way with the clouds and wisps of smoke... (The leaden circles dissolved in the air.)

(93)

In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf begins to describe scenes from her childhood as pictures, then continues: “but sight was always then so much mixed with sound that picture is not the right word” (67). In accordance to her own memories, the sound of Big Ben is not fulfilled until its sound is combined with a visual image.

Another connector is that of the car back-firing, making the sound of a pistol shot. When this sound hits Clarissa, it extricates her from an internal, sentient stream of thoughts, enforcing

an external outlook: “this beauty, this scent, this colour, and Miss Pym liking her, trusting her, were a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up when – oh! A pistol shot in the street outside! (13). Besides making “Mrs Dalloway jump”, the loud noise also compels “Miss Pym go to the window and apologize” as well as stopping the people on the street to look at the motor car (13). The explosion thus induces individual reactions in its hearers, while simultaneously connecting their attention towards the same thing: “for thirty seconds all heads were inclined the same way – to the window” (17). Moreover, Woolf emphasises the force of unity of this sound by integrating the actual sounding object with an anthropological image: “the throb of the motor engines sounded like a pulse irregularly drumming through an entire body” (14). The pounding rhythm of the motor car flows like “a pulse” through an “entire body”; as if every one that hears its beat is a part of one single organism, one single unity. They are even thinking the same thing: “for in all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of the Empire” (17).

The one person to which this unification seems troublesome is the probably shell-shocked veteran, Septimus, in whose eyes an “apprehension” (14) is palpable, and whose outlook on life seems to be one of constant dread: “the world has raised its whip; where will it descend? (14). Looking at the motor car, Septimus feels that “this gradual drawing together of everything to one centre before his eyes, as if some horror had come almost to the surface and was about to burst into flames, terrified him” (15). Flint highlights the possible aversion both noise and uninvited connection may induce: “awareness of sound is unwilling; similarly, our links with others may not be welcomed, but they are as inescapable as is the cacophony of the city” (188). Another thing that is unwilling is synesthesia, a trait that Septimus shows signs of possessing. To Septimus, the voice of a nursemaid sounds “deeply softly like a mellow organ with a roughness in her voice like a grasshopper’s, which rasped his spine deliriously and sent running up into his brain waves of sound which, concussing, broke” (21-22). Synesthesia is also incorporated in his interpretation of the world:

Music began clanging against the rocks up here. It is a motor horn down in the street, he muttered; but here it cannoned from rock to rock, divided, met in shocks of sound which rose in smooth columns (that music should be visible was a discovery) and became an anthem, an anthem twined round now by a shepherd boy’s piping (That’s an old man playing a penny whistle by the public-house, he muttered) which, as the boy stood still, came bubbling from his pipe, and then, as he climbed higher, made its exquisite plaint while the traffic passed beneath. This boy’s elegy is played among the traffic, thought Septimus.

(67-68)

The sound of a motor horn is music to Septimus; music that catapults, splits, that takes the shape of columns; twirls round the pipe of a shepherd's boy, until the "boy's elegy is played among the traffic" (68), something that could be interpreted as the boy playing in the middle of traffic, but also that the traffic is what produces the sounds, that the music is created through the noise of the city. In *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf writes that "sound and sight seem to make equal parts" of some of her own first impressions, and that she would, if she were a painter, make them into a painting where "what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf – sounds indistinguishable from sights" (66). Septimus is a painter of his own reality, and his synesthesia enables him to adorn his impressions with both sounds and paint; this isolates him from the rest of the world that encourages him to see what, according to them, may be considered "real". Rezia repeatedly implores him to "look" – because "Dr Holmes had told her to make him notice real things" (25), but Septimus does not see what, or how, they want him to see: "But what was there to look at? Some sheep. That was all" (25). By making one of her characters synesthetic, Woolf defines the inevitably private experience that synesthesia entails. More importantly, this emphasises one of the recurrent themes of Woolf's literature; the complexity of translating a private experience into a public one, and the difficulty of creating a mutual sense of understanding regarding the inner world of another human being.

In a similar intertwining manner, the sudden entrance of an aeroplane with a sound that "bored ominously into the ears of the crowd" (20) turns all heads towards the sky. While the bystanders are watching, trying to decipher the written message deriving from the plane, silence falls over the entire world "and in this extraordinary silence and peace, in this pallor, in this purity, bells struck eleven times, the sound fading up there among the gulls" (20). As the plane disappears and reappears, Woolf continuously complements its presence with sound: "it had gone; it was behind the clouds. There was no sound (21), "the aeroplane rushed out of the clouds again, the sound boring into the ears of all people" (21). As Flint states, Woolf "continually makes her reader aware of the acoustic environment" (187), both through urban city-noises, but also by incorporating a domestic sound-environment

Faint sounds rose in spirals up the well of the stairs; the swish of a mop; tapping; knocking; a loudness from when the front door opened; a voice repeating a message in the basement; the chink of silver on a tray; clean silver for the party.

(37)

Just before this passage, Clarissa thinks it odd how she knows the "very temper of the house" (37). Woolf demonstrates that temper through an omnipresent appearance of sound, as well as

assigning one of the sounds the synesthetic image of a spiral, as if the spirit and presence both consist of, and are transmitted through, sound and the visual image of that sound.

Woolf's treatment of urban environments borders on psychogeography, the study, developed in the 1950s, of how locations and environments influence the behaviours and psychological responses of individuals (Oxford English Dictionaries). While walking down the street, Peter Walsh is interrupted by the voice of an old woman: "a voice bubbling up without direction, vigour, beginning or end, running weakly and shrilly and with an absence of all human meaning... the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth" (79-80). This woman is not only a connector in terms of being the focus point of her bystanders, her wordless song also becomes a vessel, a connector, of past generations and eras: "through all ages – when the pavement was grass, through the age of tusk and mammoth, through the age of silent sunrise – the battered woman... stood singing of love" (80). She seems to be singing, not only in an environment, but *with* an environment; it is as if she is "performing" on a smaller stage inside a concert hall, and that concert hall is the city of London. Woolf is thereby using the city itself as a foundation of connection, turning London into an intermediary map of both graphic and sonic elements. According to Cuddy-Keane, in the 1920s, experiments had been conducted regarding "soundscapes of the city-streets" and "the world had opened up as a laboratory of sound" (2000: 79). This new approach towards environmental sounds developed partly from the rise of new sound technology (79), but as Flint states, the advent of a new "attentive listening" also resulted in an attitude towards hearing that enabled for an understanding of the listening subject "as someone who is in a constant process of interchange with their environment" (192). While Cuddy-Keane presents a possible reading of *Mrs Dalloway* as a visual map by arguing that "as the reader visualizes, and perhaps even cognitively re-enacts, these journeys, the paths accumulate in the "readingmind", creating a diverse and layered mental map" (2019: 15), one possible understanding of *Mrs Dalloway* is through its use of sound. Katt Hernandez, a violinist and improviser, writes in her research exposition that in her own artistic work she uses the city as "a constantly shifting map of possible entities to listen to and play with". If one reads *Mrs Dalloway* from this perspective, the journeys and the paths that the characters take in the novel could be viewed not only as walks, but as soundwalks – the act of walking while actively listening to the environment. Thus, London becomes a scene of sounds and noises transposed and experienced by the characters of *Mrs Dalloway*; a form of "aural map".

Regardless if Woolf's characters are consciously or unconsciously listening to their environment while walking the streets of London, they are immensely affected by their

sounding surrounding. By complementing sounds and noises with synesthetic images Woolf amplifies an already existing connection between humans and objects, one that is explicitly palpable in Clarissa: “odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns” (151). Similarly to Conrad’s credo of wanting to, above all, make the reader see, Woolf writes in *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* from 1934, that “painting and writing have much to tell each other; they have much in common. The novelist after all wants to make us see” (2021: 77). The “leaden circles” (4) of Big Ben, the woman’s song that streams away “in rivulets over the pavement” (81) and “the sound of St Margaret’s” that “buries itself in ring after ring of sound” (49) are both connectors, as well as synesthetic literary means to make the reader not only see, and to hear; but to make the reader see what is heard.

4. *To the Lighthouse*

While the presence of sound is consistent through *Mrs Dalloway*, vision is the most prominent sense in *To the Lighthouse*. Questions and aspects of perception are immanent throughout the novel, and these are continuously considered and examined through vision and visual means. In the ninth chapter of *To the Lighthouse*, the reader is guided through Lily Briscoe’s perception towards Mrs Ramsay, in what seems to be a desperate yearning to not only comprehend and understand Mrs Ramsay’s innermost being, but a desire to become part of her, to become completely immersed in her presence; to unify with her. What Lily seeks is not of physical existence and cannot be expressed in words. Woolf suggests that if one is to reach the inner core of another being – if that is possible – and to harmonise with them, another form of knowledge is required, as well as a different form of communication

Was it wisdom? Was it knowledge? Was it, once more, the deceptiveness of beauty, so that all one’s perceptions, half-way to truth were tangled in a golden mesh? Or did she lock up within her some secret which certainly Lily Briscoe believed people must have for the world to go on at all? ... What art was there, known to love or cunning, by one pressed through into those secrets chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge
(50-51)

Woolf's description of perceptions getting caught "half-way to truth", emphasises her view of perception and perspective being something not predetermined, as well as highlighting the indeterminacy and the interpretative nature of perception. The image of perceptions becoming "tangled in a golden mesh" implies a lack of coherence between the subjective outlook and the outer sphere as well as underlining Woolf's view of atmosphere, in terms of what is visually perceived, being something nearly tangible and substantial. It is as she writes in her early journals from 1905 about the landscape of Cornwall: "it was dusk when we came, so that there still seemed to be a film between us and the reality" (1990: 282). In another diary entry a few years later, during a visit to Turkey in 1909, Woolf describes her impressions of the Golden Horn waterway and the Hagia Sofia mosque in these terms

For in a morning a mist lies like a veil that muffles treasures across all the houses & all the mosques; then as the sun rises, you catch hints of the heaped mass within; then a pinnacle of gold pierces the soft mesh, & you see shapes of precious stuff lumped together. And slowly the mist withdraws, & all the wealth of gleaming houses & rounded mosques lies clear on the solid earth, & the broad waters run bright as daylight through their mist.

(351)

Both the gold and the mesh are encountered in this passage, and while "the golden mesh" in *To the Lighthouse* appears to be a net of interference in which Lily's perceptions are entrapped, the depiction of the atmosphere of Istanbul hints of what exists beyond the mist when the "pinnacle of gold pierces the soft mesh". Thereby, it seems – whether it is a film, a mist or a mesh clouding or obstructing the reality, that Woolf does not seem inclined to think of these impediments as something essentially negative. The image of a "golden mesh" consists of two quite paradoxical words. While "mesh" implies confusion, entanglement and captivity, the word "golden" adds a shimmer and a positive value, as if Woolf is elevating this place of confusion. This paradox is also apparent in Lily's quest of becoming one with Mrs Ramsay. Although she desperately seeks to unite with Mrs Ramsay, she believes that there are secrets in people that perhaps should not be discovered "for the world to go on at all" (50). The "golden mesh" thus works as a shelter, rather than a barrier, and as a protector of one's integrity.

Lily interrogatively searches for a means of connection where words cannot oblige – what "art", what "device", she asks, is there to merge with the object of desire? Is it the "body", the "mind", the "heart", or the act of "loving" wherein the answer lies? How does one pierce through the mesh? As Albright states, the whole novel consists of an interrogative atmosphere where "questions are real, answers are not" (2015: 190) and that the novel "imitates the mind's

necessary failure to come to terms with the world or with itself” (189). Albright further points out that in Woolf’s novels “we find a strong desire to ground art and artistic sensations in the real world” (188). Due to Lily’s artistic nature, adding a synesthetic aesthetic to literary language would be a natural method for Woolf to aid Lily in her attempt to possibly reach the “secret chambers” of Mrs Ramsay. Woolf does this by intertwining both geometrical form and audio in the end of the in-search-of-unity-passage, where Mrs Ramsay takes on the form of an “august shape; the shape of a dome” (51) through Lily’s eyes, and as she is contemplating how to reach the inner core of her hostess, she searches in her head for “the tune of Mrs Ramsay” (49) – a tune that already seems to have a solid, unquestionable existence in her head.

In addition to thinking of her as a “dome-shape”, Lily depicts Mrs Ramsay reading to her son James as a “triangular purple shape” (52). The act of turning material objects into abstract forms is not one of disrespect, but rather an attempt to be true to her inner vision, since she is determined in her belief that “a mother and child might be reduced to a shadow without irreverence” (52). In 1912, Kandinsky’s text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* was published, in which the artist advocates an intermingling of the arts and he states that “form alone, even though totally abstract and geometrical, has the power of inner suggestion” (44) and that “the more abstract its form, the more clear and direct is its appeal” (49). Coming close to Kandinsky’s view of the power of abstraction, Lily distils the essence of the image she wants to convey by breaking down what she perceives into shapes and colours. Woolf ends this chapter with a synesthetic image of Lily’s: “she nicked the catch of her paint-box to, more firmly than was necessary, and the nick seemed to surround in a circle for ever the paint-box, the lawn, Mr Bankes, and that wild villain, Cam, dashing past” (53). The circle does not only surround Lily, but encloses everything in her field of vision, as well as her inner vision of what her painting should look like. This transpires after Lily has shown her painting to Mr Bankes, which results in the realisation that the world contains an unanticipated power “that one could walk away down that long gallery not alone any more, but arm in arm with somebody” (53). Finally, Lily has received some form of experience of a shared space with another human; a unification that she yearned for with Mrs Ramsey – found in the medium of her art, captured in a synesthetic image.

In *Time Passes*, the second part of the novel, Woolf describes the duality of perception between inner and outer vision: “imaginings of the strangest kind – of flesh turned to atoms which drove before the wind, of stars flashing in their hearts, of cliff, sea, cloud, and sky brought purposely together to assemble outwardly the scattered parts of the vision within” (123). Woolf is using the elements of landscape as colours on a palette, giving the sentient a canvas and

establishing a circular path of exchange between the visceral and the visual. It is no coincidence that this passage appears in part two of the novel, which in itself is a kind of “in between” – working as tunnel or a bridge between the first and third part. During a visit to Italy in 1909, Woolf illustrates in her diary the affinity of landscape and language using a synesthetic aesthetic:

Walking on San Miniato the other evening, it occurred to me that the thing was running into classic prose before my eyes. I positively saw the long smooth sentence running like a ribbon along the road – casting graceful loops round the beggar woman & the dusky child – & curving freely over the bear slopes of the hill.

(397)

A similar image where Woolf intertwines vision, landscape and shapes is found in *To the Lighthouse*, when, during the Boeuf en Daube-dinner, Mrs Ramsay’s eyesight pliantly follows the perfectly arranged bowl of fruit “in and out among the curves and shadow of the fruit, among the rich purples of the low-land grapes, then over the horny ridge of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape” (100). Although this passage is not as strictly synesthetic as Woolf’s own experience, it stems from the same notion of an internal sense being extended and intermingled with real objects, like a road or a bowl of fruit. The same year, having seen Wagner’s opera *Parsifal*, Woolf writes in the article *Impressions at Bayreuth* about the impact of the experience: “sound melts into colour, and colour calls out for words” and that allows us to recognise “how fused our impressions are with elements which we may not attempt to separate” (qdt. in Earl 465). While the passage in the diary speaks of a merge between language and landscape, the experience of *Parsifal* emphasises a fusing of both senses and art mediums. Earl states that “Woolf detects at Bayreuth a force of unification” and that Woolf “works to bind this synesthetic description to a broader philosophy of universality: these mixed-sensory impressions substantiate her intuitive conviction that all experience shares a fundamental unity once the “arbitrary” boundaries of “ordinary experience” are dissolved (465). Woolf’s writing of all-encompassing sensory experience is exemplified through the painting of Lily Briscoe. This takes place in the third and final part of the novel. Lily contemplates on her place and relation to the house she has now returned to years later, and struggles to get hold on “the unreality of things” (138) and she decides to continue to work on the picture she once began painting. Alone at last, the others having gone to the lighthouse, and this time in a state of mounting revelation, Lily takes the first strokes of paint “with a curious physical sensation”

(148). This develops into a “dancing rhythmical movement, as if the pauses were one part of the rhythm and the strokes another” and the lines, synergetic with the body movements, form “(she felt it looming out of her) a space” (148). Several senses are connected in Lily’s painting and she physically feels the lines of paint flowing out of her, and she asks, “for how could one express in words these emotions of the body?” (165). Like Woolf’s description of a line of prose transforming into visual movement, it is as if Lily is painting in accordance to an inner melody, as if the strokes of her brush are prolongings of an inner rhythm and melody. Kathleen Marie Higgins suggests that music has an evocative power and that “it makes us strongly aware of connection with a larger reality”. This sense of connection enlivens our other senses at the same time, motivating us to respond with our entire bodies to music that engages us” (113). Perhaps this is true also of an internal music that Lily seems to retain, and the colours and shapes are the extended choreography to that music.

The act of painting is itself a means for Lily to make her internal world external. By capturing an ephemeral moment, she substantiates it; creating a painting is creating her life, her reality. She tells Mr Bankes that she cannot express her inner vision “without a brush in her hand” (52) and years later, when she attempts to finish her painting, she cannot do so until she has had her vision (192). This is the very last thing that occurs in the novel, and it seems like the story cannot end until Lily has finished her painting, until there has been a merger between the internal and the external, through the medium of her art. The painting itself is a depiction of her essence, of her being – of the “residue of her thirty-three years, the deposit of each day’s living” (50) and “something more secret than she had ever spoken or shown in the course of all days” (50) – or, the granite; the solidity of things, and the enigmatic; the ethereal qualities of a rainbow. Consequently, it both pains and excites Lily to show her painting to another person – it is frightening, yet thrilling to expose one’s soul for scrutinising. In *Sketch of the Past*, Woolf defines what seems to be the greatest purpose of her own writing:

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me.
(72)

What writing is to Woolf, painting is to Lily. It is a means of assembling the pieces, the impressions and the atoms of the world, in order to make it a clearer, more understandable place. By using synesthetic aesthetics to approach objects, atmospheres and landscapes, Woolf, in search of a larger, more all-encompassing depiction of the world, lays her own world-puzzle, forming an interlocking sensory unity of the shattered pieces.

5. Conclusion

This essay has sought to investigate Virginia Woolf's use of synesthesia in the novels *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* and has aimed to problematise the way of looking at synesthesia which simplistically associates it with subjectivity. Woolf's use of synesthesia has been explored from the outlook of it working as a means of connection, rather than one of seclusion. One of Woolf's main missions seems to have been to merge both art mediums and senses together in her writing, to create a depiction closer to how she herself experienced the world, where sound and sight appeared inseparable. In her literature, as well as in her own perception of the world, capturing an impression requires an omnipresent sensory attention that coincides with what is visually perceived.

In accordance to other literary works within the field of modernism, Woolf's use of synesthetic language and synesthetic images aspires to create an all-encompassing sensory experience, but her use of the phenomenon goes beyond mere sensory crossing. Woolf's synesthetic aesthetics create a more encompassing portrayal of her characters' experience of the world while it also functions as a connector between characters in a unifying manner. Moreover, Woolf's writing about synesthesia works on a meta-level, perhaps as an allusion to the reader that her text could, or should, be read synesthetically. Woolf's approach to sound and noise throughout the narrative of *Mrs Dalloway* is not only a perceptible literary device bringing the narrative forwards, but a motivating force that affects the internal responses and physical actions of the characters. Woolf's use of sound plays an active part in the development of the novel and allows for a reading that concerns listening, as well as listening in relation to place. *Mrs Dalloway* is therefore not only a novel that may be read psychogeographically, but one might also understand it as a sonic diagram of the city of London. The reader is thus presented to understand the novel through sound as well as sound in interaction with its surrounding. Woolf's vanguard attitude towards sounding elements and the use of city-noises may be seen to anticipate to the avant-garde experimentalists of the 1960s, and to John Cage's view of all sounding elements being possible components of music.

Perhaps most of all, this work has underlined Woolf's interest in writing about the nature of one's private experience, and the difficulty of conveying that into some form of public, external knowledge. When Lily thinks of Mrs Ramsay as being dome-shaped, or when Septimus sees the sound of a motor horn in the shape of a column, the subjective interpretation one has of one's own perception of the world is unmistakable. The question is, if we ever truly can understand or reach another being's inner core, and whether that is what Woolf is

advocating or proposing. The lacking ability of language to express what one feels is palpable to Lily, and Woolf assists her by letting her vision come out in movements, geometrical forms, brush strokes on her canvas and by letting Mrs Ramsay be represented by a melody within Lily. By letting senses intertwine and by permeating the text with synesthetic images, Woolf creates an exchanging vessel between the inner and outside world of her characters allowing for the private experiences to reach the public sphere, grasping for a unifying effect that is not always achieved. Although Mr Banks may not fully comprehend Lily's idea of painting Mrs Ramsay in the form of a geometrical shape, the act of showing him the painting is in itself unifying; it creates a shared space, a "long gallery", where one is "not alone anymore" and can walk "arm in arm with somebody" (*To the Lighthouse*, 53). It seems as if this shared space is enough. Perhaps this is Woolf's greatest use of synesthetic aesthetics. By adding omnidirectional, sensory layers to impressions, Woolf allows for the severed parts of one's reality to be put together; she creates vessels between characters, as well as between their inner and outer perception of reality – while continuously remaining true to the fact that sometimes, along the way, perceptions do get tangled in a golden mesh.

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