A Tentative Quest for Gender Identity: Elements of Queer Discourse in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and *Between the Acts*

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Abstract
Modernism was marked by a deep concern with sexuality and gender identities. Ellis's and Carpenter's works were pioneering in their attempt to disentangle the hard knot of heteronormativity, while Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde were regarded by some as a threat to society because they had taken over "the traditional idiosyncrasies of the feminine rôle" (Lewis 1989: 244). This article will argue that the sexual politics embedded in the works of Virginia Woolf anticipate the discourse of sexual identity formulated by queer theory. Depicted as the object of both heterosexual and bisexual desire, the protagonist of *Jacob's Room* (1922) explores the multifaceted nature of gender identity while *Between the Acts* (1941) deals with issues of gender and sexual desire within a well-defined cultural *milieu*.
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Poststructuralism brought about a wide range of interpretative approaches to modernism and modernity which have shed light on the delicate issue of gender roles and identities. As Bonnie Kime Scott pointed out in the introduction to the anthology of female modernist writers she edited over two decades ago,

> Modernism as we were taught it at mid-century was […] unconsciously gendered masculine. The inscriptions of mothers and women, and more broadly of sexuality and gender, were not adequately decoded, if detected at all. […] Typically, both the authors of original manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm a small set of its male participants. […] In their critique of culture, modernist women persistently bring up issues of gender, whereas men assert that the masculine is what should be advanced […]. (Scott 1990: 2; 7)

Modernism may have been received from a masculine perspective, however a widespread interest in issues of gender and sexuality

touched modernism as a whole. In her analysis of "modernist masculinity", Tickner pointed out that at the beginning of the 20th century "a concern with sexuality and sexual identity emerged as the mark of the modern in art, literature, and social behaviour", while "a combination of factors made the assertion of a virile and creative masculinity both imperative and problematic" (Tickner 1994: 47-8)[1].

In spite of this, the sexual politics of modernism – even those of the modernist male canon – are far from being homogeneous. As Foucault stressed in his *History of Sexuality* (1976), it was the Victorian need for a political economy of the population that stimulated such a plurality of discourses around sex. This 19th century *scientia sexualis* drew a line between the licit and illicit in order to establish an "economically useful and politically conservative" discourse of sexuality (Foucault 1978: 37). As a result, the capitalist drive insisted on the endogamy of sex and body as a means to preserve the existence of the bourgeoisie within society, imposing and propagandising "compulsory heterosexuality" – as Adrienne Rich puts it – for essentially economic needs (Rich 1985: 50-1). What was outside the norm was pathologised within the discourses of medicine and the social sciences, and condemned either as a transgression of civic values or as a crime against a nature shaped by political forces – the same politicised nature invoked by social Darwinism and national racisms (Dowling 1994: 5-8; Foucault 1978: 124; Hall 2003: 30ff). But while strengthening social control, such discursive practices encouraged "reverse discourses" strategically operating within the field of social forces (Foucault 1978: 101-2).

1. Performative notions of gender, from Havelock Ellis to Virginia Woolf

While for Tickner masculinity and femininity came to be perceived by male modernists like Wyndham Lewis and Augustus John as "mutually exclusive and mutually damaging" (Tickner 1994: 49), the publication of Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (co-authored

[1] Tickner explains this phenomenon by appropriating Joan Riviere's theory of heterosexuality as a masquerade. See Riviere 1929.

with John Addington Symonds, first published in German in 1896 and in English in 1897) and Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) prove that at the turn of the century gender was starting to be no longer perceived as biologically determined. At the beginning of his chapter on the "Sexual Inversion in Men", Ellis points out that

> When the sexual instinct first appears in early youth, it seems to be much less specialized than normally it becomes later. Not only is it, at the outset, less definitely directed to a specific sexual end, but even the sex of its object is sometimes uncertain. […] How far the sexual inversion may be said to be undifferentiated in early puberty as regards sex is a little doubtful to me; I should not like to go further than to say that it is comparatively undifferentiated. (Ellis 1901: 44-8)

Similarly, taking the work of Karl Einrich Ulrichs (1825-1895) and Albert Moll (1862-1939) as his starting point, Carpenter notes that

> It is beginning to be recognised that the sexes do not or should not normally form two groups hopelessly isolated in habit and feeling from each other, but that they rather represent the two poles of one [continuous] group. (Carpenter 1912: 16-7)

Words like "intermediate" and "inversion" are likely to sound derogatory to 21st century readers, who may perhaps associate them to the notion of hermaphroditism, but Ellis and Carpenter were pioneers in attempting to break down the barriers of heteronormativity. As a matter of fact, Carpenter discards the word homosexual for being "a bastard word" and introduces the adjective "homogenic" which, etymologically deriving from the two Greek roots *homos* and *genos*, he finds less politically connoted (Carpenter 1912: 38).

While Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* and Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* begin to highlight the distinction between sex and gender, Wyndham Lewis claims, according to Tickner, the cult of "the uncultivated and, hence, unfettered masculinities" (56) after his departure from the Omega Workshop in 1913. The episode is linked to professional jealousy and incomprehension, but in criticising Roger Fry's Workshop for being "badly organised" and "unfairly managed", Lewis despises its members as

> [a] family party of strayed and Dissenting Aesthetes [who], however, were compelled to call in as much modern talent as they could find, to do the rough and masculine work without which they knew their efforts would not rise above the level of a pleasant tea-party […]. (Lewis 1963: 49)

In taking the distance from the "Dissenting Aesthetes" of the Omega Workshop, Lewis echoes Ezra Pound's 1915 preface to the works of Lionel Johnson, where he states that "for Milton and Victorianism and for the softness of the 'nineties' I have different degrees of antipathy or even contempt" (Pound 1968: 362). For both Lewis and Pound, the rejection of Pater's aestheticism and its values – the "softness of the 'nineties'" – are born out of artistic motives, but Lewis's refusal eventually results in "an overtly heterosexual male poetics" (Emmitt 1993: 195ff).

In *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), Lewis expresses his disgust for both the loose morality of post-war society and for the "delinquents of natural processes" that thrived in the "famous 'nineties'" (Lewis 1989: 209):

> There is a great deal of the intellectual snob about the invert; but since he converts what he borrows from the intellect to the purposes of *sex*, he is a great enemy of the intellect. As a feminine facsimile, further, he takes over the traditional idiosyncrasies of the feminine rôle […]. (Lewis 1989: 244)

Lewis acknowledges that the crisis of gender roles in the decade following the Great War poses specific political challenges, and fears that the sex-war supported by "capital-socialist" forces (Lewis 1989: 195) may lead the individual to take more limited responsibilities in society. For this reason, he invokes a reactionary correction of socio-political values as far as gender roles and family are concerned. To some extent, his point of view is backed by the coeval scientific establishment: while purging non-heterosexual identities from a philistine sense of guilt and/or the need for corrective actions, homosexual and bisexual desire are for Freud the expression of an arrested developmental process (Hall 2003: 36-7). Besides, in stating that "[t]he 'homo' is the legitimate child of the 'suffragette'" (Lewis 1989: 218), Lewis maintains that the sex revolution springs from direct political involvement: "[m]ay it not be, too, that all the phases of the sex revolt – from the suffragette to the joy-boy – are equally

political at the start – as they certainly become at the finish?" (Lewis 1989: 215).

Lewis's criticism of gender roles and their social implications is not easy to define. His critique of natural aberrations is based on a socio-political ground, and he clearly separates sex and gender defining the latter as essentially discursive. Even before the war,

> Men were only made into "men" with great difficulty even in primitive society: the male is not naturally "a man" any more than the woman. He has to be propped up into that position with some ingenuity, and is always likely to collapse. […] The term man implies a variety of indispensable but not necessarily pleasant things, quite independently of the specific sex characters, although it can only be attached to an individual falling within the subdivision of the adult male. […] A man, then, is made, not born: and he is made, of course, with very great difficulty. (Lewis 1989: 247-8)

Hewitt stresses that Lewis's notion of masculinity is in fact a "homosexualised" one, as it ultimately relies on a performative notion of gender (Hewitt 1996: 173-4). Indeed, later on in the same chapter of *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis insists that "no more for one sex than for the other are the heroic ardours, 'intellectuality,' *responsibility* and so forth, that we associate with the male, *natural*" (Lewis 1989: 249, emphasis in the text). The exaltation of the "masculinities of the manual and the marginal" (Tickner 1994: 56) prove that Lewis's gender theory is grounded on a social rather than a biological basis.

Likewise, as I shall discuss below, much of Virginia Woolf's prose unravels a polyphonic quest for gender and sexual identities that suggests that masculinity and femininity cannot be simply explained in dichotomous terms. What Woolf seems to embrace is the assumption that gender opposition results from a cluster of elements that are the product of a variety of cultural factors and hegemonic forces (Anderson 2009: 30; do Mar Castro Varela, Dhawan, Engel 2011: 12). The mockery of gender models in *Orlando* (1928) has been the object of extensive critical studies, but *Jacob's Room* (1922) and *Between the Acts* (1941) seem equally pertinent in order to discuss the social and cultural implications of gender in Woolf's writings: while unquestionably rooted in the early 20th century, both novels raise political issues relevant to a modernity still moulded by normativised gender patterns (Anderson 2009: 45-6).

According to Marcus, Woolf's feminism was not only based on overtly feminist politics, but also on a general interest in gender identities, and in particular her fiction and essays from the 1920s show a deep concern with the mutability of gender and sexuality (Marcus 2000: 222). Woolf's disavowal of the phallocentric values inscribed in the modernist establishment may have relied on her controversial involvement in coeval feminist politics[2], but the fluidity of the sexual identities she endorses also looks ahead to queer theory as formulated over the past thirty years.

While, as I have tried to show, modernists like Pound and Lewis shared a contempt for aestheticism, it is interesting to note that it was Clara Pater – Walter Pater's sister and Woolf's tutor in the learning of Latin and Greek – who sparked the political activism that was to guide Woolf's reflection on gender identities. A pioneer of women's rights, Clara Pater had contributed to the founding of Somerville College for Women in Oxford in the 1870s (Meisel 1980: 17-9). Besides, in spite of Leslie Stephen's well-known rejection of aestheticism, Woolf read most of Walter Pater's works, which significantly contributed to making her stand apart from her modernist rivals and develop specific positions. For Whitworth, Woolf's debt to Pater is not only aesthetic: Pater's ontological theory, and his definition of the self as a flux, had an impact on her elaboration of a performative theory of gender (Whitworth 2000: 147-53).

Woolf was especially familiar with Pater's works like *Marius the Epicurean*, *Plato and Platonism* and *The Renaissance* (Meisel 1980: 16-8), which bear evidence of the development of a self-conscious homosexual elite in late Victorian Oxford[3]. In the 1870s and 1880s, Oxford became an alluring homosocial environment because it is within the academic discourse that the legitimisation of same-sex desire was first endorsed on both a historical and a cultural basis.

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[2] Although "the political climate which has done most throughout Europe to establish Woolf is feminism" (Luckhurst 2002: 12), Marcus stresses that Woolf's responses to the feminist debate of her time were contradictory in spite of her political agenda, which is why she eventually withdrew from feminist activism (Marcus 2000: 211).

[3] Especially Pater's essay on Winckelmann (1867) is considered a pioneering study unravelling the connections between homosexual desire, aesthetics and intellectual life. See Evangelista 2009: 35.

On the one hand, by demonstrating that the *areté* of ancient Greek societies was not at odds with *paideros*, coeval historiography discharged the idea that homoeroticism was incompatible with civic ethics and values (Dowling 1994: 30ff). On the other hand, Greek Studies were re-established as an essential field of scholarship and knowledge and, as Evangelista stresses, the renewed interest in Plato was crucial in shaping a late Victorian homosexual consciousness (Evangelista 2006: 231-3). Although delving into the role of Hellenism in late 19th century Oxford would require a separate and thorough investigation**,** it is nonetheless worth noticing that it provided its homosexual elite with both a counter discourse and an almost "masonic" code shared by its members[4] and, it would seem, by Jacob Flanders himself.

2. Jacob Flanders and the tentative quest for gender identity

Published in 1922, *Jacob's Room* is a Bildungsroman that reflects the modernist obsession with issues of visuality. The invention of photography transformed the literary and cultural texts of modernisms in a way unparalleled since the introduction of perspective in Renaissance painting (Humm 2003: 1-2), and its echo reverberates in the narrative technique of *Jacob's Room*. However, this impossibility of capturing Jacob's subjectivity seems also worth exploring through Foucault's theory of sexuality and discourse.

Although Jacob Flanders is constantly located as an object of visual attraction and desire by both female and male characters, throughout the novel he is deprived of a proper portrait. This seems to be a recurring feature of Woolf's style, and it is also evident in *Orlando*, where, as I have mentioned, sexual identity, and hence subjectivity, is also represented as unstable and constantly mutating. At the very beginning of the novel, the portrait of Orlando is mediated by the perception of those who look at him:

[4] The link between the reception of Ancient Greece and the development of a homsexual discourse in late Victorian Oxford has been accurately investigated by Dowling 1994 and Evangelista 2009.

for directly we glance at Orlando standing by the window, we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets […] Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore. (Woolf 2008a: 15)

And later on, when Orlando is made duke, the narrator warns of the difficulty of reconstructing his biography, which can only be inferred through fragments,

picking up our way among burnt papers and little bits of tape […]. Again, details are lacking, for the fire had its way with all such records, and has left only tantalizing fragments which leave the most important points obscure. (Woolf 2008a: 121-2)

By deconstructing Jacob's subjectivity, Woolf focuses on the effects of social and hegemonic forces and on the ways such forces shape individuals according to whether they fit in, or are excluded from, the patriarchal society they live in (Harris 1997: 422-3; Froula 2005: 63). Jacob's gender identity is as blurred as his portrait, and this fluidity of the self seems ascribable to the influence of Pater's writings.

The elusiveness of Jacob's character and the incapacity of words to frame his personality have been read as a need to "unwrite" the novel after the disillusionment of the Great War (Froula 2005: 69), but the ephemeral nature of Jacob's portrayal may as well be read as the attempt at "speaking the unspeakable", to borrow Julia Brigg's words. With specific reference to *Orlando*, Briggs stressed Woolf's attempt "[t]o find a language at once precise and suggestive in which to address and even expose cultural taboos", and noted that she

found a certain exhilaration in exploring the limits of the permissible, or (to change metaphor), patrolling the delicate border between the acceptable and the forbidden – between the allowed and acknowledged and the unspoken and unspeakable. (Briggs 2006: 163)[5]

For Briggs, "*Orlando* is a novel full of feelings that could not be mentioned, and events that could not be described under existing conventions" (Briggs 2006: 166), and so seems to be *Jacob's Room*

[5] See also Barrett 1997 on "The Inverted World of *Mrs. Dalloway*".

in bringing together the "old lie" – that "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" – and a "queer" – i.e., performative – definition of one's own gender identity. Queer theory as we know it today was obviously unknown at Woolf's time, and her characters are evidently historically situated. Nevertheless, in the light of the coeval debate on gender identities started by Ellis and Carpenter, a queer reading seems particularly fit to reflect on Jacob's exploration of his self, especially since Woolf's text does not supply any clear evidence of his being homosexual.

Throughout the novel, in his coming of age Jacob Flanders would seem to embark on a series of both hetero and homosexual experiences. In fact, it is impossible to establish whether Jacob is homosexual or bisexual, as even 'straight' intercourse is depicted as something obscene, to be confined behind the secret space of a closed door. This is especially evident during Jacob's studies at Cambridge: the academy becomes the lieu of Jacob's self-taught sexual education through a series of experiences that are no more than hinted at. Jacob's fellow Dick Bonamy, "who couldn't love a woman", was "only at ease with one or two young men of his way of thinking", and he "was fonder of Jacob than of any one in the world" (Woolf 2004: 135). Nevertheless, Jacob was "not at all of [Dick's] own way of thinking" (Woolf 2004: 135). In spite of his childhood frustration upon seeking comfort in the female body (Flint 1991: 361), and despite only feeling real "intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly" (Woolf 2004: 40) with his male companion Simeon, Jacob is never identified as homosexual.

According to Harris, the function of the academy in *Jacob's Room* is not to censor the discourse of sexuality *tout court*, but to sublimate it through an encoded language that is accessible only to those who have been initiated to the same sexual experience (Harris 1997: 427). In this regard, the novel transfers the reality of *fin-de-siècle* Oxford to the 20th century in an attempt to awaken the same non-heteronormative consciousness. Woolf's narrative is never explicit, and today it seems possible to read such ambiguity in terms of Foucault's criticism of the *scientia sexualis* resulting in the formulation of a proto-queer theory. As the extradiegetic and feminine narrator points out during Jacob's sojourn in London,

> Only to prevent us from being submerged by chaos, nature and society between them have arranged a system of classification which is simplicity itself […] The moulds are filled nightly. There is no need to distinguish details. But the difficulty remains – one has to choose. (Woolf 2004: 63)

By coupling the two categories of nature and society, Woolf seems to suggest, not unlike Lewis, that the definition of nature is never free from the influence of political forces and interests. That gender and binary polarisations should be queered and unmoored from hegemonic practices is further stressed during Jacob's tour in Greece. While his crush for Sandra Wentworth Williams steers Jacob towards a socially acceptable gender identity and sexual drive, Woolf's narrating voice suggests that "[t]here is something absolute in us which despises qualification. It is this which is teased and twisted in society" (Woolf 2004: 140).

The difficulty to define Jacob's gender identity by means of an unambiguous label is shared by all the characters that feel sexually attracted to him. Jacob may be "distinguished-looking", as Mrs. Durrant says, but as Woolf reminds her readers, "surely, of all futile occupations this of cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?" (Woolf 2004: 65).

That sexual identity is at odds with a binary theory of gender is repeatedly hinted at in the fifth chapter. Even Captain Barfoot – who seems to have an affair with Jacob's mother and so has known him for years – finds it tough to determine why Jacob was his favourite of the three Flanders. And it is precisely here that Woolf paves the way to what would later become the basis of queer theory:

> It seems that a profound, impartial, and absolutely just opinion of our fellow-creatures is utterly unknown. Either we are men, or we are women. Either we are cold, or we are sentimental. Either we are young, or growing old. In any case life is but a procession of shadows, and God knows why it is that we embrace them so eagerly, and see them depart with such anguish, being shadows. (Woolf 2004: 66)

In a few lines, Woolf's difficulty to find an appropriate language to expose taboos encapsulates a reflection on the discursive nature of sexuality which is still central today: the presence of "a gap in our culture" which, by marking the disparity between sexual practices and actions and the language available to define

them, ends up legitimising a sexual identity univocally oriented towards a binary polarisation of gender (Alexander and Anderlini-D'Onofrio 2012: 4).

Later in the novel, Jacob's Grand Tour marks his ultimate passage from boyhood to manhood. As he strolls around the streets of pre-war Paris, Jacob meets the painter Edward Cruttendon and Jinny Carslake. The trio – free from the spectre of incest and the possibility of sexual intercourse, which may only be inferred – brings to mind the *ménage à trois* of Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Dreamers* (2003), but again the fact that gender identity cannot be clearly catalogued symbolically emerges in Jinny's fascination for a box of ordinary pebbles. Because, in spite of their insignificant value, "if you look at them steadily, [Jinny] says, multiplicity becomes unity, which is somehow the secret of life" (Woolf 2004: 126). A point of view that is backed by what Sandra Wentworth Williams claims a few pages later: "everything has meaning. […] One must love everything" (Woolf 2004: 137).

It is when Woolf's narrator reveals that "[t]he tragedy of Greece was the tragedy of all high souls. The inevitable compromise" (Woolf 2004: 137) that the counterdiscourse of *fin-de-siècle* Oxford merges with queer theory. Greece gives voice to the multiplicity and the performativity of gender identity, which is not made to fit into a political and socially acceptable compromise. Woolf seems well aware of this when she has Jacob confide to Timmy Durrant that the two of them are probably "the only people in the world who know what the Greek meant" (Woolf 2004: 70). After all, it is Plato's argument, his theory of Eros and the legitimisation of non-heterosexual identities that are "stowed away in Jacob's mind" (Woolf 2004: 104). Thus Greece represents for Jacob "the only chance […] of protecting oneself from civilization" (Woolf 2004: 141) and its politicised categorisation of sexuality[6].

[6] It should be borne in mind that the notion of "homosexuality" as we conceive it today was coined in the 19th century, when, according to Foucault, sexuality began to be connected to discursive formulation. As such, our idea of homosexuality cannot be applied to Ancient Greece. In Greek ethics, heterosexual and same-sex desire were not conceived as the result of different sexual orientations. All the same, it would be equally inappropriate to describe Greek sexual practices in the modern terms of "bisexuality". See Foucault 1990: 187-8.

That *Jacob's Room* is shaped by a political agenda is hinted at soon after the protagonist's arrival at Cambridge, where "Heaven knows what [the young men in their rooms] were doing" (Woolf 2004: 37). Jacob's thoughts 'in the prime of his life' as a young adult – "I am what I am, and intend to be it" (Woolf 2004: 30) – express his desire to escape patriarchal discourse through political action, as the essay lying on his table suggests: "Does History consist of the Biographies of Great Men?" (Woolf 2004: 33). As the narrator puts it, for Jacob "there will be no form in the world unless [he] makes one for himself" (Woolf 2004: 30): the legitimisation of one's own identity within society and discursive practices is precisely what triggers activisms and counter movements. Queer theory springs from the activism sparked by the 1969 Stonewall Riots, backed by feminism and eventually prompted by the HIV/AIDS crisis of the mid 1980s. And this epidemic is what raised general public awareness of the co-existence of both 'normal' people and non-heterosexual individuals in the social fabric (Anderson 2009: 87). Like Jacob's Cambridge fellows, these are "young men in the prime of life, sound of wind and limb, who will soon become fathers of families and directors of banks" (Woolf 2004: 147), or "lawyers, doctors, members of Parliament [or] business men" (Woolf 2004: 28). Something overlooked by public opinion, but which Carpenter had already pointed out in stating that

> the homogenic passion ramifies widely through all modern society, and […] among the masses of the people as among the classes, even below the stolid surface and reserve of British manners, letters pass and enduring attachments are formed, differing in no very obvious respect from those correspondences which persons of opposite sex knit with each other under similar circumstances; but that hitherto while this relation has occasionally, in its grosser forms and abuses, come into public notice through the police reports, etc., its more sane and spiritual manifestations – though really a moving force in the body politic – have remained unrecognised. (Carpenter 1912: 71-2)

The fact that gender identity transcends the limitations of the heteronomic principle, and may therefore be defined only tentatively, is clear to Jacob as he experiences intimacy with the other sex. At first, during his trip around the Scilly Isles, Jacob is said not to feel charmed or attracted to Timmy Durrant as a woman would be,

because "Jacob, of course, was not a woman" (Woolf 2004: 41). Later in the novel, his uneasiness with Florinda is counterbalanced by a refusal of what he himself would label "indecency" – even if his "violent reversion towards male society, cloistered rooms, and the works of the classics", added to his "wrath upon whoever it was who had fashioned life thus" (Woolf 2004: 76), are no less ambiguous. As Woolf maintains, there cannot be a thing like a topography of the individual – "The streets of London have their map; but our passions are uncharted" (Woolf 2004: 89-90).

3. Modernity and the acceptance of the "unspeakable" in *Between the Acts*

Comparing the manuscript of *Jacob's Room* – the first novel published by the Hogarth Press – with its final version, Flint has argued that Woolf's revisions point to an even deeper involvement with sexual politics and power structures (Flint 1991: 377), which might be the result of her renewed awareness of gender issues and indicate an attempt to sensitise her readership. The work precedes *Orlando* (1928), which perhaps best and most provocatively epitomises Woolf's challenge to the epistemological validity of gender binarism and her conception of sexual identities as ontologically based on discursive formations (Villa 2010: 99-102). But the playful and at times carnivalesque transgender politics of *Orlando* give way to subtler gender issues in Woolf's last novel, which explores "the question of masculinity as searchingly as that of women and femininity" (Marcus 2000: 225). In *Between the Acts*, gender is blended and connected with other identities, from family roles to social class, in a series of *mises en abîme* in which "another play always lay behind the play" being enacted (Woolf 2008b: 58).

Although William Dodge is overtly identified as homosexual, his introduction into the society of Pointz Hall is marked by a Foucaultian "element of silence" (Woolf 2008b: 35) which must be filled by both Isabella and the reader even though, as the narrator warns, it is "silly to make bones of trifles when we're all flesh and blood under the skin – men and women too!" (Woolf 2008b: 36).

As in *Jacob's Room*, the other characters in the novel keep eyeing up Dodge. However, their attention to Dodge is dictated by their

need to find clues which might enable them to fit him – and his "twisted face" (Woolf 2008b: 34) – into a specific category: "Isabella opened her mouth, hoping that Dodge would open his, and so enable her to place him. But he sat staring. […] They all looked at him" (Woolf 2008b: 41).

The discursive limits of gender, and the attempt at finding a language suitable to express cultural taboos, which Briggs noted regarding *Orlando*, can also be found in the idle chattering of Pointz Hall. Mrs Swithin's explanation that the British "haven't the words" (Woolf 2008b: 50) to elaborate their responses to art and beauty leaves Bartholomew musing upon the existence of a gap separating reality and language: "'Thoughts without words', her brother mused. Can that be?" (Woolf 2008b: 50).

After a while, Giles faces the same problem when he finds difficulty in expressing the unspeakable word that identifies "a half-breed" who does not "have straightforward love for a woman" (Woolf 2008b: 55). Sitting as "straight as a dart" (Woolf 2008b: 120), Giles embodies the patriarchal system challenged by the novel and the refusal of effeminacy invoked by the male establishment, while Isabella seems more sympathetic than her husband when she guesses

> the word that Giles had not spoken. Well, was it wrong if [Dodge] was that word? Why judge each other? Do we know each other? Not here, not now. (Woolf 2008b: 56)

Towards the end of the novel, Isabella's reflections are echoed by Miss La Trobe's thoughts about "the actress who had shared her bed" (Woolf 2008b: 190). The lady is never referred to as a lesbian. Nevertheless, it seems plausible to read this same-sex relationship as an instance of the female bonding, which Adrienne Rich acknowledges as a form of resistance against compulsory heterosexuality. An opposition which might turn into political action if Miss La Trobe broke "which of the village laws? Sobriety? Chastity? Or take something which did not properly belong to her?" (Woolf 2008b: 190). As for Isabella, her sympathies are not the expression of female-gendered compassion, but the result of her struggle to focus her own sexual desire, divided between married love and adulterous drives. Hence her plea for political action:

'Why's he afraid?' Isabella asked herself. A poor specimen he was; afraid to stick up for his own beliefs – just as she was afraid, of her husband. (Woolf 2008b: 46)

Although mainly focusing on gender definition, sexual identities and desire, queer politics are not limited to the field of the GLBT movements – as the mirrors in the final scene of the pageant enacted in *Between the Acts* confirm. At the end of the play, Woolf mentions the chattering of the "dispersed" spectators of Pointz Hall in a passage that echoes Hamlet's ontological doubt and intermixes genders by juxtaposing different subjects:

He said she meant we all act. Yes, but whose play? Ah, that's the question! And if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure, as a play? […] Or was that, perhaps, what she meant? […] that if we don't jump to conclusions, if you think, and I think, perhaps one day, thinking differently, we shall think the same? (Woolf 2008b: 179-80)

Queer theory aims at unsettling and upsetting the balance of ideological and normativised categories. It furthermore challenges gender identities at the level of ontology on the premise that cataloguing the individual may be misguided. Woolf seems to embrace this assumption, as both Isabella Oliver's musings and the ambiguous portrayal of Jacob Flanders show. On the one hand, *Jacob's Room* problematises the idea of identity as stable, and Jacob eventually falls victim not only to national demands, but also to the expectations placed upon him by his gender role (Ronchetti 2004: 41). On the other hand, *Between the Acts* – Woolf's last novel, and the one in which, as I have mentioned above, Woolf is concerned with both issues of masculinity and femininity – is an acceptance of "diversity and heterogeneity" (Snaith 2000: 146). Like *Jacob's Room*, the novel brings together Woolf's preoccupation with the war and her reflections on gender identities through homosocial characters like William Dodge and Miss La Trobe, but also a straight couple, like Giles and Isa.

Regarding gender politics, both novels back Donald Hall's remark that, as unique as it may have been, political self-awareness is not a prerogative of the late 20th and early 21st century. Long before the ACT UP movement, "In simply existing 'queerly', people were living in ways that had a political impact" (Hall 2003:

8). This, in turn, helps to find a *fil rouge* that connects Modernism with Modernity, in which "[r]eflection about what gender is and how it structures basic features of personal identity are [...] geared to projects for profound potential transformation" (Giddens 1991: 162). This sustains the idea of an evolutionary developmental pattern of modern societies, as Woolf's gender politics and cultural representations are meant to show. At the same time, it acknowledges the presence of a queer element in this developmental process.

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