Enclosing the Whole: Woolf's "Kew Gardens" as Autopoetic Narrative

Frank Stevenson

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 4 mai 2019.

Enclosing the Whole: Woolf's "Kew Gardens" as Autopoetic Narrative

Frank Stevenson

"[I wish to] re-form the novel and capture multitudes of things at present fugitive, enclose the whole, and shape infinite strange shapes "

(Woolf 1975: 356)[1]

1   The short pieces published in *Monday or Tuesday* (1921) and written between 1917 and 1921—not quite Virginia Woolf's earliest period[2]—are social, historical, autobiographical, psychological, epistemological and/or metaphysical experiments. "A Society" begins with the creation or origin of a particular society (a group of women who are friends) rather than with, say, the origin of human society: "This is how it all came about. Six or seven of us were sitting one day after tea. [...] After a time, [...] we drew around the fire and began as usual to praise men" (Woolf 1989: 124). "A Mark on the Wall" is more explicitly epistemological and (meta)physical: it focuses on a fixed physical point, a mysterious "mark" (in fact a snail) which the narrator tries to identify in a discontinuous, freely-associating stream-of-consciousness.

2   "Kew Gardens" can be read, from a very objective, detached, abstract point of view, as a physics experiment: a hidden microphone (the snail) is placed randomly within a large public garden, and it records fragments of the conversations of a series of couples as they approach and pass, their voices emerging out of noise to make sense, then fading again into noise. But this is to speak of a focal point or observer that is (like the snail in "Mark") "within the system", to use the terms of cybernetics and systems theory. There is also an omniscient observer, no less apparently trans- human, standing outside the system and encompassing or enclosing it, although this second observer or point of view becomes clearest at the story's end. Here I am particularly interested in exploring the relation between these two perspectives, and I will suggest a way in which we might look at this highly experimental narrative as being itself a sort of self-enclosed, self-creating, autopoietic "system".[3]

Visual-Aesthetic, Temporal, Linguistic Space

> Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, [...]. Life is not a series of symmetrical gig-lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (Woolf 1972: 106)

3   In this famous passage from "Modern Fiction" the "envelope" suggests a subjective, aestheticized view of consciousness while the "atoms" suggest a radically empirical view of human perception, as does Woolf's interest in predecessors like Swift and Sterne.[4] Noting the author's interest in the painter Roger Fry, McLaurin explores Woolf's visual-aesthetic, perspectival techniques and relates them to her experiments with representing temporality through repetition. "Kew Gardens" foregrounds painterly aesthetics in a special way; Julia Briggs speaks of the influence on Woolf of French impressionism and Katherine Mansfield's own miniaturized and static (as in "painting a scene") narrative techniques. As for empiricism, critics have seen it in the author's stream-of-consciousness technique, mainly in the stylistically most experimental novels—*Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *The Waves.* However, readers of all persuasions have tended to take the author's shorter fiction less seriously, in part due to its greater experimentalism (thus difficulty, "obscurity").[5]

4   "Experimentalism" is the key point. Yet the term itself, a cognate of "experience" and "empirical," tends to suggest science before it suggests art. Indeed, not only is literary (and more generally artistic) experimentalism closely related to the *idea* of scientific experimentalism, but the former may even be modeled on the latter.

> A literary experiment is roughly analogous to a scientific one in that it proceeds from some hypothesis about what fiction can and cannot do. It then tests that hypothesis by trial and error and compares the results to what the hypothesis predicted. If the experiment succeeds, some new insight is gained into the possibilities of language to order and describe the universe [...]. [However,] in science Nature is the ultimate arbiter, whereas in literature aesthetic considerations are paramount. (Baldwin 5)

5   Of course, in literature any aesthetic considerations are circumscribed by the limits of verbal language. Thus while it is true that Woolf was seeking "some new insight [...]into the possibilities of language to order and describe the universe", she was always aware of the negative side of these possibilities, the limitations of English. Woolf was in fact very concerned with the relation between, on the one hand, visual-aesthetic (artistic, painterly) and physical space and, on the other, "linguistic space"; that is, she was preoccupied with the problem of representing physical and aesthetic spaces—where the relation between a "real" physical space and a "virtual" aesthetic one is already problematic—in verbal language.

6   Here Woolf was influenced by the painter Roger Fry and his theories on the use of shape, color and form to create a sense (an illusion) of perspective in painting. She took to heart Fry's belief that spatial and plastic forms in themselves, independent of psychological ones, can create "spiritual" meaning or value (McLaurin 91).[6] Thus in her writing she tends to foreground the pre-existing spatiality, the spatial framework that is always

presupposed by verbal spatial descriptions, that is, to foreground their spatial-perspectival nature. "In many ways Virginia Woolf tries to right the balance between the literary and the visual by allowing a great deal of the spatial element in her art—as much, indeed, as words can accomplish in this direction. She never forgets the visual, spatial metaphor involved in speaking of 'point of view' or 'perspective'; they are never merely psychological" (McLaurin 91).

7   In this interface between visual-aesthetic and verbal-linguistic space(s) there is, for Woolf, a kind of tension between two modes or "orientations". On the one hand we have the sense of the harmony of the perceived scene at this moment, a sense of the visual-aesthetic *surface* upon which everything is "smoothed out." McLaurin cites a passage from Woolf's diary (92):

> Proportions changed
> That in the evening, or on colourless days, the proportions of the landscape change suddenly. I saw people playing stoolball in the meadow; they appeared sunk down on a flat board; and the downs raised high up and mountainous around them. Detail was smoothed out. This was an extremely beautiful effect: the colours of women's dresses also showing very bright and pure in the almost untinted surroundings. I knew, also, that the proportions were abnormal—as if I were looking between my legs". (Woolf 1953: 96)[7]

8   On the other hand, of course, the "detail" can only be "smoothed out" because the incongruities were there to begin with, and we still have the slightly shocking sense of perceptual distortion: "the proportions were abnormal—as if I were looking between my legs". The dynamic of flattening-out is really the interplay between two extreme positions, between what is "raised up from" and what is "sunk down on a flat board", between positive and negative values. Thinking of this "negativity" more abstractly, perhaps as being in effect itself projected onto the two-dimensional surface, it appears as "holes" (or "discontinuities") in an otherwise continuous, visual-esthetic-spatial or linguistic-spatial surface.[8]

9   The negativity can also be seen like this: what is momentarily foregrounded ("the colours of the women's dresses" for instance) can also be "backgrounded" by what we first thought was its background, now emerging as foreground as if in a sort of *Gestalt*-switch.[9] Yet such a "rhythm" is possible only if we adopt Woolf's *temporal* mode ofpausingor "lingering in the moment"—as opposed to rushing forward into the future: "[I]n her own work she seeks freedom in Proust's way, by the past crystallized in the present, and for that to occur a certain static quality is necessary. But there must be some rhythm in that moment of stillness; her own movement is not from present to future as in Lawrence, but from the near to the far and the large to the small. Her special moments are instantaneous and spatial" (McLaurin 93).

10   The "moment of stillness," then, in which we gaze at a particular scene—which we might associate with the mode of "smoothing-out the surface"—has its own spatio- temporal rhythm: it is an essentially spatial leap, a discontinuous jump or displacement into the distant past or future that is now seen as a sudden move from "near to far and large to small." The spectator's indefinitely long *lingering* (or *pause*) before the scene brings her suddenly so close to its surface that we get the sense of a radical temporal displacement. Yet what is being gazed at is also the linguistic surface itself, the *language-surface,* which now (having come so close to us) appears to be filled with holes, *aporias*, spaces between the words.[10] The temporal discontinuity becomes the discontinuity (irregularity, disorder) of the spatio-linguistic surface. Einstein's relative equivalence of space-time at

speeds approaching that of light indeed makes use of the idea or trope of *folds* in space, now also interpreted as *holes*; the trope of past (and/or future) as "crystallized in the present" also suggests, with its image of embedment, a rough surface, a surface marked by holes.

11   Thus Woolf describes the conversation of her last two couples in "Kew Gardens":

> The ponderous woman looked through the pattern of falling words at the flowers [...] . She stood there letting the words fall over her [...]. Long pauses came between each of these remarks: they were uttered in toneless and monotonous voices. [...] as if these short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far [...] but who knows [...] what precipices aren't concealed in them, or what slopes of ice don't shine in the sun on the other side? [...] he felt that something loomed up behind her words, and stood vast and solid behind them . (93-94)[11]

12   Here the author-observer is making her language-surface spatial. She sees the holes or spaces between the words because she is looking at the body, face or "surface" of *langue* from very close up, and or (the relativistic *Gestalt*-switch) from very far away—or, correlatively, from the perspective of the distant past and/or the distant future;[12] perhaps she has some close that she passes through a hole in the surface and begins to approach "the sun on the other side", to get further away again. And yet it is really the individual words—and not the surface of all the words—of which it is asked, "what precipices aren't concealed in them, or what slopes of ice don't shine in the sun on the other side?" Perhaps, after all, we could not finally distinguish between "flying into" an individual word and into the spaces between the words; these might be two different perspectives, taken from two different scales of magnitude, on the same "reality".

13   Of course, the close-up perspective (at the moment of "passing through"?) is implied by the fact that the words themselves have become so solid and bulky that they are *heavy*, inclined to fall down to the ground—and thus perhaps to "smooth out" once again the projected surface. But this is because they now have become *meaningless* ("short insignificant words"), "their "wings" are too "short" to carry their "heavy body of meaning". It is this (relative degree of) meaninglessness or *insignificance* that "draws" us toward them, even pulls us through them. If *langue* has become fragmented into particles, we are now looking at the individual particles from very close-up, having come in effect within their gravitational field.

A spatio-temporal-linguistic system with inside and outside observers

14   This close-up view of a surface that is spatio-temporal as well as visual-aesthetic (painterly) and linguistic presupposes, then, an observer who is pausing, lingering *here* and *now* and gazing at this surface as might a landscape painter or scientist. In the above passage it seems the observer has come so close to the perceived surface that she simultaneously seems extremely far away from it; or perhaps she has passed through one of these worm-holes to the "sun" on the "other side"; Woolf's aesthetics of disproportion and discontinuity can allow for just such unthinkable jumps or flights. And yet this observer-within-the-story is balanced by a second, omniscient, "outside" observer; for we are looking, not only at a particular (minute) scene within the narrative but also at the "whole narrative" (at the larger scene depicted by the narrative) within a frozen moment

that somehow warps temporal and linguistic space. In this "larger" experiment we find ourselves looking at a particular circumscribed space or place (London's "Kew Gardens") over an indefinitely extended period of time.[13] Yet while we have various hints earlier on that the story's complex, multi-dimensional space is potentially infinite, its "virtual eternity" is only really made clear in the long final passage:

> Thus one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passed the flower-bed and were enveloped in layer after layer of green-blue vapour, in which [...]. both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere. [...] Yellow and black, pink and snow white, shapes of all these colours, men, women and children, were spotted for a second upon the horizon, and then [...] they wavered [...] dissolving like drops of water in the yellow and green atmosphere, staining it faintly with red and blue. It seemed as if all gross and heavy bodies had sunk down in the heat motionless and lay huddled upon the ground, but their voices went wavering from them as if they were flames [...]. Voices, yes, voices, wordless voices. (95)[14]

15   The humans'/ghosts' "irregular and aimless movement" could be seen as an experiment in stationery time-lapse photography: 24-hour video films, shot from above, of traffic movements at one city intersection, or of human movements within one inner-city courtyard, when later viewed at high speed (in a one-minute movie) show a more jerky and irregular effect than we are aware of in "normal time". Yet at the end of "Kew Gardens" the jerky movement goes to its natural limit and becomes the merging or fading-together of countless hordes of people (romantic couples) seen (imagined) walking here, over a very long period of time.

16   This merging encompassesor envelops the various individual fadings-in and fadings-out of discrete couples earlier in the story, as they walk about in the public garden and pass, within a very limited period of time (perhaps five minutes), a central focal-point. The passing to-and-fro of four discrete couples occupies the middle part of the story and also the "middle perspective," for if "Kew Gardens" ends with a very wide perspective, it begins with a very narrow one. The opening passage, where the author uses the same impressionistic, painterly style she returns to at the end—(virtually) infinitesimal and infinite perspectives are equivalent in the eye of the landscape painter— gives us a close-up view of a relatively near-by (and non-human, natural) world, the suddenly *unfamiliar* world of flowers in a flower-bed:

> From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat it emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The light fell either upon the smooth grey back of a pebble, or the shell of a snail with its brown circular veins, or, falling into a raindrop, it expanded with such intensity of red, blue and yellow the thin walls of water. (91)

17   In the story Woolf seems to be moving ("expanding") from the "very small" to the "very big," and/or from "very near" to "very far"—though this assumes a fixed point of view, a fixed location of the observer (author, narrator, reader) with respect to the narrative itself, lacking which it may seem that she is at each moment simultaneously moving back in the other direction. Perhaps the story is moving from an "observer within the system"— concretely embodied by the snail itself—to one "outside" of it. As for this snail, it was perhaps itsown Lilliputian, micro- and/or macroscopic (depending how we look at *it*) perspective that we had from the very beginning of the above passage.[15]Whereas the

"figures of these men and women straggled past [...] with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the [...] butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights" (91), the snail's behavior seems rational, goal-oriented. Embedded within the labyrinthine flower-bed (of the circular, continually circling-back "text"), it is trying to move forward in a straight line:

> In the oval flower-bed the snail [...] now appeared to be moving very slightly in its shell, and next began to labour over the crumbs of loose earth [...]. It appeared to have a definite goal in front of it [...] . Brown cliffs with deep green lakes in the hollows, flat blade-like trees that waved [...] , round boulders of grey stone, vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture— all these object lay across the snail's progress [...]. Before it had decided whether to circumvent the arched tent of a dead leaf or to breast it there came past the bed the feet of other human beings. (91-92)

18   The relativistic effect is clear enough: what would be a small leaf to us is an "arched tent" to it, our crack in the ground is its "brown cliff"—now thrust directly in our faces, forcing us to experience the snail's world from its point of view. This effect reinforces the story's fundamental sense of distortion, of relativistic disproportion or discontinuity: very small can be very big and *vice versa*; the extreme outer boundary of the trans-human omniscient observer may be just as permeable as the extreme inner limit of the innermost trans-human observer, the snail. But as inside observer the snail plays an important role in the story's physics experiment: it is in effect the hidden microphone— for a human being could never so easily "hide"—which overhears these fragments of human voices, of human conversations as the couples approach and then pass by. True, a snail could not "understand" these voices, it would here them as (human) *noises*, but again we have the relativistic switch: a person who only heard snatches of conversations, unless she/he were really trying to pay attention, might hear them basically as senseless background noise.

19   Here we come back to the central role of sound, that is, of *voices* in the story. If spatio-temporal and visual-aesthetic surfaces are always relative-to-an-observer then so are the linguistic surfaces of human language and human literary narratives. In fact the non-human snail lives in its own *self-enclosed world*, and so do the four human couples, and so does each member of each of the couples: the radically limited nature of all human "communication" is clearly one of Woolf's main points here. In other words, while we will tend to see each of these self-enclosed worlds in spatio-temporal terms we can also see it in linguistic terms, or (going back to my earlier formulation) spatio-linguistic (linguistic-spatial) terms. For the sense of isolation of human beings (if not also of flowers, snails and trans-human ghosts) has much to do with *meaning*, which in turn has much to do with (human) language, the possibility of human speech and communication. At the story's opening the human couples, talking somewhat randomly as they saunter, also somewhat randomly, through the park are introduced via the inevitably distorted and distorting perspective (as far as any "human meaning" is concerned) of a snail; at the end the "voices" of all the couples walking here, in this particular space, for centuries past and centuries to come, are merged and thus become senseless noise on another level, another order of being.

A noisy, self-enclosed system with indeterminate boundaries

20   The point that human voices sound like noise not only to a snail (if it can hear them at all) but even, much of the time, to other humans is a crucial one. If we want to see linguistic space in relation to physical and temporal space, then we must note in the first place that human language in its spoken form is based on sounds (signifiers) that have meaning, sounds which, from the point of view of physics (acoustics), are mere refinements of a wider spectrum of noise, just as colors are refinements of a wider spectrum of light-frequencies. In the "system" of Woolf's "Kew Gardens" we have two kinds of "noise": the noise of *disorder* that permeates the system in various ways, often in the form of relativistic juxtapositions, discontinuous spatio-temporal-linguistic leaps, and that "noise" which human speech becomes, that "babel" of meaningless sounds, when it is viewed (or rather *heard*) from a distorted perspective, from very far away or from very close to its source.

21   Among the various narrative spaces of the story, then, which become mere "blurs" when viewed from too-close or too-far, or (as in time-lapse photography) for too long (or too short) a time, we also have the linguistic space of the couples' conversations. Just as anything may become a mere blur, a blankness when we gaze at it long enough or glimpse it too quickly, human speech is mere noise, a mere "crackling" except when heard within a very narrow and specialized range of listening (The snail only perceives "vast crumpled surfaces of a thin crackling texture"). Beyond this range its frequencies blur into those of the "wavering light," the "green-blue vapour" and "flames" of "wordless voices" that Woolf's omniscient perspective gives us at the story's end. From the narrative's "innermost" perspective, however, the linguistic surface of human conversations is filled with holes, with the "spaces between words". In the third conversation this phenomenon is marked in two ways, first by the actual "conversation" between the two women and then by one woman's second-level reflection on the phenomenon itself, as if she were herself temporarily standing in for the eye and ear of the omniscient "experimenter" of the story's ending. The conversation itself goes like this:

   "Nell, Bert,Lot, Cess, Phil, Pa, he says, I says, she says, I says, I says, I says—"
   "My Bert, Sis, Bill, Grandad, the old man, sugar,
    Sugar, flour, kippers, greens
    Sugar, sugar, sugar" (93)

22   Here we should first note that ordinary, everyday conversations are already filled with various repetitions, partly those induced by "mindless" socio-linguistic rituals or functions such as "How are you?" and "Nice to see you!" or "How nice the weather is today" but also other sorts of careless repetition. They are also filled with the "lacunae" of vague, inane, quasi-meaningless or completely nonsensical (intentional or otherwise) remarks. It is as if the author, knowing this truth about human conversation, reduced all such conversations to their "general case" by speeding them up, playing the tape-recorder at high speed and then erasing most of the parts, the words in-between. Interestingly, the "holes" in spoken language more clearly manifest themselves not when speech is stretched out but when it is compressed; or rather, we have now come so close to the linguistic surface that we can see its lacunae as if we were (also) standing very far away, for it is from this perspective that everything (as at the story's end) gets sped-up.

23   The "ponderous woman" then remains silent, gazing or rather listening to these words spoken by her friend which have now become noise. She looks "through the pattern of falling words at the flowers standing cool, firm and upright in the earth [...]. She stood there letting the words fall over her" (93). Similarly, the young man in the fourth couple stands back for a moment to reflect on the too-broad reference (thus rendering them nonsensical) of such common English words as "it": he asks his girlfriend what the "it" means in her question, "Isn't it worth sixpence?" and she replies, "O anything—I mean— you know what I mean." (If he *already knows* then her question was rhetorical, suggesting one form of redundancy and, once again, the "blankness" of meaning.) Woolf, looking at the linguistic surface from this defamiliarizing perspective, now takes all words as "it"- words, as flitting butterflies and bees, tiny falling objects, particles like those of rocks and air: "these short insignificant words also expressed something, words with short wings for their heavy body of meaning, inadequate to carry them far" (94).

24   In fact, the spaces within, between and/or behind words can themselves be seen as noise. In classical information theory noise is always in the background of communicated signals (as on the telephone, the radio or TV): as such it plays the paradoxical role of both "drowning out" the signal if it becomes too loud, and making "meaningful" messages possible by creating spaces between the discrete signals in a message like "areyouhowareyouhowareyouhow". (For without the noisy spaces- between we might not know where to "begin" or "end" the message in order to decipher it[16]. Such a hyper- ordered or redundant message, lacking the noise- between to make it meaningful, becomes what Michel Serres (in *Genesis*) would call blank chaos, the "other side" of the dark chaos of pure randomness.

25   This capacity of noise or chaos to *reorder* or *renew*, by creating spaces-between, a system that has entered the entropy-driven, hyper-ordered state of terminal equilibrium, a virtue of disorder or noise emphasized in both information and chaos- complexity theory, casts a (potentially) very positive light on that systems-theory reading of "Kew Gardens" which foregrounds the chaos of the system's individual parts and of the whole. Perhaps, on such a reading, the "middle" of the story—with its series of separate conversations— corresponds to the level of ordered meaning (where the noise between its parts gives meaning to the whole message or signal) that lies between the initial and final stages of entropic, self-ordering systems, between dark and blank chaos. For this is the ostensibly human "level" of the story, set between the initial trans-human (snail's) perspective and final trans-human (omniscient) perspective.

26   Thus the crescendo of "encompassing noise" at the story's end, enclosing everything within its bounds in a series of concentric orders or worlds, might be read not in transcendent, mystical terms but (also) in Serreisan terms as the hyper- redundancy of sound (meaning), as blank chaos which reverts to initial dark chaos.

> in the drone of the aeroplane the voice of the summer sky murmured its fierce soul. [...] Voices, yes, voices, wordless voices, breaking the silence suddenly [...]. But there was no silence; all the time the motor omnibuses were turning their wheels and changing their gear; like a vast nest of Chinese boxes all of wrought steel turning ceaselessly one within another the city murmured; on the top of which the voices cried aloud and the petals of myriads of flowers flashed their colours into the air. (95)

27   The Chinese-box structure or pattern *would* reinforce our sense that the whole story, as well as each of its parts, is "self- enclosed" except for the problem that the boundaries are always permeable, always being transgressed. Even the mechanical city that encloses the

physical space of the park and the "human space" within it is encompassed by the sky, its own space ruptured by a droning airplane, while the voices of the now-extended human life-space "cried aloud [...] on the top of" everything else. Thus we get a final "discordant" symphony here, a cacophony, a mixing and merging of sounds or noises which tends to render boundaries indeterminate. The ceaseless sound ("But there was no silence") also suggests the "terminal- equilibrium" reading—"no boundaries" means nothing if not "chaos" of one sort or another—but insofar as this ultimate blank disorder may revert to the initial pure randomness (pure noise) there is still "hope".

The possibility of an autopoietic narrative

28   Ultimately the widest context of this narrative is indeterminately human (voices), organic non-human (flowers, snails), mechanical (buses, airplanes) and natural- inorganic (the sky); that is, the "order of rank" is never specified. But the focus on an observer who is simultaneously and indeterminately internal-external suggests we might see the story itself as an "autopoietic system". This means looking at it as a *self-generating* and *self-creating* system and emphasizing the *reflexivity* of both itself and all its parts, its various sub-systems. For the notion of self-creation through self-reference or *self-reflection*— a strategy implicit in Woolf's focus on separate "worlds" which are ultimately conjoined yet also individually isolated and self-enclosed—is the key idea in autopoietic theory. "Reflexivity is the movement whereby that which has been used to generate a system is made, through a *changed perspective,* to become part of the system it generates" (Hayles 8, my emphasis).

29   Implicit here is perhaps one further "step" in the self-reflective process, a step most scientists are not concerned with but one that Hayles herself and several meta-fictional, especially sci-fi and cyberpunk fiction writers are very aware of (see note 4): in creative writing it is the writer (author) who "generates the system" of the narrative and thus self-reflexively becomes (or at least her voice, technique, *design* becomes, as in the human DNA code) "part of the system it [she] generates". Hayles continues here:

> Reflexivity entered cybernetics primarily through discussions about the observer. By and large, first-wave cybernetics [considered] observers to be outside the system they observe. Yet cybernetics also had implications that subverted this premise. The objectivist view sees information flowing from the system to the observers, but *feedback can also loop through the observers, drawing them in to become part of the system being observed.* [...] The second wave of cybernetics grew out of attempts to incorporate reflexivity into the cybernetic paradigm at a fundamental level. [...] [The biologists Maturana and Varela] expanded the reflexive turn into a fully articulated epistemology that sees the world as *a set of informationally closed systems.* Organisms respond to their environment in ways *determined by their internal self-organization.* Their one and only goal is to *continually produce and reproduce the organization that defines them as systems.* Hence, *they not only are self-organizing but also are autopoietic, or self-making.* (Hayles 10, my emphasis)

30   Of course, the idea that a fictional narrative written in a language such as English might be an "autopoietic system" in the above sense is no doubt controversial, and here I am only speculating on its possibility. It seems we would first need to distinguish the system of the story itself (including all its sub-systems) from that *other* system, arguably wider and more encompassing, which includes the writer/author and also the reader *of* the story. (And although the complexity of the author-reader relationship lies beyond my

scope here, an autopoietic reading of fictional narratives could arguably *equate* author and reader, thus solving the problem of their relationship). Then we would need to consider how the *first* system or level (the story itself) might fit the specifications of an autopoietic system as established by Hayles, Maturana, Varela *et al*, *before* moving to the second level. However, as is already implied by the self-reflective problem of the observer, no matter how remote, how far "outside" the system the author/reader may feel they are, they are clearly carried right back into the "inner" system of the narrative through that *feedback loop* which also inevitably flows or loops through them.

31   For again, in writing creatively the writer also creates or generates out of herself/ himself a narrative or poetic system, like a spider spinning a web; if we can say that this system in effect "reproduces the organization that defines the writer (author) as a system" then we might have a more solid ground for speaking of "autopoietic narratives" in Hayles' sense. Still, it may not yet be clear how those inner sub-systems within the larger system of the narrative themselves act like autopoietic systems (organisms, micro-organisms, "snails") independently of the author who has breathed self-generating *life* into them. (In the real world of biology, snails and micro-organisms do not need humans to "motivate" their behavior, except very indirectly and often at a very far remove through the earth's pervasive ecological system.) Perhaps then a fictional narrative could be an autopoietic system with a difference, a "homologous" autopoietic system, one in which the God-like author/reader somehow "breathe(s) life" into all the tiny constituent organisms, objects, parts, particles; that is, a system in which the author/reader as most aloof, objective, transcendent "observer" and "experimenter" is simultaneously the most intimate, inner, immanent one.

32   Perhaps what could make this possible is the fact that here we are dealing primarily with linguistic space; physical and temporal spaces are somehow incorporated (self-reflexively, autopoietically) within a verbal-linguistic space. For the latter is filled with holes, with the noise that lies between the words and, expanding, even threatens to drown them out, and it is in the force of this inter- , intra- or trans- verbal noise that space, time and language may become virtually indistinguishable. If the author/reader is not so much the creator as the "experimental observer" of this verbal-linguistic system, then it is because only she can see those other-than-human shapes that lie within it, shapes dwelling quite beyond her own creative power or reach, within/between/behind her words, shining "in the sun on the other side."

BIBLIOGRAPHIE

Baldwin, Dean R. Virginia Woolf: *A Study of the Short Fiction.* Boston: Twayne, 1989.

Briggs, Julia. *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life.* New York: Harcourt, 2005.

Fry, Roger. *Transformations.* London: Chatto and Windus, 1926.

Hayles, Katherine N. How *We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics.* Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1999.

McLaurin, Allen. *The Echoes Enslaved*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1973.

Rosenthal, Michael. "The Problem of the Fiction." *Critical Essays on Virginia Woolf.* Ed. Morris Beja. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1985. 187-199.

Serres, Michel. *Genesis.* Trans. G. James and J. Nielson. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan Press, 1995.

Wiener, Norbert. *Cybernetics: or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*, Second Edition. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1948, 1961, 1965.

Woolf, Virginia. *Kew Gardens by Virginia Woolf.* Decorated by Vanessa Bell. London: The Hogarth Press, 1919, 1929, 1999.

---. *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf. Ed. Susan Dick.* New York: Harcourt, 1989.

---. *Collected Essays* Volumes II. London: Hogarth P., 1972.

---. *A Writer's Diary: Being Extracts from the Diary of Virginia Woolf.* Ed. Leonard Woolf. London: Hogarth P., 1953.

---. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf.* Vol. I. Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joan Trautmann New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.

---. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf. Vol. II.* Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joan Trautmann New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976.

NOTES

1. In a letter of 1917 Woolf claimed that the novel was "frightfully clumsy and overpowering [...] . I daresay one ought to invent a completely new form. Anyhow it is very amusing to try with these short things. (Woolf 1976: 167).

2. Dick places Woolf's first five stories in the "Early Stories" group; this precedes the 1917-1921 group that includes "Kew Gardens".

3. Katherine Hayles (1999) speaks of the paradigm shift away from such dualities as content/ form and signifier/signified to *randomness* (noise)/*pattern* (form) in the period since Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* (1948); randomness and pattern are configurations of "information." Hayles explains how, with the second wave of cybernetics beginning roughly from the 1960s, the location of the observer moved from outside to within the system. Chaos- or systems-theory-based readings have been used primarily with sci-fi and cyberpunk fiction and with mainstream writers like Pynchon ("Entropy," *The Crying of Lot 49*) and DeLillo (*White Noise*)—where information theory is already to varying degrees the narrative "theme" or "content"—rather than with more "traditional" fictional narratives.

4. Woolf's *Collected Essays* Vol. 3 contains one essay on Swift and three on Sterne. Swift's interest in relativistic, micro- and macro-physical perspectives is clear in *Gulliver's Travels*; he foregrounds the physio-chemical nature of the brain in "Tale of a Tub." Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* deals on several levels with Locke's empirical psychology of the mind, his random "association of ideas."

5. See Baldwin, pp. xii, 3. As Rosenthal puts it: "Demanding everything and making few concessions to readers, [Woolf's fiction] seems to many hermetically sealed in its austerity and fragility [...]. For as a writer Woolf was obsessed with [...] formal rather than thematic concerns, with finding ways of embodying [...] 'the exact shapes my brain holds' (Woolf 1953: 176). [...] Woolf was absorbed primarily in creating shapes" (190).

6. McLaurin cites Fry in *Transformations* (41): [It is a] "false assumption that spiritual values could only be attained through psychological structures, that spatial and plastic ones had no such function" (92).

7. McLaurin (92) adds here: "Earlier in her diary she had spoken of a new theory of fiction: 'The one I have in view is about *perspective*. But I do not know. My brain may not last me out'" (Woolf 1953:83).

8. The title of McLaurin's chapter is "Space: Hollowing Out a Canvas".

9. Thus Woolf opens "The Moment: Summer's Night": "The night was falling so that the table in the garden among the trees grew whiter and whiter, and the people round it more indistinct. An owl [...] crossed the fading sky with a black spot between its claws. The trees murmured. An aeroplane hummed like a piece of plucked wire" (Woolf 1972: 293). Here the faded background comes to dominate the scene, and the "black spot" between the owl's claws might almost be the photographic negative of the white table.

10. It is as if, approaching very close to it, we were "stretching out" the surface, body, face of language.

11. Of course, this also has a crucial social dimension: it seems to express the virtual impossibility of real communication. But seen in the wider, more "abstract" context of information theory, such an impossibility can be read as a predominance of "noise" over "pattern" or "wholeness." Vanessa Bell's 1919 edition of "Kew Gardens" is "decorated" with woodcuts which frame Woolf's words (in large print and on big pages) with wavy lines, circular flowers and other curving forms (clouds, suns)—as if perhaps finally, on the outer boundary, this is what the words (human voices) will fade into. But on page 13, which begins with the words, "The ponderous woman looked" a large upright flower occupies the center of the page, with the words "falling over" it on both sides.

12. Looking at the stars from very far away we also see the spaces between them, whereas being (on earth) so close (relatively) to our own sun, in a sense we don't see the space between it and us.

13. We also get this spatio-temporal "flattening" mode in Woolf's novels, e.g. in the "Time Passes" section of *To The Lighthouse* and in *The Waves*, which plays with more repetitive spatio-temporal forms. But "A Haunted House" (also in the 1917-1921 group) comes closest to the "Kew Gardens" experiment. A ghostly couple return to their old house and try to communicate with the couple now living there. Woolf plays, partly through indefinite pronoun reference, with the confusion of identities: above all, it seems the couple now sleeping in their bed upstairs may also *be* the ghostly couple. The simplest explanation is the (meta)physical one: from the viewpoint of an omniscient God-narrator- observer who is "looking at" this house over a long period of time (100 or 1,000,000 years), any humans (or any*thing* else) living in it would basically be "the same," would be merged into "one."

14. The supernatural effect of this human-to-trans-human transformation may also be seen merely as extending the purely "natural" interflow at the story's beginning, where "the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July" (91).

15. This non-human "it" as observer-narrator of the story fits cybernetic systems theory as well as Woolf's fictional world; it recalls the impersonal-pronoun play in "Haunted House" (a ghost is an "it") but also the fourth couple's "*linguistic-space*" discussion (near the end of "Kew Gardens) about the possible meaning of "it" in the sentence, "Isn't it worth sixpence?"

16. In information theory, more "information" means *more possible meanings* within a wider system(rather than the contents of a discrete signal). "Identifying information as *both* pattern and randomness proved to be a powerful paradox, leading to the realization that in some instances, an infusion of noise into a system can cause it to reorganize at a higher level of complexity. Within such a system, pattern and randomness are bound together in a complex dialectic that makes them not so much opposites as complements" (Hayles 25). The sped-up sentence (signal, message) "Nell, Bert, Lot [...] he says, I says, she says" looks more like pure noise

—the *Gestalt*-switched inversion of a message like "areyouhowareyouhow"; that is, it looks like the words that the latter kind of message would need to have "placed between."

RÉSUMÉS

En proposant une lecture autopoiétique de "Kew Gardens", nouvelle publiée en 1919, cet article se fonde sur une interprétation de l'empirisme et de l'expérimentation dans les premières nouvelles de Woolf plus littérale que celle généralement adoptée par les critiques. L'*autopoiesis* est ici définie simplement comme le processus selon lequel un système reproduit l'organisation qui le définit comme système dans le cadre de son environnement élargi. De telles lectures ont été appliquées à la science-fiction et à la fiction cyberpunk ainsi qu'à la fiction d'auteurs tels que Pynchon et DeLillo, dont le thème suggère déjà ce type d'interprétation. Cependant, à ma connaissance, aucune lecture autopoiétique n'a été faite d'un écrivain "traditionnel" comme Woolf—dont le thème dans "Kew Gardens" n'est pas explicitement autopoiétique—ni de la forme narrative en général qui prenne en compte sa création d'un espace physique, temporel et linguistique fermé. La réflexivité du système—ici, narratif—nécessite la présence de l'observateur extérieur—ici l'auteur/lecteur—à l'intérieur du système. Cependant, alors que l'auteur/lecteur insuffle vie au système depuis l'intérieur de ce système, "Kew Gardens" met en avant l'impersonnalité mécanique du monde qu'il décrit, les ruptures dans l'espace verbal ou linguistique, les interstices ou le "bruit" entre les mots.

AUTEURS

FRANK STEVENSON

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei.Frank W. Stevenson Frank W. Stevenson has a Ph.D. in philosophy from Boston College and teaches western literature and literary theory at National Taiwan Normal University in Taipei. He is interested in theories of poiesis, mythos and the comic, in Deleuze's theory of noise and voice, and in Michel Serres' interpretation of information theory and non-linear dynamics. He has published books on Poe/Serres and the novels of Madison Morrison, and essays on (among other things) Nietzsche, Bataille, Lyotard, Poe/Deleuze, and Kafka/Serres/Deleuze. Professor Stevenson is also interested in comparative (Chinese/Western) philosophy and has published essays in Philosophy East and West (on Zhuangzi and chaos theory) and the Journal of Chinese Philosophy and in the book "Buddhisms and Deconstructions."