

## The Spatial Dynamism in *Jacob's Room*

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In her polemical essay *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf argues that “[t]he public and the private worlds are inseparably connected” (156). Realizing the historical and theoretical division between them enables us to understand the complex political implications of her work. It is through discourses of public and private that she problematizes the exclusions and boundaries that regulate women’s bodies and minds. Building on the work of Anna Snaith and others, and focusing specifically on the textual practice of *Jacob's Room* (1922), this paper suggests that Woolf manipulates the gendered dichotomy between public and private to regenerate the female agency and autonomy, and that her spatial practice extends beyond the representations of physical space to the configuration of her own textual space.

Rooted in the Greek definition and reinforced by the sociocultural condition of the modern world, the historical and theoretical division between the public and the private spheres has deprived women of social agency and autonomy (Arendt 24-5; Koelsch 15-16). In *Jacob's Room*, however, Woolf explores the validity of individuality unfixed in the public structures by handling the gender relationship between the male protagonist and the female narrator. Identified as a senior woman, the narrator is one of the essential characters: “Granted ten years’ seniority and a difference of sex, fear of him [Jacob] comes first” (94-95). For her, Jacob is “the inheritor” of patriarchal privileges (45). Alone in his room at Cambridge University, “[h]e looked satisfied; indeed masterly; which expression changed slightly as he stood there, the sound of the clock conveying to him (it may be) a sense of old building and time” (45). Jacob’s room is represented as what Woolf calls “a room of one’s own”. It provides him agency and privacy by restricting the participation of the female narrator. Nose pressed to the window of the bastion of male privilege, the narrator stands at the outside and observes Jacob and his community almost as a voyeur: “Heaven knows what they were doing. What was it that could *drop* like that? [...] Was it to receive this gift from the past that the young man came to the window and stood there, looking out across the court? It was Jacob” (42-45). Just like the coffee houses of the eighteenth century, which Jurgen Habermas conceptualises as an ideal model of “publicness”, Jacob’s room stresses a view of intellectual life predicated on exclusively male privilege (Habermas 84). As “the magnet” and the “centre” of the novel, Jacob’s private room

embodies the sociohistorical configuration of the public sphere (95). The window reflects the physical and conceptual threshold of patriarchy between men and women.

Seymour Chatman briefly touches on the ideological implications of the female narrator's limited perspective: "[w]hy is she outside in the cold if not because she is a woman?" (55). For Chatman, "[t]he whole effect argues the cultural starvation felt by intellectual women in early twentieth-century England" (55). However, Woolf did not simply lament women's lack of education. "If one is a woman", she writes in *A Room of One's Own* (1929), "one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of that civilisation, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical" (96). Woolf's subversive politics of outsiderhood is the hub of her feminist agenda. In her autobiographical essay *Moments of Being*, she comments on her cousin H.A.L. Fisher: "What would have been his shape had he not been stamped and moulded by the patriarchal machinery? Every one of our male relations was hot into that machine and came out at the other end, at the age of sixty or so, a Headmaster, an Admiral, a cabinet Minister, a Judge" (132). The exclusion from the institutional space of Oxbridge Universities paradoxically enabled Woolf to reveal the political function that deprives the male students of individual autonomy. In examining "the gender-blindness of Habermas' model" of modern state, Nancy Fraser also argues that "the members of the public [...] are transformed from a collection of self-seeking, private individuals into a public-spirited collectivity, [only] capable of acting together in the common interest ("What's Critical" 45; "Rethinking" 130). For Woolf, distance from the arena of the public provides women the opportunity to become a historical subject who critically observes the social construction and practice of "the patriarchal machinery".

In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf develops the spatial politics of outsiderhood. Standing at the outside, the female narrator casts a suspicion upon the authoritative buildings of Cambridge University: "it is not simple, or pure, or wholly splendid, the lamp of learning" (39). Being denied access to the intellectual archive of British masculine civilisation, the female narrator sees its archive in the same way as Michel Foucault. For him, "[t]he archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events [...]. It is not possible for us to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak" (*Archaeology* 129-30). In metaphysically flying over the university, the narrator critically observes the buildings that bear the stamp of pretension and provinciality (39-40). For her, distance is power. Yet, Woolf does not place the narrator completely outside the public sphere: she has "no wish to be Queen of England", but would "willingly sit beside her" so that she might "hear the Prime Minister's gossip" (69). Teresa de Lauretis argues that "feminism understands the female subject as that [...] not either 'in

ideology' or 'outside ideology' [...] but rather is at once inside and outside the ideology of gender" (192). Likewise, Woolf also formulates "Outsider's Society", whose members do not settle down in a position at patriarchy but freely move inside and outside the public sphere (*TG* 162). In the novel, the narrator's mobility illuminates women's autonomy, which is very different from that of the natural inheritors of masculine civilisation. To borrow the words of de Lauretis, the narrator's position always vacillates between "in ideology" and "outside ideology". The interpolated nature of that space is that which Woolf herself aimed to maintain throughout her life.

For Woolf, "religious pride, college pride, school pride, family pride, sex pride" only produce "unreal loyalties" to the history of patriarchy, which never disturb the repetition of war (*TG* 163, 122). In comparing Walter Benjamin's concept of history to Woolf's examination of the gendered faces of fascism in *Three Guianese*, Marie Luise Gätten perceptively observes that for both, fascist ideology is embedded within progressivism, and correspondingly the deconstruction of the concept of linear history was urgently needed at the horror of the Second World War (36). Published just after the First World War, *Jacob's Room* also reflects Woolf's antagonism towards heroism and its relation to the conventional view of history. As discussed, Jacob is described as the "authoritative" figure appropriated by his own room—the room that literally concretises the historical rhetoric of male privilege (92). For him, however, it does not matter what the past means in the present: "What for? What for?" Jacob never asked himself any such questions [...]" (161). Woolf represents the British Museum as an architectural emblem of the historical configuration of power, masculinity, and knowledge: Plato and Aristotle appear close together around the dome (109). Within the Museum, Jacob becomes a "composed, command[ed]" figure with his "fixed marble eyes and an air of immortal quiescence" of the absolute but authoritative past (145, 172). Fanny Elmer, for example, develops an idea of him as "statuesque, noble, and eyeless" (170). Florinda also says to him, "You're like one of those statues" in the Museum (80). Symbolically fashioning Jacob's object-like figure, Woolf makes visible the impassive "closedness" of men's minds and bodies within the heroic notion of civilization and their allegiance to the linear continuity of history, which finds its expression in periods of war (92).

In the novel, Woolf problematizes the closed and "immortal" tendencies of the traditional literature inherited by Jacob, who "never read[s] modern novels" (122). For him, "the moderns were futile" (122). In his room, he reads Plato and Shakespeare: "Only here the brain is Plato's brain and Shakespeare's" (109). Woolf describes that "Plato continues his dialogue; in spite of the rain; in spite of the cab whistles; in spite of the woman in the mews behind Great Ormond Street who [...] cries [...], 'Let me in! Let me in!'" (109).

This scene implies what needs to be let in to his inheritance. The narrator consistently emphasises what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “the ‘todayness’ of the day in all its randomness” by simultaneously describing the different voices, rain, traffic and the woman’s shout (26). As Carol Ohmann observes, “the problem is how to relate, how to connect” past with present, and the internal world of the book with the outer world of the reality (166). However, Jacob never draws attention to what is happening outside his room. His exclusive mind with Plato and Shakespeare is the shaping impulse behind the reified nonchalance of the “young men in the prime of life” on the battleship who “descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea” (155). The canon, “an unseizable force”, impoverishes Jacob’s capacity for critical response to the present political realities, and materializes him as a “broken match-stick” without a will of his own (156).

In her 1929 essay “Phases of Fiction”, Woolf writes that “‘the novel’ has a certain character which is now fixed and cannot be altered, that life has a certain limit which can be defined” (101). For her, the traditional style of literature maintains the hegemonic relationships between author and reader: “all [...] great novelists have brought us to see whatever they wished us to see” (“Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown”, 325-26). Foucault argues for “a certain political function of writing” (*Discipline* 192). In his view, “turning of real lives into writing is [...] a procedure of objectification and subjection” (192). D. A. Miller explicitly observes the interrelation between the style of Bildungsroman and social domination (1-32). In introducing John McCrae’s *In Flanders Field* as “the most popular poem of the war”, Paul Fussell also argues for the literary production of heroism (248). In *Jacob’s Room*, the gender relationship between the female narrator and the male protagonist contributes to the deconstruction of narrative authority, which presents social consensus and universal truth. The narrative voice is described as the subjective impression of any human individual, and thereby the reader can only partially approach Jacob’s inner world. Woolf eliminated the descriptions of his consciousness in the draft version, leaving the symbol of her artistic attempt: “the opal-shelled crab [...] [is] trying with its weakly legs to climb the steep side; trying again and falling back, and trying again and again” (14). She returns at the end of the first chapter to the crab Jacob has captured in his first scene. This incident becomes a central motif of Jacob’s characterization: “Nobody sees any one as he is” (30).

Jacob is represented not only as a figure determined within “the patriarchal machinery”, but also as a focal point of diversity and disparity (*MB* 132). Consider, for instance, three types of language that Woolf demonstrates in the novel. Jacob’s direct monologue is described along with his inner monologue in parentheses and the narrator’s objective descriptions of the real world:

"I say, Bonamy, what about Beethoven?"

("Bonamy is an amazing fellow. He knows practically everything—not more about English literature than I do—but then he's read all those Frenchmen.")

"I rather suspect you're talking rot, Bonamy. In spite of what you say, poor old Tennyson ..."

("The truth is one ought to have been taught French. Now, I suppose, old Barfoot is talking to my mother. That's an odd affair to be sure. But I can't see Bonamy down there. Damn London!") for the market carts were lumbering down the street (72).

In dividing the language of the text into two categories, Colin MacCabe explains that the dialogue has two characters: one is set apart by inverted commas, and the other is the narrator's commentary, which he conceptualises as "metalanguage" (35). He argues that "metalanguage" is commonly "unwritten" and unmarked by quotation marks, because it denies its status as language. For him, "metalanguage" is "transparent", privileged and unquestioned, revealing "empirical truth" (36). However, Woolf presents "metalanguage" as a sub-dialogue, as indicated by her placement of it in parentheses. She does not allow the reader to ignore its falsity, showing the normally transparent conventions that manipulate the readers' view. In turn, Jacob's subjectivity is preserved, or at least illuminated, within the textual space: "[...] there remains over something which can never be conveyed to a second person save by Jacob himself", and this remainder "is mostly a matter of guess work" (72-3).

The textual space Woolf literally designs invites readers to practice their own skills of observation and imagination without any privileged access sanctioned by tradition. In her essay "The Narrow Bridge of Art" (1929), Woolf suggests that the novel "will clasp to its breast the precious prerogatives of the democratic art of prose; its freedom, its fearlessness, its flexibility. For prose is so humble that it can go anywhere; no place is too low, too sordid, or too mean for it to enter" (226). In *Jacob's Room*, the female narrator's inability to find one word to describe Jacob paradoxically provides him something like a refugee from any severe censure: "One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it?" (71). In the end of the novel, Woolf symbolically describes Jacob's room at Cambridge: "One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there" (176). Jacob's young death at war reflects the conventional power of public structures, which has annihilated the male members and led them to the front. At the same time, Jacob's death could be read with regard for Woolf's own creative practice. The lack of teleology is itself rebellion against the traditional style of Bildungsroman. His young death enables the readers to speculate Jacob's alternative life and future. Being young does not simply mean not being adult, but

implies multiplicity. Erick Erickson explains this stage of life as a “psychosocial moratorium during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society” (156). Jacob dies young, thereby he never dwindles into the banal life he sees ahead of him, that of “settling down in a lawyer’s office, and wearing spats” (50). Thus, his room not only represents the pacifism to which Woolf subscribes, but also illuminates her textual practice to leave her character in an unfixed state and enable the reader to investigate his subjectivity and his multiple facets.

Woolf writes in her diary, “There’s no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at 40) to say something in my own voice” (47). However, we still witness the ways she develops her experimental practice to empower the female agency in *Jacob’s Room*. In the novel, she does not merely reject the division of the male insider and female outsider of the public sphere. Rather, the gender discrimination is negotiated in many ways. For Woolf, literature has “the capacity [...] to overflow boundaries and make unity out of multiplicity” (TG 218). In literally leaving her readers in Jacob’s room, she encourages them to habituate the textual space and explore the beginning of a renewed world.

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