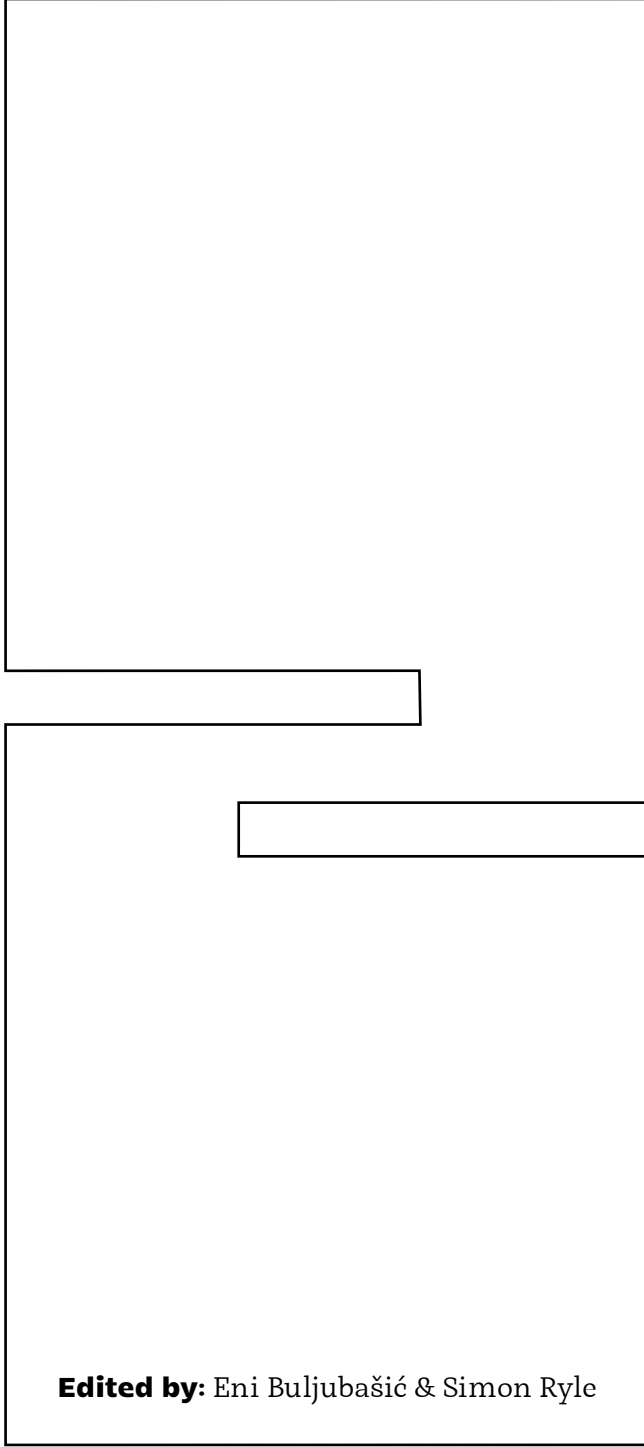


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Wavescapes in the Anthropocene

(explorations in Blue Ecocriticism and the Environmental Humanities)

Virginia Woolf's Fish: Animal Lives between Aesthetics and Ethics

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Abstract

Aquatic creatures such as pikes, salmon and whales feature prominently in the poetry, fiction and painting of the Modernist period. It should therefore come as no surprise that water-dwelling animals, and fish especially, were fascinating to Virginia Woolf too. Woolf's interest in fish (among other animals) can be accounted for by the profound changes in human-animal relations that mark the period of Modernism, and which were brought about by the unyielding influence of taxonomy and Darwin's theory of evolution, but also new developments in ethology and ecology that appeared in early 20th century. This article addresses the significance of fish as both zoometaphor and individual subject in the fiction and non-fiction of Virginia Woolf. First, I comment on the significance of fishes in connection to Modernist ideas on beauty. Then, I analyze fishing allegories and fish-related motifs in the context of Woolf's own (feminist) poetics. In the last part of the article I analyze the posthuman potential of animal consciousness that could be regarded as superior to the human one.

Key words. Virginia Woolf, fish, natural sciences, posthumanism, *écriture féminine*

Modernist Fish, Aesthetics and Ethics

The Modernist break with the past, reflected in profound changes in political economy, social theories and aesthetics, has for a long time fed scholarly interest and research into the period. In recent decades, Modernist culture is increasingly being studied with respect to another major paradigm shift – the breaching of the human-animal divide, rooted in 19th-century scientific theories and turn-of-the century developments in the life sciences. Drawing on Darwin's theory of evolution and the popularity of the taxonomic tradition which continued well into the 20th century, as well as early 20th century advances in ethology and ecology, research into Modernist culture now attempts to grasp these changes in human-animal relations, which are reflected in the period's

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fascination with zoology, animal life and nature. The analysis of literary symbols and imagery, of which animals are part, is a staple of literary studies, but with the so-called animal turn' (cf. Ritvo 2007), conventional approaches in the study of literature have been supplanted by readings that highlight the ethical potential of art and literature with respect to animals.¹ Issues of ethics and aesthetics intersect, as the wonder and admiration felt at the morphology and psychology of animals are seen as important ethical stances that contribute to human understanding and respect for animal lives.

The works of many great Modernist authors are imbued by the scientific discourses of natural sciences and zoology, putting animals and nature center-stage. One of the more interesting examples of the period's fascination with the world of animals can be found in the work of Virginia Woolf, which abounds in a large number of different animal species. While it is hard to say which animal bears the most importance for Woolf, it is safe to say that one of the animals to which she refers the most often are fishes. Fishes, and fish-related motifs and stories abound in Virginia Woolf's work, from the Brothers Grimm tale of the "Fisherman and his Wife," told by Mrs Ramsay to her son in *To the Lighthouse*, to the "snub-nosed monster" spurting water from his mouth in "Blue and Green" (1989: 142), and the underdone salmon in *Mrs Dalloway*.

Woolf is not solitary in her fascination for aquatic creatures, which can be seen in a large number of pikes, whales, and salmon that span poetry and fiction, but also painting of the period. D.H. Lawrence, for example, saw animal existence as something humans should emulate. For Lawrence, animals have access to a superior, primal form of consciousness, and exemplify a more physical, embodied kind of existence, such as the one depicted in his poem "Whales Weep Not!" In this poem, aquatic animals are portrayed as creatures of an unrestrained, enviable sexuality, which is something humans cannot access due to cultural constraints. Such a view of animals goes against the grain of the many Modernists who have, according to Carrie Rohman (2008), pushed animals away from the human realm and positioned them as 'other' to humanity, in reaction to Darwin's theory of evolution, which was perceived as threatening to the status of humanity in the world. Other Modernists writing about fish made use

1 The status of animals in the human world received more scholarly attention with the rise of animal studies, an academic discipline that engages in a variety of animal-related issues. Scholars belonging to so-called critical animal studies' try to distance themselves from the more mainstream strands of the field by being dedicated to issues of ethics, and working toward the abolishment of animal exploitation. While a large portion of mainstream animal studies approaches animals as "reified signs, symbols, images, words on a page" (Best et al., 2007: 1), and remains rooted in speciesist ideologies, critical animal studies' is interested in animals as sentient beings and living subjects.

of it to bestialize the human. This can perhaps be illustrated by James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which, Margot Norris points out, provides its cultural narratives with a broad ecological framework (2014: 540). In chapter seven of Joyce's book of night, featuring the struggle between the twins Shaun and Shem, Shem is compared to a salmon and other kinds of fish, and described as having "barbels," and "eelsblood in his cold toes" (2012: 169). While Patricia Morley stresses other possible interpretations of fish symbols in *Finnegans Wake*, she also mentions that the comparison of Shem with a fish may also imply that he is cold-hearted and mean (1969: 268). On the other hand, some Modernists made use of the more archetypal, religious meanings attributed to fish in many cultures, in which they are linked with narratives of regeneration and rebirth.² T.S. Eliot in his "Waste Land" makes the same kind of association with the story of Fisher King, to which he alludes in the poem, and which is essential to its topoi of barrenness and desolation. The morphological peculiarities of the fish were also interesting to many painters, such as Paul Klee, famous for his Expressionist and Surrealist style. His "Fish Magic," "The Goldfish," and "Around the Fish" feature unlikely-coloured fish of strange geometric shapes, occupying dreamlike environments that are often interpreted as manifestations of the unconscious.

As other of her animals, fish acquire diverse meanings within the framework of Woolf's literary texts, and are often admired for aesthetic reasons. Still, they also serve as a fit illustration of the broader cultural changes in the human view of animals, brought about by the life sciences in the period of Modernism. These intersections of science and literature, and ethics and aesthetics, embedded in Woolf's literary oeuvre, also prove crucial for her take on life, art and literature, and human-animal relations.

Modernist Beauty and the Aquarium

Woolf often wrote about fish as living creatures, praising their beauty and biological complexity, which she saw as extremely aesthetically pleasing. In a review written for the *Nation & Athenaeum*, on "the new aquarium" at the London Zoological Gardens, Woolf describes the fishes as being equally fascinating to scientists and poets:

2 Writing about water in his seminal work "Patterns of Comparative Religion", Mircea Eliade describes it as the supreme symbol of creativity. Spanning mythical narratives across the globe, water symbolizes a medium that precedes, gives birth to and succeeds all life (1958: 188). Creatures associated with water, such as "dragons, snakes, shell-fish, dolphins, fish", typically enjoy its powers, sharing them with those with whom they come into contact (1958: 207). In Christianity, fish is a symbol of Christ, and in Buddhism and Hinduism, it is related to the renewal of life.

Aesthetically speaking, the new aquarium is undoubtedly the most impressive of all the houses at the zoo. Red fish, blue fish, nightmare fish, dapper fish, fish lean as gimlets, fish round and white as soup plates, ceaselessly gyrate in oblong frames of greenish light in the hushed and darkened apartment hollowed out beneath the Mappin terraces. Scientifically, no doubt, the place is a paradise for the ichthyologist; but the poet might equally celebrate the strange beauty of the broad-leaved water plants trembling in the current, or the sinister procession of self-centred sea-beasts forever circling and seeking perhaps some minute prey, perhaps some explanation of a universe which evidently appears to them of inscrutable mystery. Now they knock the glass with their noses; now they shoot dartlike to the surface; now eddy slowly contemplatively down to the sandy bottom. Some are delicately fringed with a fin that vibrates like an electric fan and propels them on; others wear a mail boldly splashed with a design by a Japanese artist. That crude human egotism which supposes that Nature has wrought her best for those who walk the earth is rebuked at the aquarium. Nature seems to have cared more to tint and adorn the fishes who live unseen at the depths of the sea than to ornament our old, familiar friends, the goat, the hog, the sparrow, and the horse (1986: 404-405).

In her analysis of Woolf's review, Caroline Hovanec points out that the admiration Woolf expresses for the strange forms and striking colours of the fishes can be understood as a reflection of Modernist aesthetics (2018: 2), which displays an interest in the exotic, uncanny, and bizarre, and subverts the normative ideas on beauty, reality, perspective and other aspects of human life. Jane Goldman explains that the alien beauty of the fishes, occupying an underwater realm unfamiliar to humans, requires of us to reconfigure our established notion of beauty, and puts the drabness of humans and the world known to them to shame (1998: 100). The discovery of an entirely new dimension of the world challenges the conventional ideas of beauty, which now include previously unknown creatures of exquisite morphology, form and colour. Virginia Woolf points out that the beauty of the fishes greatly surpasses that of "the goat, the hog, the sparrow, and the horse," which are animals that have for centuries lived in companionship with humans, but also that of all creatures "who walk the earth," which includes humans too (1986: 405).

Woolf provides another extensive commentary on fish in her essay "The Sun and the Fish," written after the eclipse of the sun in 1927. Although the essay is loaded with symbolism related to the solar eclipse, fish are again referred to in a complimentary way, with the description bordering on the fantastic:

The fish themselves seem to have been shaped deliberately and slipped into the world only to be themselves. They neither work nor weep. In their shape is their reason. For what other purpose, except the sufficient one of perfect existence, can they have been thus made, some so round, some so thin, some with radiating fins upon their back, others lined with red electric light, others undulating like white pancakes on a frying pan, some armoured in blue mail, some given prodigious claws, some outrageously fringed with huge whiskers? More care has been spent on half a dozen fish than upon all the races of mankind (1994: 92).

The extraordinary beauty of animals hidden in the depths of the sea alters the normative way we usually perceive our surroundings. The multiplicity of perspectives and possible worlds are important elements of Modernist ideology, and are also reflected in the literary devices used by Modernist authors. In his well-known essay "Art as Technique," Viktor Shklovsky argues that the estrangement of the common ways in which humans see their world is the very purpose of art. According to him, human perception of the world has become automatic, and the role of art is to make things strange, "make objects unfamiliar", "make forms difficult" and thereby recover the sensation of environment lost by habit (2017: 9). Woolf's accounts of fish operates with the same alienating effect, which is triggered by their unusual anatomy, colour and form.

The creatures in the aquarium appear unfamiliar thanks to their vivid colours, and unusual shades and patterns. Some of them are described as sporting "blue mail," and others as emitting "red electric light." The painterly quality of these descriptions, conveys a sense of wonder at the animal world, and the fish seem unusual and beautiful at the same time. Woolf also plays with the reader's perception of the fish by the changes in perspective, as she zooms in' on minute details of the fish's body, camera-style. While the image of the fish's "whiskers" requires the reader to focus on a detail on the fish's body, the reference to the large size of the fish's barbels creates a counter-effect, making the reader adjust their perspective, since the detail is now regarded as something large and out-of-proportion. A similar effect is produced by the reference to the fins that "radiate" on the back of the fish, which again conveys an impression of excessive spreading out.' The play of perspectives puzzles the reader, and disrupts their habitual way of looking at things. Finally, Woolf creates a sequence of striking similes by linking things that are seemingly disparate. She compares white fish to pancakes on a frying pan (1994: 92), and comes up with technology-inspired comparisons that make the fish appear almost mechanical. The image of the fish "propelled" by a fin that "vibrates like an electric fan" (1986: 405) is one of the more striking images that alienate habitual perception.

The morphological alterity of the fishes, which is highlighted and complemented by literary devices, positions the creatures as being worthy of aesthetic appreciation. The fact that they are described as more beautiful than humans is a statement on value in itself. Furthermore, in both of these texts Woolf acknowledges the animals as creatures endowed with a subjectivity of their own. Goldman points out that, in the Aquarium review, the aesthetic appreciation of the fishes is not an end in itself, since they are described as not only objects of the human gaze, but also subjects in their own right (1998: 100). In the review, fish are described as moving “contemplatively,” and looking for “some explanation of a universe.” They also knock their noses on the tank glass while looking at us (Woolf, 1986: 404). This conveys a picture of fish being endowed with a subjectivity of their own (Goldman, 1998: 100), occupying a world which is separate from the human one, but which also overlaps with it. The fact that Woolf acknowledges animals as autonomous creatures can be interpreted as part of legacy of the scientific theories that have redefined the place of animals in the human world, most important of them being Darwin's theory of evolution.

It is a widely known fact that Darwin's theory of evolution proved central to the dethroning of humans from their privileged status. Gillian Beer (2009) sums up the political, social and religious implication of Darwin's ideas by pointing out that one of the most important implications of the theory of the descent of man is that humans were suddenly seen as animals themselves. Furthermore, the theory of evolution disrupted the belief that humans were created in God's own image, which made their rule on Earth and dominion over the animal kingdom even more questionable. In addition, humans are no longer regarded as the only beings who are in the possession of reason (Beer, 2009: 7-9). The narrowing of the gap between humans and animals, prompted by Darwinian ideas, is reflected in Woolf's writing and description of animals.

Not only does Woolf depict the fish that populate her aquarium as more beautiful than humans, she also points out that they have been given colour and shape without any respect for human concerns. Fishes have been endowed with features that are beautiful and striking in their form, and these aspects of their bodies are there for their own use and sake. In “The Sun and the Fish”, Woolf states that the shape and form of the fishes is part of their self-contained existence, which appears to have no relation whatsoever to the human world. They are “slipped into the world only to be themselves” (1994: 92), which goes against the anthropocentric belief, predominant even today, that humans are superior, rational creatures who are more apt in making decisions on not only human but also animal lives. In other words, animal bodies, their fur, skin, feathers, and other things that make them beautiful, or are simply

part of animal life, are not there for the use and pleasure of humans, but rather serve animals themselves. Even though the gap between humans and animals appears to be greater in “The Sun and the Fish” than Woolf’s essay on the aquarium, the statement on the detachment of the fish from the human world and their unknowability to humans does not preclude ethics, since it is precisely their alterity that commands respect in treatment.

Fluidity of Life and *Écriture Féminine*

In Virginia Woolf’s work, fish often appear whenever there is talk of writing and literature. They are described as dwelling in deep lakes, and slumbering at the bottom of the sea. They are keenly sought after, but get loose as soon as caught. Just as the material of literature itself, fish are elusive but crucial if art is to happen at all. Woolf’s fishing allegories might have had their foundation in her own fishing experience, which she describes in the biographical *A Sketch of the Past*. She describes the activity of fishing in an exhilarated manner: “the line thrilled in one’s fingers as the boat tossed and shot through the water; and then – how can I convey the excitement? – there was a little leaping tug; then another; up one hauled; up through the water at length came the white twisting fish; and was slapped on the floor” (1985: 134).³ The preparation of the rod, the anticipation of the tug, and the satisfaction of pulling the fish out of water mirror the stages of the writing process, and the effort involved in putting words on paper.

Indeed, Woolf often referred to fish and fishing in trying to describe the act of putting the complexity of world into words. In her novel *The Waves*, one of its male characters, Bernard, describes his inadequacy in using language to express life:

The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air. If I press them all will burst. Whatever sentence I extract whole and entire from this cauldron is only a string of six little fish that let themselves be caught while a million others leap and sizzle, making the cauldron bubble like boiling silver, and slip through my fingers (1992: 184).

3 While she recalled her fishing passion being extinguished by her father, who stated that he would stop accompanying her because he did not like to see the fish caught, Woolf admits that she had always associated fishing with an extreme thrill and pleasure.

Bernard's attempt to find the right chain of signifiers for the desired field of reference, and contain the evanescent material of life in words, is compared to fish which keep slipping through one's fingers.

Again, in *A Sketch of the Past*, Woolf refers to fish in trying to explain the futility of life writing'. The life of a person is shaped by so many invisible presences that, without trying to describe them, it is impossible to capture an individual's life on paper. Thinking about the influence of her own mother on her own life, Woolf compares herself to a fish whose body is moved here and there by currents of water: "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream" (1985: 80). Reducing life to a cluster of facts about the person, without attempting to grasp the environment which cannot be peeled away from them, means that what is essential about the human in question will be left out in biographical writing.

The view of life as evanescent and fluid, and the futility of trying to impose fixed truths are expressions of the ideology of Modernism, and its epistemological uncertainty which extends to things such as consciousness, subjectivity, time, and perspective. In addition to Bergson's notions of subjective time or duration', and Freud's ideas on the unconscious, which have influenced the poetics of many Modernist authors, some critics also stress developments in the life sciences as contributing to the Modernist skepticism towards the fixedness' of life. In her study of the natural sciences and Virginia Woolf, Christina Alt points out that Woolf, despite her childhood enthusiasm for bug hunting, gradually grew critical towards the traditions of taxonomy and classification, which had at the time given way to new practices of studying nature and animal life, based on observation. Her criticism of these traditions of natural history is best seen in her rejecting the idea of naming, capturing and fixing' as a way of getting to know the truth' about the world (2010: 72). This can be substantiated by her references to fish in respect to the writing-process, in which fish signify the difficulty of containing meaning in words, something which Woolf has written about extensively in many of her essays.

Woolf proposed her own notion of life in "Modern Fiction," in which she describes a series of unpredictable sensations, emotions and stimuli that shape a person. These should, she believed, be recorded in the same non-linear, spontaneous manner in which they affect an individual's brain (1994: 161). Referring to what seems to be the stream-of-consciousness technique, which she describes as more suitable for encapsulating life,' Woolf again reveals her interest in a different kind of truthfulness, one which describes life by respecting its interactive, dynamic and changeable quality. The conviction that life is fluid, elusive and evanescent was reflected not only in Woolf's choice of literary devices, but also her ideas

on the fluidity of gender, which played a major part in her distinctively feminist poetics.

Fish feature in one of her much-studied feminist texts, *A Room of One's Own*, in which she makes use of a fishing narrative to criticize the exclusion of women from the world of education and literature. The narrator in the essay, visiting "Oxbridge," takes a walk around the university grounds. Musing about all sorts of issues, she makes use of images of water and fish to describe her thoughts:

Thought—to call it by a prouder name than it deserved—had let its line down into the stream. It swayed, minute after minute, hither and thither among the reflections and the weeds, letting the water lift it and sink it until—you know the little tug—the sudden conglomeration of an idea at the end of one's line: and then the cautious hauling of it in, and the careful laying of it out? Alas, laid on the grass how small, how insignificant this thought of mine looked; the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water so that it may grow fatter and be one day worth cooking and eating. (1977: 9)

In the continuation of the essay, she is suddenly interrupted by a Beadle, who drives her off the Oxbridge lawn, sending her "little fish" (1977: 10) into hiding. Since the university turf is not meant for women, the narrator has to leave. In the text, the reference to the fish that is driven away by the actions of the Beadle can be read with respect to Woolf's materialist ideas on literature. The Beadle embodies the institutional obstacles that reproduce gender inequality, preventing women from accessing education, which directly stifles their financial independence. The reference to the fish that is driven away by the Beadle can therefore be seen as a commentary on history written by patriarchy, which has eliminated all potential for women reaching the same level of skill in writing as men. The fish that is sent into hiding by someone who represents patriarchal authority is described as "the sort of fish that a good fisherman puts back into the water" (1977: 9). However, the little fish could have grown larger if left to grow.

In "Professions for Women," another of her well-known essays, Woolf again draws a link between writing and fish. In describing the process of writing as such, she comments on a very specific state of mind which the (female) writer has to achieve before she can start putting words to paper:

I hope I am not giving away professional secrets if I say that a novelist's chief desire is to be as unconscious as possible (...) I want you to imagine me writing a novel in a state of trance. I want you to figure to yourselves a girl sitting with a pen in her hand, which for minutes, and indeed for hours,

she never dips into the inkpot. The image that comes to my mind when I think of this girl is the image of a fisherman lying sunk in dreams on the verge of a deep lake with a rod held out over the water. She was letting her imagination sweep unchecked round every rock and cranny of the world that lies submerged in the depths of our unconscious being (1974: 239-240).

The trance-like state of unconsciousness in which the imagination of the author flourishes precedes the act of writing as such, but remains crucial for it. The physical inactivity and social isolation that it demands should be maintained if the mind is to be active and creative. What happens in this state is compared to fishing. This indicates an automatism, or an absence of control on behalf of the writer, who has no total power over writing or its outcome. Woolf then goes on to describe the obstacles to writing, which resemble those already discussed in "A Room of One's Own":

Now came the experience, the experience that I believe to be far commoner with women writers than with men. The line raced through the girl's fingers. Her imagination had rushed away. It had sought the pools, the depths, the dark places where the largest fish slumber. And then there was a smash. There was an explosion. There was foam and confusion. The imagination had dashed itself against something hard. The girl was roused from her dream. She was indeed in a state of the most acute and difficult distress. To speak without figure she had thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked. The consciousness of-what men will say of a woman who speaks the truth about her passions had roused her from her artist's state of unconsciousness. She could write no more. The trance was over. Her imagination could work no longer (1974: 240).

Woolf describes the writer as inhibited by a set of conservative gender expectations that collide with that which she, detached from her conscious self, finds she wants to say. The reference to the unconscious' and dreaming' might be understood as part of the legacy of Freud's psychoanalysis and its interest in what remains hidden from the conscious self, but what is important for the state that Woolf describes is that she equals it to a sense of detachment. Detaching from reality allows for the emergence of thoughts and ideas that will eventually be externalized in and through writing. The deep, dark lake in which the writer fishes for her material, and the large fish' that do not dwell close to the surface indicates the separation between reality and the mind of the writer who needs to forgo everything that stifles her, most importantly aspects of her gender.

The creative mind works best when the artist withdraws from reality. This can be seen in a number of Woolf's fictional artists, such as the

painter Lily Briscoe from the novel *To the Lighthouse*, who has trouble painting due to the presence of other people. The sense of detachment contributes to and is simultaneously maintained by the elimination of everything that is external, including not only literary conventions and tradition, but also aspects of one's (gendered) identity.⁴ Although she was concerned with the position of women in the world of literature, Woolf had a personal take on women's writing'. Rather than favoring a form of literature that would be based on difference, she was interested in its abolition in the process of writing. For Virginia Woolf, the writer is an androgynous creature, much like her Orlando, the main character of the eponymous novel. The writer comes into being only when she manages to give voice to her interiority in a way which is true to her, catching a string of fish' that make up her unique view of the world. In "Professions for Women," Woolf points out that she will be able to define what a woman is only after women manage to express themselves "in all the arts and professions open to human skill" (1974: 239). What a woman is cannot be defined by a set of fixed qualities – a woman becomes' in expressing herself. In this respect, Woolf anticipates Hélène Cixous and her well well-known essay on *écriture féminine* "The Laugh of the Medusa," in which she urged women to give their passions, thoughts, and ideas a voice. By reclaiming their bodies, which are constrained by patriarchal ideology embedded in the discourse of femininity', they could speak for themselves and about themselves in a special kind of "female-sexed" writing. Rather than favoring anything specific that would make a text female', Cixous calls for the liberation of the immense richness and diversity that exists in each individual woman: "Women's imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing; their stream of phantasms is incredible" (2012: 941).

Fish Consciousness, Posthuman Potential

While animals abound in the texts of Virginia Woolf (cf. Czarnecki and Rohman 2011), explicit commentary on the cruelty and violence to which they are exposed in the human world is not that frequent. As Christina Alt explains, Woolf was acquainted with the protectionist ideas and

4 Woolf talks about abolishing gender in many of her texts. In her essay "The Patron and the Crocus" she describes an ideal reader, or the patron', and discusses the conditions in which one's writing, the crocus' of the story, would flourish best. In addition to ignoring everything that stifles the writer, such as preconceived notions of decency' ("The twentieth-century patron must be immune from shock" (1994: 214)), the writer should forget everything that is part of one's identity when it comes to gender: "And if you can forget your sex altogether... so much the better, a writer has none" (1994: 215).

movements of the period (2010: 135-147), but her interest in animal well-being often intersected with issues of gender or class. In her essay on the Plumage Bill' (cf. "The Plumage Bill" 1994), published in the *Woman's Leader* and written as a response to a text by H.G. Massingham, editor of the *Nation*, she speaks against the cruelty involved in the trade of feather, often used to adorn women's hats. However, Alt explains that Woolf does so to defend women from Massingham's accusation that they themselves are the culprit, instead of the larger, patriarchal structures which profit from plumage trade (2010: 132-133).⁵ These instances illustrate Woolf's interest in oppression on a broader socio-political scale, but her contribution to the ethical treatment of animals should be looked for elsewhere, that is, in her posthuman take on human and animal minds. Her understanding of the human mind exemplifies a challenge to the established notion of the human which, according to Timothy Clark, produces better results in contributing to our respect and understanding of animals than the more frequent critical practices based on detecting human' qualities in animals and vice versa (2011: 187).

Woolf's interest in animal psychology can best be seen in her novel *Flush*, which takes up the perspective of a spaniel, but she explores the perspectives and points of view of other animals too, such as that of the snail in "Kew Gardens." Caroline Hovanec argues that Woolf's interest in animal minds reflects the ideas of another scientific discipline that was prominent in the period, that of comparative psychology. Interested in animal minds, comparative psychology envisaged them as having a more profound experience of the world, based on sensations. Superior in their perspective of the environment, animals are understood as being rooted in their life-world by the senses, which enable them to have a more embodied experience of the world. To Virginia Woolf, literature offered means to explore animal minds, their specific animal experience, and the way it intersects with and alienates our world. She also made use of the (imagined) aspects of animal consciousness by applying it to humans, and zoo-morphing their mode of existence, which makes it seem as something porous, and unstable (2018: 176-184).

When it comes to fish, they appear in "The Mark on the Wall," in which Woolf describes a narrator's sequence of thought in trying to figure out what the mark that can be seen on the wall really is. The narrator's mind is fluid, moving from one topic to another with the help of free-indirect discourse, and at one point, the narrator suddenly despairs over what she sees as the inadequacy of the human mind: "I want to think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from

5 For a reading that focuses on patriarchy and the violence of fishing see Shirkhani (2011).

my chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle. I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts” (2008: 5). Then, in the continuation of the essay, the narrator expresses skepticism about human knowledge and its institutions, imagining a world free of them:

Yes, one could imagine a very pleasant world... A world without professors, or specialist or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one's fingers as a fish slices the water with his fin, grazing the stems of the water-lilies, hanging suspended over nests of white sea eggs... How peaceful it is down here, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections. (2008: 8)

In her analysis of Woolf's essay, Hovanec argues that the consciousness of the fish, which the narrator takes up, reveals a form of non-human epistemology based on sensations. The fish is described as being one with the environment in a physical sense, touching the plants, moving through water, watching the play of light on the surface. The description of the fish as passive, their consciousness embodied, their bodies one with its medium, reflects the primitivist aspects of comparative psychology, which casts the animal experience as predominantly sensory (Hovanec 2018: 179-180). In this respect, Woolf takes on the mind of the fish echoes D.H. Lawrence's poem "Fish," in which the titular animal is described as inseparable from its environment, free of self-consciousness and intersubjectivity. In her reading of the poem, Rohman points out that Lawrence sees the animal's primal form of existence as more perfect than the human one (2008: 96), which is why the poetic speaker is envious of it: "To be a fish!// So utterly without misgiving/ To be a fish/ In the waters" (1994: 271).

For Woolf, the mode of consciousness of the fish appears as a welcome non-human alternative that reveals a different form of existence, and other possible worlds, which the human could occupy if only they got rid of the legacy of their human knowledge. In other works, she envisioned these other modes of being in the world by painting the human experience from a distinctively sensory, non-human perspective. *The Waves* for example features human subjects whose experience of the world cannot be defined as entirely human, and according to Derek Ryan, illustrates a "posthuman form of intra-action," based on "natural-cultural entanglements" that subvert the distinction between human and non-human agency (2013: 177). In *The Waves*, one of the male characters, Luis, is hiding from his friends, and experiences something that transcends the boundaries of both his body and mind:

I am alone. They have gone into the house for breakfast, and I am left standing by the wall among the flowers. It is very early, before lessons. (...) The flowers swim like fish made of light upon the dark, green waters. I hold a stalk in my hand. I am the stalk. My roots go down to the depths of the world, through earth dry with brick, and damp earth, through veins of lead and silver. I am all fibre. All tremors shake me, and the weight of the earth is pressed to my ribs. Up here my eyes are green leaves, unseeing. (1992: 340)

How he feels and what he sees seems to be modeled on plant-life, the way this is described draws on the plant's would-be sensory experience. Louis feels the dryness and dampness of the earth, and the weight of it on his chest, in an act of physical, bodily unity with its environment. His experience of the environment and his knowledge of it are defined and limited by his senses, which can be seen in the fact that he describes his eyes as "unseeing". Rather than being endowed with eyes, plants rely on other types of senses when collecting information on their surroundings. The fact that the erasure of boundaries between self and other and human and non-human happens to Louis as a child is important, as the period of childhood, situated at the beginning of the novel, is depicted as free from the restraints which come with growing up and entering institutions of education, and their tight and narrow moulds. The predominantly sensory mode of existence, imaged by comparative psychology as typical for animals, but applied by Woolf to both human and plant life, presents an alternative and complement to human experience.

Woolf's critique of human modes of consciousness for their predominantly intellectual quality and rootedness in social and political hierarchies, as well as institutions and knowledge that are closely tied to violence, establishes grounds for a new kind of understanding between humans and non-humans. As Cary Wolfe argues in his work on posthumanism, insight into animal minds and perspective contributes not only to our respect towards animals but also those who are often considered to be less-than-fully human, due to different modes of interacting with their environment. In considering the sensory apparatus of the animals, and the specificities of their experience of the world, Wolfe points out that the understanding of the animal's sensorium contributes to our redefinition of the concept, but also increases empathy and deepens bonds with those suffering from disorders such as autism (2010: 127-142). Interest in animal psychology therefore contributes to the establishment of new bonds across species, but also to a more profound understanding between humans.

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