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**“THE MARK ON THE WALL” AND LITERARY FANCY:  
A COGNITIVE SKETCH**

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**Introduction**

The cognitive turn in literary studies has opened vistas for outlining new theoretical directions and revealing new interpretive possibilities (Richardson and Steen 2002). Even its most ardent opponents agree that 'cognitive literary criticism can be considered and welcomed as an attempt to broaden our understanding of literature considerably if not indeed to deepen it qualitatively' (Adler and Gross 2002: 196). Polemics on the scope and limits of cognitivist expansionism tend to take a balanced standpoint, as voiced by Richardson and Steen (2002: 2) who believe that a cognitive approach in literary studies 'aims more to supplement than to supplant the current approaches and methodologies'. This compromise, however, leaves open the question of the extent, relevance, and validity of the contribution a cognitively biased interpretive reading of literary texts can provide to literary criticism in general as well as our view of specific literary works.

This study addresses these questions by suggesting a cognitive, or rather cognitive-conceptual analysis, of Virginia Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall' (Woolf 1972: 37-46), the 1917 story where, as many agree, Woolf began to develop her new ideas about fiction (Phillips 2003). The analysis focuses on the interplay of images in whose drama, as Baldwin (1989) claims, the genius of the story lies. More traditional interpretations of the story, which see it as a reverie about 'the unreality of reality as conventionally defined', highlight various breaks with tradition that push the short story to its essayistic limits (Baldwin 1989: 13), making it a manifesto of modernism. In 'The Mark on the Wall' the reader finds bold experiments with fictional time, where time and motion are shown to be relative (Narey 1992). Readers also trace the ambiguity of closure (Cyr 1996), discern ideas that are given the status of characters (Baldwin 1989), and discover a new status ascribed to the objects of the outside world (Kemp 1994). Relying upon the 'brink of memory' effect (Greshnykh 2000), Woolf's story also reveals how objects can interfere with and interact with thought (Phillips 2003). Such experimenting is no accident because as a writer Virginia Woolf exhibits nearly all the qualities which, according to Lodge (1991), modernist fiction displays.

Interpretive readings of 'The Mark on the Wall', however fractional, selective, or corrective, all make note of the hidden agenda of imagination. Baldwin (1989), for instance, identifies the relation between imagination and fact as the dominant thematic tension in the story, while Phillips (2003) recognises Woolf's discovery of a new capability of imagination as her major achievement. Woolf's writings suggest that imagination, just because it is often anchored to a physical detail or a solid object, never allows us to go 'unmoored into purely abstract consciousness' (Phillips 2003: 10). Still, in Quentin Bell's view, as quoted by Lehman (1975: 22), Woolf's imagination 'was furnished with an accelerator but no brakes'.

## Literary imagination from a cognitive poetic perspective

Cognitive studies of literature have provided ample evidence to prove the crucial role that imagery and imagination play in our everyday language and discourse (Turner 1996). Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 15) point out that

work in a number of fields is converging toward rehabilitation of imagination as a fundamental scientific topic, since it is the central engine of meaning behind the most ordinary mental events. The mind is not a Cyclops: it has more than one *I*; it has three – identity, integration, and imagination – and they all work inextricably together.

Against this background, the time seems already ripe to re-address the issue of literary imagination *per se*, since little attempt has been made to reveal and systematise the ways in which the creative potential of the everyday mind, literary by nature, nourishes and augments the literary mind proper.

In 'The Mark on the Wall', Virginia Woolf experiments with all the three 'mind's *I*'s: identity (sameness and differentiation, analogy and disanalogy), integration (bringing various meanings together for a new one to emerge), and imagination whose flight, paradoxically, is 'not from the world, but to it' (Phillips 2003: 16). The story, which has a suspenseful structure, rotates around the reiteration axis of *the mark on the wall* which initially seems to have been made by *a nail*, but under further scrutiny turns into *a snail*. Thus the language of the story becomes 'vitalized, with a matter of a simple phoneme' (Baldwin 1989: 15). Its composition, unfolding like a spiral, iconically mimics the snail's shape as the narrator, step by step, creates her world of reverie.

The story's intricate texture, where 'hard separate facts' (Woolf 1972: 39) of reality are juxtaposed and brought into collision with the world of fancy, gives access to those modifications and disturbances of cognitive processes that make such collision in literary discourse possible. It was Tsur (1992: 4) who, in his version of cognitive poetics, first claimed that 'organized violence against cognitive processes' is symptomatic of creating and reading poetry. Similarly, in many instances of literary prose, alongside the normal use of such processes initially developed for non-aesthetic purposes, one may intuitively discern 'some kind of modification or disturbance of these processes; and their reorganization according to different principles' (Tsur 1992: 5).

My analysis of Woolf's short story proceeds from the assumption that, to a great extent, the specificity of literary imagination results from such modifications and disturbances. Their presence might be traced in the story's texture via various means of foregrounding and defamiliarisation employed by Woolf 'to jettison "plot" in the accepted sense, and achieve an aesthetically satisfying structure by other means' (Lehman 1975: 48). Among the most powerful of such means are unconventional images and the use of symbols. I will here focus on the interplay of imagery and symbolism through a cognitive lens from three major perspectives: (i) reworking conventional conceptual metaphors, (ii) creating new conceptual metaphors, and (iii) manipulating cognitive operations with mental images.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Special emphasis on the metaphorical mappings, often viewed as cognitive universals, was largely prompted by specific tasks of the analysis, not by the misconception that the metaphoric mode prevails in modernist fiction. This mode, as Lodge (1991: 492-493) maintains, is 'perfectly compatible with the

## Reworking conventional conceptual metaphors

In cognitive poetics, the reworking of conventional conceptual metaphors is regarded as a part of an artist's creed (Kövecses 2002), a constituent of the literary mind *per se*. Such reworking, according to Kövecses (2002: 47-49), embraces several cognitive mechanisms which prompt the novelty of the metaphor. These include *extension*<sup>2</sup> based on introducing a new conceptual element (or elements) in the source domain (often accompanied by the use of new linguistic means); *elaboration* which captures an already existing element (or elements) of the source domain in a new, unusual, or unconventional way; *combination* as the use of everyday conventional thought based on simultaneously activating and bringing together two or more conceptual metaphors; and *questioning* that relies upon calling into question the validity and the very appropriateness of common everyday metaphors. These mechanisms are in many cases jointly employed, triggering what might be called conceptual defamiliarisation.

In Woolf's story, the conventional metaphors that undergo reworking highlight in a new way at least three groups of concepts – LIFE/AFTERLIFE, THE WORK OF MIND, and KNOWLEDGE, as is explicitly indicated in the text: 'Oh! Dear me, the mystery of life; the inaccuracy of thought! The ignorance of humanity!' (38). Interestingly, it is possible to trace a general tendency of metaphor reworking in Woolf's text, which in all probability demonstrates that in her 'darting of the mind from one train of thought to another [...] there is less inconsequence than might appear at first reading' (Lehman 1975: 48). Whatever concerns life, death, or afterlife is, in Woolf's imagistic vision, conceptually extended or elaborated. Whatever concerns the working of the mind appears as the result of a combination of conceptual metaphors. Wherever the issue of knowledge is brought up, conceptual stereotypes are being questioned.

### *Extension*

Unlike other fictions and essays where 'Woolf's fascination [...] with life and death in startling juxtaposition' (Phillips 2003: 3) stands out very vividly, 'The Mark on the Wall' construes a continuum in which the boundaries between life, death, and afterlife become blurred, as in the passage below:

Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour – landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the foot of God entirely naked! Tumbling head over heels in the asphodel meadow like brown paper parcels pitched down a shoot in the post office! (38-39).

Here, what Tsur (1992: 415) calls 'rapid categorisation' activates the conventional metaphor LIFE IS A VOYAGE IN SPACE which is extended by new concepts, namely those of rapidity, nakedness (~ helplessness), and communication. The latter is humorously described as sending parcels by regular post whose arrival to Heaven

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retention and exploitation of metonymic writing on an extensive scale'. A mark on the wall may then quite legitimately become 'an emblem for the susceptibility of reality to the subjective consciousness' (Phillips 2003: 11).

<sup>2</sup> Similar terms, used by Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 48-49) to describe the essential aspects of blending, characterise in a somewhat different way the creative possibilities of conceptual integration.

means 'death' (DEATH IS THE END OF A JOURNEY), or rather 'life after death'. Thus, the conventional metaphor of death gets defamiliarised through elaboration that employs a communicative perspective.

### ***Elaboration***

The mechanism of conceptual elaboration affects, to an even greater extent, the vision of afterlife which may, according to Baldwin (1989), be regarded as a variation of the story's main theme – reality *versus* imagination as a subjective reality. Characteristically, life after death is visualised by Woolf in quite an unorthodox way: 'the slow pulling down of thick green stalks so that the cup of the flower, as it turns over, deluges one with purple and red light' (39).

Relying upon the conceptual metaphor PEOPLE ARE PLANTS as a part of the Great Chain of Being hierarchy (Turner 1996), death and afterlife in the story are conceptualised in an unconventional way. Death is no longer presented as withering or being cut down by THE GRIM REAPER, but is interpreted as the result of exerting a strong physical pressure which, instead of destroying, gives vent to new energy, to a new life (cf. the LIFE IS LIGHT metaphor). The metaphor of 'life against death', which suggests the resistance to pressure that includes the deathly pressure of a weapon, is further elaborated in the description of the winter storm against which the tree, conventionally a symbol of life, stands 'in the empty field with all leaves close-furled, nothing tender exposed to the iron bullets of the moon, a naked mast upon an earth that goes tumbling, tumbling, all night long. [...] One by one the fibres snap beneath the immense cold pressure of the earth' (45). Here, as in Woolf's other works, the symbol of the tree acquires a new meaning: it stands not just for life, but for something enduring in life (Lehman 1975). This metamorphosis is supported by the conceptual combination of metaphorical images. The EARTH IS A VESSEL metaphor, triggered by referring to the tree (PEOPLE ARE PLANTS) as 'a naked mast', combines with the DEATH IS AN ENEMY metaphor, the latter being elaborated through the image of *the moon as a deathly weapon*. Hence, despite the pressure, or rather due to resisting the pressure, a new life is born.

### ***Combination***

Another vivid example of conceptual combination is the narrator's reflections on how the mind works: 'How readily our thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straws so feverishly, and then leave it' (37). The fragment activates two conventional conceptual metaphors that have to do with the mind and thinking – THINKING IS MANIPULATING WITH OBJECTS and MENTAL WORK IS PHYSICAL WORK. These metaphors are integrated within the range of the metaphor HUMANS ARE ANIMALS further specified as THOUGHTS ARE INSECTS. By being combined with the metaphors CONSCIOUS IS UP and CONTROL IS UP, the resulting metaphorical amalgam displays a positive axiological bias. Further in the story, the analogy of mental and physical work seems to be shattered by the introduction of the thought-action opposition: 'I understand Nature's game – her prompting to take action as a way of ending any thought that threatens to excite or pain. Hence, I suppose, comes our slight contempt for men of action – men, we assume, who don't think' (44). Thus, the metaphor MENTAL WORK IS PHYSICAL WORK gets, if not rejected, at least questioned, while the former supportive charge gives way to a skeptical, if not negative one.

### *Questioning*

This conceptual mechanism appears for Woolf to be a strong tool of re-evaluating what knowledge is:

But for that mark, I'm not sure about it; I don't believe it was made by nail after all; [...] I might get up, but if I got up and looked at it, ten to one I shouldn't be able to say for certain [...]. (38)

No, no, nothing is proved, nothing is known. And if I were to get up at this very moment and ascertain that the mark on the wall is really [...] the head of a gigantic nail, – what should I gain? – Knowledge? Matter for further speculation? I can think sitting still as well as standing up. And what is knowledge? (43)

In both the above quotations the narrator calls into question the validity of the KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor. Unlike other examples where conceptual metaphors were construed via linguistic metaphors and other verbal tropes, here access to the dominant conceptual metaphor is gained through verbs and nouns that belong to the domains of 'seeing' and 'knowing'. The first step in questioning the validity of the conceptual metaphor is its reversal to SEEING IS KNOWING, which is followed by rejecting the metaphor as such – SEEING IS NOT (always) KNOWING. Hence the question: How should we conceptualise knowledge then?

### **Creating new conceptual metaphors**

Crossing the boundaries of what seems to be conventionally accepted and entrenched, thus making these boundaries fuzzy, finds a further textual realisation in the way Woolf creates new metaphors based either on rich images or on a conceptual breakthrough.

### *The central rich image*

One of the key rich images of the story – 'a world which one could slice with one's thought as a fish slices the water with his fin' (43-44) – incorporates a symbol which, according to Lehman (1975: 84), haunted Woolf's imagination – the symbol of a fin. This symbol 'that seems to have been mysteriously charged with meaning for Virginia [...] was the result of an actual mystical vision', thus constituting part of her mystical and meditative element (Zwerdling 1992). It is precisely the symbol of a fin that has 'made the mystical undercurrent a commonplace in thinking about Woolf' (Phillips 2003: 11).

Approaching this symbolic image with analytical tools, one can hypothesise that it might go back to the conceptual metaphor ANALYSIS IS DISSECTION 'where the source domain is a precondition for the event in the target to occur' (Kövecses 2002: 158), as well as to PROGRESS IS MOTION FORWARD. Furthermore, the novel metaphor can be viewed as the result of conceptual blending where the 'world-man-thought' and the 'water-fish-fin' input spaces integrate to give birth to the emergent meaning '*cognising the world is enjoying the flight of imagination*' developed in the context that follows: 'How peaceful it is down there, rooted in the centre of the world and gazing up through the grey waters, with their sudden gleams of light, and their reflections' (44). In light of the way Virginia Woolf

chose to end her life, this rich *underwater* image becomes particularly important and revealing, echoing with another description – that of plunging into one's meditations in order to escape reality: 'I want to sink deeper and deeper, away from the surface, with its hard separate facts' (39).

### ***Conceptual breakthrough***

Unlike other short stories by Virginia Woolf where conventional conceptual metaphors are modified without any great disturbance, e.g. LOVE IS A LIGHT WITHIN in 'A Haunted House' (3-5) or SEARCHING FOR VALUES IS A VOYAGE IN THE SPACE OF ONE'S IMAGINATION in 'Monday or Tuesday' (6-7), 'The Mark on the Wall' suggests a new way to conceptualise life. Here we find an instance of what Werth (1999: 319) defined as *megametaphors*, 'sustained metaphorical undercurrents [...] which bring together the metaphors in a text into an overarching structure' where 'the obvious surface metaphors in the text combine to point to a compelling subliminal message'. In Woolf's story, the subliminal message accumulates through the entire text, surfacing as overt metaphors of life and other thematically and associatively adjoined textual elements. Gradually, through 'delayed categorisation' (Tsur 1992: 415), it crystallises as the metaphor LIFE IS A FANCY / A FLEETING ILLUSION.

This megametaphor arises out of several thematic lines that run through the story, the most transparent being those of obstructed or distorted vision and reflection, of elusiveness and haphazardness, and of instability. Each of these lines, cumulatively or through specific images, highlights a cluster of conventional conceptual metaphors.

The first thematic line of *dim or reflected vision* gradually unfolds from 'the steady film of yellow light' to the image of a mirror as a filter through which we perceive ourselves and others in the world we live in. Another example is the *underwater* image with its 'gazing up through the grey waters' (44), as if contemplating life from the center of the world. In this chain the illusory nature of perception is emphasised by the combination of two conceptual metaphors – THE MIND IS A CONTAINER in 'All the time I'm dressing up the figure of myself in my own mind' (40), and THE MIND IS A MIRROR reflecting both one's self and others.

The effect of *elusiveness* is coupled in the story with that of rapidity and haphazardness. Most likely, readers first realise the role of elusiveness in life, when life is conceptualised as a JOURNEY where 'one rushes past in the train' (38). Eventually, readers may come to realise the elusiveness of life as such, which is made especially vivid in the extended simile of *living as being blown through the Tube*, where life is seen as a VOYAGE IN SPACE.

A disturbing sensation of *instability* conceptualised as LACK OF CONTROL IS DOWN is first provoked by the description of 'how very little control of our possessions we have' (38). The feeling further increases with the metaphorical depiction of human life as an almost blind search for knowledge and truth, which evokes KNOWING IS SEEING metaphor. This feeling reaches its culmination at the end of the story with the narrator's awakening from her daydream.

What makes the megametaphor LIFE IS A FANCY / A FLEETING ILLUSION not merely an effective poetic device but a conceptual breakthrough is the context of the story, together with the wider cultural and literary context of modernism, which is noted for its rejection of established rules and conventions. Basically, the range of the LIFE metaphor, which involves such source domains as JOURNEY, A VOYAGE IN SPACE, DAY / LIGHT, PLAY / GAME, STORY, A

PRECIOUS POSSESSION, etc. (Kövecses 2002: 283), can be viewed as a set of conventions *we live by*. The LIFE IS A FANCY metaphor, however, goes beyond these conventions, suggesting that readers, as well as people in general, can be guided not only by these conventions but also by 'an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom' (42). This consideration questions the ubiquity and validity of *living by*, particularly in the world of literary fancy. This point of controversy is reflected in Tsur's (1998) polemics with Lakoff, in which Tsur, on the grounds of differentiating between rapid and delayed conceptualisation as two alternative strategies of interpretation, argues that 'Lakoff's system has been devised, [...] to create meanings that show little sensitivity to changing context' (1998: 6). 'In this respect', as Tsur maintains, 'literature begins where Lakoff ends' (1998: 2).

By unfolding the LIFE IS A FANCY metaphor, the narrator, in her flight of imagination, steps on the tricky ground of contrasting the real and the illusory, trying all the while to keep a balance between the two through 'the fusion of external and internal observation' (Zwerdling 1992: 23). In this balancing act *the mark on the wall* metonymically stands for the real, offering, like 'a plank in the sea' of the illusory, 'a satisfying sense of reality' (44). The interplay of the real and the illusory is made even more prominent due to the poetic use of cognitive operations with mental images such as *zooming* and *filling in patterns of contours* (Pinker 1995).

### **From mental images to cognitive operations**

In Woolf's short stories, a widely used compositional device to create suspense is the reiteration of a symbolic artistic detail throughout the entire text. In some cases such reiteration creates the effect of 'emotive crescendo' as 'a pattern of gradually intensified emotions' (Tsur 1992: 431), or 'an expansion or outburst of vital forces' (445). This can be exemplified by the 'textual cardiogram' of 'A Haunted House' (Woolf 1972: 4-5), with *the pulse of the house* beating at a more and more intensified rhythm, or by the 'desiring truth' arrow of 'Monday or Tuesday' (6-7), which punctuates the story's texture.

In 'The Mark on the Wall', the reiteration axis is formed according to another principle, that of *zooming in*, which here acts by bringing the object of scrutiny into closer view, while the mark on the wall gradually changes contours and shape. Scrutinising the mark, the narrator takes only mental actions, physically remaining passive and immobile, as if demonstrating that *real* life is the life of the mind. The account of what *is* illusory, though often passing for real, is given by portions, as if *filling in the pattern of contours* of a space delineated by the narrator's imagination. Interestingly, in the story's texture these contours are marked by negative and/ or hypothetical modality.

On the real/ illusory scale, the role of the mark on the wall appears to be ambivalent. It interacts with the thought like a ring-buoy in the ocean of instability and fancy, 'something definite, something real' (44), indicating a point from which imagination may move on (Baldwin 1989). At the same time, the mark on the wall interferes with thought, interrupting the fancy, presumably, to the narrator's (and the readers') relief. Consequently, as the thought is taking off from an object and running up against it (Phillips 2003), we get the effect of an *imagination swing*.

There is still another facet of the mark on the wall that can be seen as the story's pivot: its hidden, palimpsestic symbolism that evokes associations, if rather

vague, with the Old Testament's 'handwriting on the wall'<sup>3</sup> as a prophecy of impending misfortune (Hirsch, Kett and Trefil 1993: 10). The risky game of balancing on the brink of the real and illusory, where what seems to be real turns out to be the most illusory, as well as going against Nature's game of self-preservation, whose rules state that 'any thought that threatens to excite or to pain' should be put an end to (44), might have been interpreted as a mere literary device but for Virginia Woolf's untimely death. With this in mind, the statement 'so Nature counsels, comforts you, instead of enraging you; and if you can't be comforted, if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall' (44) sounds as a warning against upsetting the balance of the real and illusory.

## Conclusion

Woolf's mystical insights are often associated with 'her occasional apprehensions of patterns behind reality' (Phillips 2003: 11). Cognitive tools allow us to reach the preliminary conclusion that such mystical impulses may be provoked by the hidden patterns in the writer's imagination, patterns that are anchored to particular metaphorical concepts. Such hidden patterns are crystallised by cognitive mechanisms. It is these mechanisms that can widen the horizons of imagination, thereby allowing conceptual breakthroughs and evoking rich images charged with mystical undercurrents. At the same time, such cognitive mechanisms can constrain these horizons through cognitive operations that help manipulate, modify, or reorganise cognitive processes originally evolved for non-literary purposes. Woolf's imagistic vision plays with various cognitive twists, extending and elaborating conceptual mappings of life, death, and afterlife; construing combinations of metaphors that conceptualise the workings of the mind; questioning conceptual stereotypes of knowledge; and suggesting a vision of life as a fleeting illusion.

Such an analysis contributes not only to Woolf criticism, but also to cognitive poetic studies in general, revealing the ways and formats through which the everyday mind nourishes the literary mind and structures the literary imagination whose 'synthetic' and 'magical' power, as Coleridge assumed, could bring about the fusion of human faculties. Thus, cognitive readings, as supplementary tools of literary interpretation, may objectivise our intuitions concerning literary imagination and the hidden agendas of specific literary texts, and make them less opaque and thus more easily accessible. They can also assist in throwing light on that which is concealed in the conceptual space behind the text and which most likely sets the interpreter's intuition working.

## Notes

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<sup>3</sup> I am grateful to Hanna Herzig from the Open University of Israel for drawing my attention to this aspect of the story's symbolism.

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