

Dreaming of London—*The Voyage Out*

“As the streets that lead from the Strand to the Embankment are very narrow, it is better not to walk down them arm-in-arm” is the first sentence in Virginia Woolf’s first novel.¹ She began her literary career with the description of a walk, and moving about in London—on foot, by cab, bus or car—was to become a fundamental feature in her writing. This first walk in her works is short but packed with the issues that she would continue to elaborate on in her fiction: issues of class, gender, place and space, and about who is able to move around where, how and when. Furthermore, the walk is set in the central area in London that would become the predominant setting in her works.

Time and again Woolf would return to this area in her books, but only once did she allow a man and a woman to walk happily arm-in-arm in the centre of the city: in the final scene of her second novel, *Night and Day*, in which Katharine and Ralph stroll in precisely this part of London. It is night and their arms are lovingly interlocked. However, as we shall see, even on that occasion it may be questioned whether it is possible for a woman to be happy together with a man.

Mrs. Ambrose in *The Voyage Out* does not like walking arm-in-arm with her husband. In fact, one might argue that all of Woolf’s novels are about a female dream of walking alone and independently through the city, while at the same time throughout her oeuvre there flows, like a strong current, the vision of arm-in-arm companionship between a man and a woman. The reason Mrs. Ambrose is nevertheless clinging to her husband’s arm is that she cannot manage without his support, as they

are jostling with the crowd of “lawyers’ clerks” and “young lady typists” in order to reach the Embankment, cross this busy thoroughfare and get to the promenade along the balustrade facing the Thames. “When they were safe on the further side, she gently withdrew her arm from his, allowing her mouth at the same time to relax, to tremble; then tears rolled down, and leaning her elbows on the balustrade, she shielded her face from the curious.”²

This walk is charged with significance, not only in marking the beginning of a great literary career, but because it very clearly lays out both the geographical terrain and the issues that Woolf would write about so systematically: women’s impossible conditions, their lack of freedom of movement and their imposed ignorance. In the subsequent scene of *The Voyage Out*, the Ambroses are unable to walk any further but hail a hansom cab instead. In her description of their ride through the East End to Wapping (Map 2.1), where the steamer that is to take them to South America is anchored, Woolf displays the geographical class division in the city as well as the cluelessness of the upper class, which she would continue to write about ironically and to struggle with:

Observing that they passed no other hansom cab, but only vans and wag-gons, and that not one of the thousand men and women she saw was either a gentleman or a lady, Mrs. Ambrose understood that after all it is the ordinary thing to be poor, and that London is the city of innumerable poor people. Startled by this discovery and seeing herself pacing a circle all the days of her life round Piccadilly Circus [...].³

In Woolf’s novels it is always important to know where in London the various parts of the story take place, and in this scene from the beginning of *The Voyage Out* she draws an indelible line running north to south that divides the London map of her fiction into two parts: the affluent west, which she herself came from and which is the point of departure for most of the main characters in her fictional world; and the poverty stricken East End, which is almost depicted as a dark hole that the characters in her fiction only penetrate out of necessity or compassion. In between lies the centre of London with its grand shopping street, the Strand, Fleet Street, home of journalism, and the newly constructed Victoria Embankment. This is where people of various sorts will meet, lose their composure, abandon their old habits, taste freedom and think new thoughts.

“angry glances” from “small, agitated figures—for in comparison with this couple most people looked small”, figures who “decorated with fountain pens and burdened with despatch-boxes, had appointments to keep, and drew a weekly salary”. Mrs. Ambrose can only react “by scorning all she met”, but “the friction of people brushing past her was evidently painful”.⁴ However, the pain that she expresses as she stands leaning on the balustrade of the Embankment is one that is linked to gender: it is the pain of being a mother. She has left her small children behind in order to accompany her husband on a journey of convalescence. It had been the only possible decision, but it had not been her decision.

The Voyage Out is one of the few of Woolf’s novels in which the central action is *not* set in London. The steamer Euphrosyne, which the Ambroses are boarding, is to take them and Mrs. Ambrose’s young motherless niece, Rachel Vinrace, to South America, which is where most of the narrative unfolds. Nevertheless, the novel is largely a story about London. This is the city that has shaped the lives and social routines of the people Woolf portrays. London is the backdrop to their thinking and their lives, and London is where they want and are going to return to. Nevertheless, Woolf’s description of London is, to put it mildly, ambivalent. The tears that Mrs. Ambrose sheds on the Victoria Embankment are caused by her distress at being forced to leave her children behind. Yet she does not blame her husband, nor patriarchal conventions, but the city itself. What she is thinking about while tears run down her cheeks is “how little London had done to make her love it”.⁵ Likewise, as the steamer glides out along the Thames and the passengers contemplate the illuminated city, it is not a triumphant metropolis that Woolf describes but “a circumscribed mound, eternally burnt, eternally scarred. From the deck of the ship the great city appeared a crouched and cowardly figure, a sedentary miser”.⁶

The Voyage Out, which was published during the First World War, is one of Woolf’s most obviously political novels. In it her anti-imperialist and feminist criticism of contemporary English society is expressed more directly and bluntly than in most of her subsequent works. The structure of the novel is similar in many ways to Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902).⁷ As Nick Montgomery, among others, has pointed out, the journey described in both novels begins at the same place: the Thames Estuary.⁸ Both take their travellers across an ocean to a foreign continent where they later continue their travel inland by river. The protagonist of *The Voyage Out* is, admittedly, not a male adventurer working for

a colonial trading company, as in *Heart of Darkness*, but a young woman who encounters love. Nevertheless, Woolf's novel contains a number of allusions to Conrad's. Despite the novel's initial focus on the Ambroses, Rachel turns out to be its protagonist and, just like Kurtz in Conrad's novel, she travels in a continent that is foreign and unknown to her, both in a physical and in an emotional sense. But surprisingly enough, in Woolf's novel, the 'dark heart' is not to be found far away in what is foreign and unknown, as in Conrad's narrative, but in what is familiar, in the civilised capital of colonial power: London and all that it represents.

Nor is it in London, on the imperial steamer or in the fictional former English colony of Santa Marina on the coast of Brazil, where Rachel and her relatives stay for an extended period, that she trustingly confides in another human being. It is not until she travels up the Amazon River "into the heart of the night"⁹ and goes for a walk deep in the jungle that she becomes free enough of London's grip to be able to open up to love.

Woolf clarified her significant inversion of Conrad's metaphor in a number of ways. Most striking is the fact that in the middle of her first embrace with Terence Hewet, Rachel echoes, in a sense, Kurtz's last words of dread in *Heart of Darkness* as she murmurs "'Terrible—terrible'" just as he uttered "'The horror! The horror!'". Another important element in this inversion is that Woolf makes Terence do what Marlowe deceitfully tells Kurtz's fiancée that Kurtz did before he died, which is to call out the name of his beloved.¹⁰

"For Hewet and Rachel, the excursion into the wilderness becomes a sublime release from the symbolic order, an episode of remission from the authority of the paternal world" writes Nick Montgomery in his psycholinguistic deconstruction of the colonial rhetoric found in *The Voyage Out*.¹¹ Deep in the Amazon jungle, Rachel and Terence are finally liberated from the ruling conventions of stifling London and are able to meet without reservations. On the other hand—and this is important—when Rachel during their first embrace expresses the same dread that Kurtz did, she does so because she somehow realises that it is impossible to escape London. What makes her echo Kurtz's words is not, however, a savage human being, nor anything bestial or foreign, but the threat of endless repetition: "the persistent churning of the water [...]. On and on it went in the distance, the senseless and cruel churning of the water".¹²

The literary allusions in *The Voyage Out* are plentiful and they are not only to *Heart of Darkness*. The novel also contains many allusions to

Antigone, Sophocles' tragedy about the woman buried alive for asserting her love and her ideals against the conventions of society. Rachel has recurring nightmares about being trapped, the first of which occurs on the voyage to South America after middle-aged Richard Dalloway has passionately kissed her. In her dream that night a dripping-wet crypt opens up and she finds "herself trapped in it" together with "a little deformed man who squatted on the floor gibbering, with long nails".¹³ When, in the final section of the novel, she has a high fever and eventually dies, in a dream she "found herself walking through a tunnel under the Thames, where there were little deformed women sitting in archways playing cards, while the bricks of which the wall was made oozed with damp, which collected into drops and slid down the wall".¹⁴ Likewise, when Terence kisses her as she is dying, she does not see him but instead one of the deformed women from her dream, "an old woman slicing a man's head off with a knife".¹⁵

In *The Voyage Out*, Woolf engages in a complicated game of allusions, literary intertextuality and quotations. It is often difficult to interpret them unequivocally and references to sexual desire are particularly complicated; however, I will mention a few examples. First, the ship that carries Rachel away from London shares its name with Saint Euphrosyne, the Catholic saint who, in order to avoid the marriage arranged by her father, disguised herself as a man and fled to a convent, where she lived the rest of her life in the guise of a man. On the boat trip up the Amazon River, Terence, who is soon to propose to Rachel, reads aloud from Walt Whitman's homoerotic cycle of poems, *Leaves of Grass*. And at an earlier point, Rachel's other admirer, Hirst, had presented her with his own translation of the poems of the Lesbian writer Sappho.

Although Woolf makes Rachel move directly into the heterosexual marriage plot, at the same time her text uses other literary devices to signal a number of diametrically opposed desires, both in Rachel and the men who court her. Indeed, a 'short circuit', as it were, of sexual desires seems to be enacted in and around Rachel, as if neither she nor her young suitors are conscious of their own desires but doomed to act out a predetermined script.

Christine Froula, who has read *The Voyage Out* as a story of female initiation, finds that Woolf "endows Rachel with a powerful desire to evade or transcend this culturally determined destiny; in other words, to break out of the female initiation plot that her culture imposes upon women".¹⁶ However, Rachel appears to be unaware of this desire until

far into the novel. As Mrs. Ambrose notices on the first evening on board the *Euphrosyne*, Rachel is a very compliant daughter: “weak”, “vacillating” and “emotional” are the words she uses to describe her niece.¹⁷ Rachel’s lack of education has made her naïve and ignorant of the world, society and other human beings and also apparently of the destiny that Froula describes as “culturally determined”. “Why do people marry?” is Rachel’s innocent question during a dinner conversation with the married couple Richard and Clarissa Dalloway, who for a brief time also travel on the ship on its way to South America. “That’s what you’re going to find out” Clarissa laughingly replies.¹⁸ She is so convinced that Rachel will soon find herself involved in the well-established plot of love and marriage that she takes neither her question nor her repeated claim that she will never marry seriously.

Clarissa’s husband, Richard, is amused by Rachel’s naïvety and in an unguarded moment embraces her and kisses her with passion. It is during the night after this kiss that Rachel dreams that she is trapped in a crypt. One might say that it is her fear of the ‘culturally determined destiny’, in other words marriage, or, as many others have suggested, her fear of sexuality, that emerges in her dream about the horrible crypt in which she is trapped together with stunted women and a bestial man.¹⁹ During a conversation with Mrs. Ambrose that takes place at a later point, however, Rachel asserts that she likes Mr. Dalloway. What troubles her are the women in Piccadilly that he was talking about as Rachel does not understand who these women are. When Mrs. Ambrose leads her to understand that they are prostitutes, a shock runs through Rachel and she expresses her insight spontaneously in terms of walking: “So that’s why I can’t walk alone!” she exclaims after having sat rigid and quiet for a while. And “[b]y this new light she saw her life for the first time a creeping hedged-in thing, driven cautiously between high walls, here turned aside, there plunged in darkness, made dull, and crippled for ever—her life that was the only chance she had—a thousand words and actions became plain to her”. What follows also reveals the ambivalent feelings this evokes in her: “I hate men!” she exclaimed. ‘I thought you said you liked him?’ said Helen. ‘I liked him, and I liked being kissed,’ she answered, as if that only added more difficulties to her problem.”²⁰

Rachel seems to be paralysed by contradictory desires and wishes, and, as Britt Andersen has pointed out, there is a degree of compulsion in the way she speaks when she confesses her love, deep inside the Amazon jungle. It is Terence who does the talking, while she repeats what he is

saying.²¹ “‘We love each other,’ Terence said. ‘We love each other,’ she repeated.”²² She not only sounds like an echo; while they walk back to the other travellers waiting for them in order to continue their voyage up the Amazon, she trails him almost slavishly. “Rachel followed him, stopping where he stopped, turning where he turned, ignorant of the way, ignorant of why he stopped or why he turned.”²³

As this walk indicates, the conventional gender hierarchy has been established, and when Rachel and Terence take another walk during the next stop on the route, silence has fallen between them. In order to prompt their conversation, Woolf adopts the first of many ingenious inversions of gender hierarchy that were to appear in her works. “‘You love me?’ Terence asked at length, breaking the painful silence.” Instead of making an assertion, he has to formulate a question and Rachel neither answers nor repeats his words. She asks a question herself, voicing her despair: “‘Am I in love—is this being in love—are we to marry each other?’ The voices of the others behind them kept floating, now farther, now nearer.”²⁴

Rachel and Terence can hardly communicate with each other and Woolf continually intermingles their fragmentary conversation with that of their fellow travellers. Their salvation turns out to be a discussion about what they are actually doing, walking: “‘We will go for walks together,’ he said. This artless idea brought relief and for the first time they laughed. Had they dared, they would have liked to take each other by the hand, but awareness that eyes were fixed on them from behind had not yet deserted them.”²⁵ Now they walk further into the jungle and the character of the conversation changes. “They began to speak naturally of ordinary things,” Woolf writes, and all of a sudden she has reversed the gender hierarchy of the conversation, letting Rachel speak first and Terence afterwards, not in a hierarchical manner, however, but as if simultaneously: “‘This is happiness’” she says. “On the heels of her words he answered, ‘This is happiness,’ upon which they guessed that the feeling had welled up in both of them at the same time.”²⁶

In order to find one another, Rachel and Terence had to leave London, but this is still the city on which their vision of the future and of marriage nevertheless focuses. “‘We shall live in London’” Terence says confidently to Mrs. Ambrose when they see her again.²⁷ In this novel there are two versions of London: on the one hand, ‘London’ with its social conventions, greed, unhappy marriages, hypocrisy, prostitution,

and oppositions of class and gender; and, on the other hand, London—with no quotation marks—which is a utopia free from these very things. It is ‘London’ that spies inquisitively on Rachel and Terence. It is ‘London’ that prevents them from living out their feelings. It is ‘London’ that worries them. But it is in London that they plan to live. “‘But London, London’s the place,’ Terence continued. They looked together at the carpet, as though London itself were to be seen there lying on the floor, with all its spires and pinnacles pricking through the smoke.”²⁸

Terence illustrates his dream of their future together by describing an imaginary walk in the area of London that, as I have already indicated, is central in all of Woolf’s novels (Map 2.2): “On the whole, what I should like best at this moment,” Terence pondered, “would be to find myself walking down Kingsway, by those big placards, you know, and turning into the Strand. Perhaps I might go and look over Waterloo Bridge for a moment. Then I’d go along the Strand past the shops with all the new books in them, and through the little archway into the Temple.”²⁹

It is no coincidence that Terence places himself in Kingsway, the grand boulevard constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century to connect the northern parts of London with the centre. As David Bradshaw has pointed out in his essay on Woolf’s use of London locations, the historical dimension of these locations always plays a significant role.³⁰ The construction of Kingsway, which is also a central street in Woolf’s second novel, *Night and Day*, was an important element in the slum clearance project to modernise London around the turn of the century. Between 1898 and 1905 all the old alleys and houses in what was then Northern London were demolished, making room for this thoroughfare, which led to an expanded and modern city centre. It was a grandiose engineering project built in two dimensions, with tunnels for trains and the underground. The opening of the area in 1909 was a great national celebration, for which Edward Elgar, England’s great composer, wrote accompaniments, for instance to the poem “The King’s Way” based on a melody from *Pomp and Circumstance March no. 4*. Woolf seems to echo the first two lines of the poem written by Elgar’s wife: “The newest street in London town/Who’ll pace it up and pace it down”, in her description of Terence’s fantasy walk.



Map 2.2 *The Voyage Out*. Terence's imagined walk. 1. The beginning of Terence's imagined walk. 2. Terence's long route to the Temple

Kingsway formed part of the project to modernise London, as did the transformed Strand that emerged after the completion of the Victoria Embankment at the end of the nineteenth century. What had until then been a somewhat decrepit street was now taken over by new businesses and publishers. It is this modern project that Terence wishes to become

part of. But, paradoxically enough, he ends his fantasy walk in an area that definitely belongs to the past. All of a sudden he turns off into the Temple, the former domain of the Knights Templar. Although in Terence's day the area was no longer part of any religious patriarchy, it was nevertheless an exclusively male zone, where lawyers and economists received their education. Terence further imagines that he is going to look up his male friends who live and study there—an impossibility for women in that period.

Here, in terms of his and Rachel's dreams of an equitable relationship, Terence takes completely the wrong path. Whether this is caused by old habits, male ignorance or lack of insight is difficult to say. Maybe Woolf simply wants to indicate that he is not whole-heartedly engaged in his commitment to a modern, equitable relationship and therefore merely ends up where he belongs, in what had for centuries been an area of manifest male power. Indeed, as we have seen, Terence and Rachel's dream of a life together will not come true. 'London' stands in the way.

Woolf's criticism of 'London' and 'Englishness' would become a recurrent theme in her writing.³¹ In *The Voyage Out*, this criticism is exceptionally bitter. One of the satirical highlights of the novel is the description of the Dalloways. Clarissa and Richard Dalloway are the very incarnation of 'London', with their mindless, pompous nationalism and upper-class conceit. They would later be given their own novel, in which this aspect is toned down considerably, but in *The Voyage Out* Woolf lets them excel themselves in nationalist sentiment. "I grant that the English seem, on the whole, whiter than most men, their records cleaner," says Richard Dalloway during a dinner. Clarissa feels, as she says on another occasion, as if she "couldn't bear *not* to be English!"³²

As two British warships sail past the Euphrosyne, the passengers on the steamer stand up on deck out of respect. Clarissa takes Rachel's hand and cries out exaltedly: "Aren't you glad to be English!" The vision of London that Clarissa entertains one night, as she and Richard are about to go to bed, is definitely not that of Mrs. Ambrose's "miser", but of a grand and radiant metropolis: "Think of the light burning over the House, Dick! When I stood on deck just now I seemed to see it. It's what one means by London."³³

Clarissa and Richard Dalloway personify the 'London' that Woolf never tired of ridiculing. It is in the spirit of this 'London' that Rachel has been raised by her father's sisters. They have shielded her from everything, even forbidding her to play the piano as they thought it would ruin the shape of her arms. It is 'London' that has made her so ignorant

that ultimately she is even unable to get through a book. It is 'London' that has made her completely unaware of the society she inhabits. It is 'London' that makes Mrs. Ambrose, despite her inner aversion, take it upon herself to introduce Rachel to the city and "make a woman of her", as Rachel's father puts it.³⁴

When the *Euphrosyne* reaches the South American coast, the passengers leave the ship and install themselves in a villa on the outskirts of Santa Marina, a fictional former English colony lost long ago to "vengeful Spaniards and rapacious Portuguese" and transformed into a holiday destination with a large hotel where day after day the English guests act out their 'London'.³⁵ At first Mrs. Ambrose hesitates to allow Rachel to take part in the social life at the hotel but it cannot be avoided, not least because Rachel is strongly attracted to it. As it turns out, the Ambroses and the guests at the hotel have a number of mutual acquaintances in London and this immediately creates an atmosphere of intimacy.

At the hotel the conventions of 'London' are scrupulously upheld. The guests read the sole copy of *The Times* assiduously, discuss the state of the Empire, gossip, play parlour games and drink tea. Their days are structured rigorously around the English system of meals, which the guests observe even during excursions. Woolf especially points out the significance of having tea:

"He would like some tea," said Mrs. Paley. "Susan, run and get some cups – there are the two young men."

"We're thirsting for tea," said Mr. Elliot. "You know Mr. Ambrose, Hilda?"³⁶

"There's nothing half so nice as tea!" said Mrs. Thornbury, taking her cup.³⁷

At this point, a group of guests has just climbed the Monte Rosa in order to admire the impressive view of the South American continent from the top of the mountain. This is the first of two excursions the guests are making. As Nick Montgomery has pointed out, both this and the subsequent excursion along the Amazon resemble colonial expeditions. They are also very interesting from a social point of view.³⁸ During these excursions something similar to what Michel Foucault called 'heterotopies' come into being: places where the prevailing order is suspended and it becomes possible to behave in a freer and more pleasurable way.³⁹ In the freedom that emerges, men and women are able to

interact in a manner that is otherwise rendered impossible by the conventions of the dining room and the drawing room.

It is at the top of Monte Rosa that Rachel and Terence take their first walk together. It looks like the beginning of a love story, and so it is; but what is going to bring them together is not their desire to become a couple but their negative attitude to marriage. Thus, when they witness a love scene between Susan and Arthur, another young couple in the group—and understand that they have decided to get married—Rachel and Terence are not filled with happiness, but, on the contrary, with discomfort and sadness:

‘I don’t know either of them, but I could almost burst into tears. That’s silly, isn’t it?’

‘Just because they’re in love,’ Hewet responded. ‘Yes,’ he added after a moment’s consideration, ‘there’s something horribly pathetic about it, I agree.’⁴⁰

At the hotel, however, where love affairs thrive and interlock, accompanied by gossip and speculation, Susan and Arthur’s engagement is a happy event and the guests unite in their effort to arrange a ball to celebrate it. In her description of this ball, Woolf’s satire on ‘London’ reaches new heights. The older guests are seated along the walls exchanging comments about the looks, character, intelligence and physical condition, as well as the social and pecuniary status of those dancing as in a novel by Jane Austen. The characters gossip and speculate about who might be interested in whom, and who is suitable and who is not.

The writing verges on drawing room farce and Woolf’s irony sparkles, but at the same time she allows Rachel to enjoy herself fully for the first time. This is in fact one of the few occasions in the novel that Rachel takes charge. Late at night, when the musicians have gone home and she, like several other guests, would like to continue dancing, she sits down at the piano and offers a candid and brilliant travesty of ‘London’. She combines the classical repertoire she has acquired by heart with the vigorous dance rhythms she has just learnt, to get the guests to free themselves from the conventional patterns of movement they have been taught and abandon themselves to the music in free improvised dance.

Yet another step towards the liberation from ‘London’, an imperative if Rachel and Terence are to become a couple, is the disillusionment that

Woolf makes Rachel experience as she accompanies the hotel guests to the Sunday service and listens to the English clergyman, Mr. Bax, one of whose judgements is that “the success of our rule in India, that vast country, largely depended upon the strict code of politeness which the English adopted towards the natives”.⁴¹

Afterwards, while waiting for the obligatory tea, Rachel is confronted by ‘London’ in a concentrated form as Woolf allows her to wander about in the hotel and lose her way. First she ends up in the room belonging to Evelyn, a young woman who is eager to get married and always has at least two proposals to consider. Evelyn talks all the time about men, yet at the same time she wants to “do something” and believes that one simply “ought to go into Piccadilly and stop one of these poor wretches and say: ‘Now, look here, I’m no better than you are, and I don’t pretend to be any better, but you’re doing what you know to be beastly, and I won’t have you doing beastly things, because we’re all the same under our skins, and if you do a beastly thing it does matter to me.’”⁴² Fleeing Evelyn, Rachel happens to watch through a window as a woman, egged on by the cruel cheers of the other kitchen staff, chops off a chicken’s head. Soon Rachel is dragged into another room by the spinster Miss Allen, who offers her “a piece of preserved ginger”. The candy burns like fire in Rachel’s mouth while she stays on and watches as Miss Allen gets herself “completely equipped for Sunday tea”.⁴³ When finally she manages to escape into the corridor, the gossipy “Mrs. Paley rolled out in her chair, equipped also for tea”. The wheelchair blocks the passage and Rachel escapes in another direction, so frustrated that she “indulged herself at last in violent abuse of the entire day”.⁴⁴ As Woolf writes:

She had now reached one of those eminences, the result of some crisis, from which the world is finally displayed in its true proportions. She disliked the look of it immensely — churches, politicians, misfits, and huge impostures — men like Mr. Dalloway, men like Mr. Bax, Evelyn and her chatter, Mrs. Paley blocking up the passage. Meanwhile the steady beat of her own pulse represented the hot current of feeling that ran down beneath; beating, struggling, fretting. For the time, her own body was the source of all the life in the world, which tried to burst forth here — there — and was repressed now by Mr. Bax, now by Evelyn, now by the imposition of ponderous stupidity, the weight of the entire world.⁴⁵

At this point, Rachel has become a battlefield of conflicting emotions. She has discovered ‘London’ and is taking part in its pastimes, but at the

same time she has begun to object to the things that ‘London’ represents. On several occasions she expresses her great doubt about the possibility of any real connection between men and women. “‘It’s no good; we should live separate; we cannot understand each other; we only bring out what’s worst’” she exclaims, talking to Terence after having quarrelled with her other admirer, Hirst.⁴⁶ Terence disarms her anger by turning his rival into a ridiculous figure. But within himself he speaks to her with words that he does not as yet dare speak aloud: “‘I worship you, but I loathe marriage, I hate its smugness, its safety, its compromise [...]. We’d be free together. We’d share everything together. No happiness would be like ours. No lives would compare with ours.’” His vision of this type of companionship seemed to have become reality after the great love scene deep in the Amazon jungle. Nevertheless, he will echo Rachel’s disillusioned words almost verbatim after they have returned to Santa Marina as a couple in love.⁴⁷

In one of the novel’s contradictory movements, Rachel and Terence eagerly throw themselves into the traditional plot of love and marriage, while at the same time they want to remain outside it. What looks like, and for a moment actually is, a liberation, turns out in practice to be a subjugation. And soon their London turns into ‘London’. It seems impossible to escape it. When Terence illustrates his dream of love with a walk in modern London, he ends up in an exclusively male area of power. When he persuades Rachel to tell him about her daily walk, it turns out that it takes place very far from the centre of the city, more precisely in the Richmond that Woolf detested (Map 2.3).⁴⁸

Rachel is not familiar with London, and during a conversation with Terence she mentions the prostitutes there, whose living conditions trouble her. On this subject they are not of one mind, however, and faced with his lack of sympathy for the women she withdraws into her shell, which in turn drives him to despair. What upsets him is not that their views on prostitution and prostitutes differ but that she shuts him out, and suddenly he repeats her words that men and women can never understand each other. As Woolf writes: “The hopelessness of their position overcame them both. They were impotent: they could never love each other sufficiently to overcome all these barriers and they could never be satisfied with less.”⁴⁹ Nevertheless Woolf reconciles them. But, soon afterwards, as they are looking at themselves in the mirror to make sure that their clothes are in order, their images have changed: “[...] for instead of being vast and indivisible they were really very small and



Map 2.3 *The Voyage Out*. 1. The Ambroses' point of departure. 2. The beginning of Terence's imagined walk. 3. Terence's imagined walk. 4. Rachel's walk in Richmond. 5. The Ambroses' walk along The Embankment. 6. The Ambroses take a cab. 7. The Ambroses' route to Wapping. 8. Rachel's home in Richmond

separate, the size of the glass leaving a large space for the reflection of other things.”⁵⁰

Little by little they are transformed into a conventional loving couple. Shortly afterwards, as Woolf describes them walking away from the villa in which the Ambroses are staying towards the hotel where they have been invited to tea, they seem to Hirst—who has to walk behind them, since there is only room on the path for two people to walk next to each other—to be a couple happily in love. He feels bitterly excluded. What he does not know is that they are in the middle of their first quarrel.⁵¹

During the tea party Rachel sits in silence. Terence and she have become one couple among many. They are integrated into ‘London’ with its rituals, rules and superficial chatter, and Woolf suddenly relocates

the novel's critical gaze, which had been assigned to Rachel, to Evelyn, who has already rebuffed a number of suitors and will after tea be refusing yet another:

Evelyn had not spoken, but she had been looking from Susan to Rachel. Well – they had both made up their minds very easily, they had done in a very few weeks what it sometimes seemed to her that she would never be able to do. Although they were so different, she thought that she could see in each the same look of satisfaction and completion, the same calmness of manner, and the same slowness of movement. It was that slowness, that confidence, that content which she hated, she thought to herself. They moved so slowly because they were not single but double, and Susan was attached to Arthur, and Rachel to Terence, and for the sake of this one man they had renounced all other men, and movement, and the real things of life. Love was all very well, and those snug domestic houses, with the kitchen below and the nursery above, which were so secluded and self-contained, like little islands in the torrents of the world; but the real things were surely the things that happened, the causes, the wars, the ideals, which happened in the great world outside, and went so independently of these women, turning so quietly and beautifully towards the men. She looked at them sharply. Of course they were happy and content, but there must be better things than that.⁵²

In the following chapter, Rachel dies.

Many scholars, among them Hermione Lee, have criticised *The Voyage Out* because its tragic ending, Rachel's death, comes about all too abruptly.⁵³ Time and again, scholars have quoted the opinion expressed by Lytton Strachey in a letter to Woolf immediately after the publication of the novel: "At the end I felt as if it was really only the beginning of an enormous novel, which had been—almost accidentally—cut short by the death of Rachel."⁵⁴

Indeed, present-day readers of *The Voyage Out* have complained about the suddenness of Rachel's death, in precisely the same way as the characters lament it in the two final chapters of the novel. They had only just got to know her. She seemed so happy. It is as if they, like David Daiches in his book about Woolf, wanted Rachel's death to have been announced at the very beginning of the novel.⁵⁵ The remaining hotel guests try to make some kind of sense of Rachel's death. "'There must be a reason,'" Miss Thornbury says, "'[...] the older one grows [...] the more certain one becomes that there is a reason.'"⁵⁶ Several of the guests place the blame on the excursion along the Amazon River. "They should have

known better” says Arthur, Susan’s fiancé. Mrs. Flushing feels guilty for having encouraged Rachel to participate. Yet her husband is equally convinced that Rachel caught a deadly infection up at the Ambroses’ villa, because “they never washed their vegetables properly”.⁵⁷ Mrs. Paley blames the bad drinking water; and so forth. In the same vein, scholars of literature have, unsuccessfully, tried to discover a connection, reason and logic that would explain Rachel’s death. According to biographical readings, by for instance Roger Poole, Rachel had to die because of Woolf’s own problems with sexuality.⁵⁸ Christine Froula, on the other hand, thinks that the reason lies “not in Rachel’s psyche but in the culture that suppresses female authority”.⁵⁹ Most convincing are scholars such as Julia Briggs, however, who have read the novel as an attack on marriage.⁶⁰

In fact, the novel does not end with Rachel’s death, as one might presume upon reading these scholarly analyses: it contains another two chapters. They are short but can hardly be described as an insignificant epilogue. On the contrary, this is where, in my opinion, Woolf’s message is to be found.

In the penultimate chapter, where the reason and meaning of Rachel’s death are being discussed among the hotel guests, it is Evelyn who has the last word and claims despondently that there is no reason or meaning.⁶¹ In the final chapter, the guests are preparing to return to London when a storm breaks out. It is terrifying and splendid but soon over, and the guests continue their activities, playing chess, chatting and packing. Death has smitten them but life merely goes on, and on this last evening the hotel resounds with “the persistent churning of the water [...]. On and on it went [...], the senseless and cruel churning of the water.”⁶²

In accordance with conventions of the literary genre, there are two possible endings to *The Voyage Out*. The first belongs to the love story in the Amazon jungle with Rachel and Terence deciding to get married. The other is a tragedy, with Rachel dying and Terence crying out her name in despair. But the novel ends with neither a love scene nor a death scene. There is no ending. The human comedy merely continues. Rachel and Terence will never walk together arm-in-arm in London. But London is still there, and other couples will walk there, time and again, in a variety of circumstances.⁶³

NOTES

1. *The Voyage Out*, p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
3. *The Voyage Out*, p. 5; Map 2.1. *The Voyage Out*. Mr. and Mrs. Ambrose's Travel in London; cf. also <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1MIntFnB7iJFoAjXyZ8U9W9xFCtk&ll=51.50708319514595%2C-0.09055149999994683&z=14>.
4. *The Voyage Out*, p. 1.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
7. Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*, ed. Ross C. Murfin (3rd ed., Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011) (Conrad 2011).
8. Nick Montgomery, "Colonial Rhetoric and the Maternal Voice: Deconstruction and Disengagement in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*", *Twentieth Century Literature* 46:1 (2000), 34–55: 37 (Montgomery 2000).
9. *The Voyage Out*, p. 325.
10. *The Voyage Out*, p. 432; Joseph Conrad, op. cit., p. 93.
11. Nick Montgomery, op. cit., p. 49.
12. *The Voyage Out*, p. 332.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 404.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 413.
16. Christine Froula, "Out of the Chrysalis: Female Initiation and Female Authority in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*", *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 5:1 (1986), 63–90: 63 (Froula 1986).
17. *The Voyage Out*, p. 15.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
19. See, for instance, Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 170 (Zwerdling 1986).
20. *The Voyage Out*, p. 91.
21. Britt Andersen, *Tapets poesi. Kreativitet, tap og melankoli i Virginia Woolfs romaner* (diss., Trondheim, 1996), pp. 72ff (Andersen 1996).
22. *The Voyage Out*, p. 332.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 333.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 343.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 344.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 346.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 352.
28. *Ibid.*, p. 368.

29. Ibid; Map 2.2. *The Voyage Out*. Terence's Fantasy Walk; cf. also <https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1O930ycUvOh0jmFJIQD-ju77cOjY&ll=51.512825637196606%2C-0.11598700000001827&z=15>.
30. David Bradshaw, op. cit., 2010, p. 190.
31. See, for instance, Julia Briggs, "Almost Ashamed of England Being so English": Woolf and Ideas of Englishness", in Robin Hackett, Freda Hauser and Gay Wachman (eds.), *At Home and Abroad in the Empire: British Women Write the 1930s* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2009), pp. 97–118 (Briggs 2009).
32. *The Voyage Out*, p. 69.
33. Ibid., p. 53.
34. Ibid., p. 97.
35. Ibid., p. 102.
36. Ibid., p. 139.
37. Ibid., p. 170.
38. Nick Montgomery, op. cit., p. 47.
39. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces, Heterotopias", *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (1984), pp. 46–49, <http://www.foucault.info/documents/heterotopia/foucault.heterotopia.en.html>; accessed 15 June 2015 (Foucault 1984).
40. *The Voyage Out*, p. 163.
41. Ibid., p. 281.
42. Ibid., p. 304.
43. Ibid., p. 314.
44. Ibid., p. 315.
45. Ibid.
46. *The Voyage Out*, p. 182.
47. Ibid., p. 298.
48. Map 2.3. *The Voyage Out*; cf. also https://www.google.com/maps/d/viewer?mid=1S3I_5xL0V5UVPWclduswXPgaH8w&ll=51.48481291590191%2C-0.1791822499999398&z=11.
49. *The Voyage Out*, p. 371.
50. Ibid.
51. *The Voyage Out*, p. 380.
52. Ibid., p. 392.
53. Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* ([1977]; London: Routledge, pp. 50ff (Lee 2010).
54. *Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey: Letters*, ed. Leonard Woolf and James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1956), p. 65 (25 February 1916) (Woolf and Strachey 1956).
55. David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* ([1942]; rev. ed., New York: New Directions, 1963), p. 20 (Daiches 1942).

56. *The Voyage Out*, p. 436.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 440.
58. Roger Poole, *The Unknown Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), p. 45; Diana L. Swanson, “‘My Boldness Terrifies Me’: Sexual Abuse and Female Subjectivity in *The Voyage Out*”, *Twentieth Century Literature* 41:4 (1995), 284–309: 285 (Poole 1978; Swanson 1995).
59. Christine Froula, op. cit., p. 89.
60. Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* ([2005]; London: Penguin Books, 2006), p. 7 (Briggs 2006).
61. *The Voyage Out*, p. 436.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 332.
63. See, for instance, Map 2.3 and Map 3.4. *Night and Day*. All of Katharine’s Walks.

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