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OPPONENT'S REPORT
re "All this little affair with 'being' is over:"
Metaphysical Crisis in Virginia Woolf's The Waves
by Vít Opravil (B.A. dissertation, 2015)

Mr Opravil's B.A. thesis addresses three issues in the "metaphysics" of Woolf's *The Waves* (identified as "subjectivity," "centre" and "art" [2]) through a daring and original synthesis of Deleuzo-Guattarian and Derridean thought. Thus, the subjectivity of Woolf's six protagonists, no longer unified transcendental unities, is conceptualised with reference to *Anti-Oedipus* as "a rhizomatic multiplicity of machinic assemblages" (2); the centre—in *The Waves*, the present-absent centre of the Percival character—is rethought in a Derridean framework (of "Structure, Sign, and Play") as an essentially "supplementary" sign, unmasking the illusion of his transcendental stature (4); and Deleuze's fourfold hierarchy of signs in *Proust and Signs* is brought to bear upon the artistic aspiration of Woolf's Bernard character, his "apprenticeship" (4-5). The thesis is generally well written, with linguistic, formal & formatting issues only seldom marring Mr Opravil's argumentation.

The strengths of the thesis consist in its close readings of the primary fiction text side by side with the philosophical commentaries, its accomplishment lies, then, in finding a few compelling parallels between Woolf's fictional performance and D&G's and Derrida's theoretical conceptualisation. Mr Opravil is unafraid to go beyond some of the theory and take its thinking to a next level: as when he complements D&G's insistence on the deterritorialising force of the waves with the important reterritorialising presence of the sun. The switch, from D&G on deterritorialisation in Chapter I, to Derrida on the centre and supplement in Chapter II, is also well argued. Mr Opravil's sensitive reading of Woolf's text shows that the characters' coming-to-terms with another's death and their troubles getting rid of their self-projections and phantasies, are a fictional anticipation/approximation of Derrida's deconstruction of the key structuralist concept of the centre.

Less impressive, however, is Mr Opravil's somewhat hazy deployment of some of the key concepts he is using. For one, it is hard to see how D&G's "Body Without Organs," whose precise definition from *Anti-Oedipus* the thesis quotes (on p. 8 ft. 17), can be applied to Percival only on account of "his status of non-presence" (12) or to the suicidal Rhoda, who is termed "a body without organs of death" (29). I am not aware that D&G, anywhere in their work, would apply this (originally Artaudian) concept to decay/dying/demise, as Mr Opravil does throughout this thesis. It is also a shame that Mr Opravil's use of the concept of "supplementarity" is restricted to just Derrida's "Structure, Sign & Play" essay – Percival's absent presence through the mediation of the other characters' consciousness seems very much in anticipation of what Derrida in *Of Grammatology* has to observe re writing as "the dangerous supplement" to speech. A broader focus would have been in place, here.

The least successful application of a theoretical framework is attempted in Chapter III, where Deleuze's reading of Proust is imposed upon Mr Opravil's reading of Woolf. The major (unaddressed) question here is, to what extent is Deleuze's reading of a particular literary text and its particular "problems" applicable outside of its original context? If, as secondary scholarship argues, Woolf does not seem to have been "directly influenced" by Proust (31), then how can Deleuze's hierarchy of signs as used in Proust's *Search* have any meaningful bearing upon their use in Woolf, beyond just the occasional resemblance? Mr Opravil is perceptive enough to admit himself that his analogy is a rather wobbly one, in assertions such as "Deleuze argues that interpreting a sensuous sign first brings a 'prodigious joy,' but Woolf asserts that it does not necessarily have to be so" (34), or "the signs of art are thought by Woolf in a smore radical way than Deleuze" (43). Which in turn begs the question, why use the Deleuzian framework at all, other than in order to emphasise its incompatibility with Woolf's text? Why not use a non-Deleuzian framework for Chapter III, as it was aptly done in Chapter II? For instance, Julia Kristeva's conception of the semiotic vs. the symbolic (in *Desire in Language*) and her denunciation of identity politics, seem a far better fit for analysing Woolf's style and "art" than *Proust and Signs*.

Which brings me to my crucial objection. The most serious shortcoming of Mr Opravil's thesis is a flagrant avoidance of the issue of the style in Woolf's *The Waves* and the basic question of whether and how it can be taken as "deterritorialising." It is one thing to argue that Woolf deterritorialises subjectivity, that she unmasks the illusiveness of the centre, that she submits her artistic *alter ego* to a de-oedipalising apprenticeship to signs, but another thing is to address the fundamental issue: Is there anything in Woolf's writing *itself*, in her use of language, typography, the literary voice, style, narrative techniques etc., that generates, or communicates, or contributes to these processes? If yes, what is it? If not, then how can *The Waves* pose as a deterritorialising text? As long as Woolf's is a text—Mr Opravil's conclusion asserts—not only about a single *character's* artistic apprenticeship, but also about such apprenticeship *on the part of the reader*, then how can this apprenticeship take place outside a critical engagement with Woolf's (i.e. not Proust's and certainly not Deleuze's) unique use of signs? How can one speak of "the problem of art" in fiction without actually getting down to the nitty-gritty of the particular literary style in which this problem is articulated?

A thesis singularly devoted to "the problem of art," in Woolf, should surely devote more space than one—and largely paraphrased—paragraph (p. 40) and one scanty quote from Woolf herself on how "style is all rhythm," to what seems to be the crucial issue: whether Woolf's *The Waves* is a piece of *deterritorialised/ing* literary writing while still using language that does not break with conventional morphology, grammar or syntax, in order to tell a more or less chronologically laid-out story about a stable set of more or less identifiable characters. If the thesis has failed to do this, its whole analysis necessarily seems to have gone only halfway, evading its most relevant and interesting implications.

Apart from these considerations, the opponent would also like to raise a few text-specific questions, to be addressed by Mr Opravil at the defence:

1. What is meant by the point regarding the preludes "serving as allegories for the narrative chapters" (12)? If they indeed do, are we to read this recourse, on Woolf's part, to an established literary technique based on one-to-one (metaphorical) correspondence, as a re- or deterritorialising gesture? My guess would be, the former – but that brings up problems of its own, does it not? Either way, Mr Opravil's point is made in a rather off-hand way and would benefit from further elaboration.

2. Analogously, how does Mr Opravil reconcile the paradox that, following his Deleuzian reading of Woolf's characters as "bodies without organs" and desubjectivised "assemblages" of "intensities" (13) is a five-page list (15-19) of Woolf's six principal characters, each endowed with a specific personal history, individual particularities and, for lack of a better word, a singular (i.e. not multiple) *subjectivity*?

3. Last but not least (and to do with my main objection), Mr Opravil sets out by criticising a Woolf critic for failing to "take into account the possibility of approaching the character as a multiplicity" (6), but concludes by searching, however provisionally, for a "unity to a work of art" (41). How do we explain this paradoxical gesture and why, in a theoretical context arguably seeking to do away with the category of unity, is it necessary for Mr Opravil to still cling to the literary text as "unified," rather than as "multiple" or "disunited"?

Mr Opravil's is an ambitious and laudable project, quite exceptional especially given its BA level, showing potential for further elaboration. As it is, however, it seems to fall short of thinking through some its most obvious and important implications, and of solving the "problems" it postulates. The opponent's recommendation, therefore, is that it be graded as "VERY GOOD" – a recommendation only, as the final verdict should depend on Mr Opravil's performance at the defence.