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Anindyo Roy
Colby College

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Metropolitan Civility, Bloomsbury, and the Power of the Modern Colonial State: Leonard Woolf's "Pearls and Swine"

Anindyo Roy

Anindyo Roy is Assistant Professor in English at Colby College where he teaches courses in critical theory, postcolonial literatures and theory, and British Modernism. He has published essays on postcolonial theory and literature, fiction of the empire, and on modernist (Bloomsbury) writers such as E. M. Forster and Leonard Woolf.

Leonard Woolf, one of the key figures in the Bloomsbury circle, is perhaps most widely known for his role in labor party politics in Britain and for his engagement, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, with internationalist politics associated with the League of Nations. As someone closely allied with Bloomsbury, Britain's pre-eminent circle of aesthetes and intellectuals, Woolf's political thinking can at best be described as unorthodox: although a member of the exclusive Cambridge circle that had been nurtured by the aesthetic and moral philosophy of G. E. Moore in the early years of the twentieth century, his metropolitanism was subsequently tempered and shaped by the demands of a colonial career which spanned nearly eight years (1903-11). Upon returning from Ceylon where he served as an administrator, Woolf resigned his post in the colonial service, married Virginia Stephen and settled down with her in 1916 in Sussex, in their new home that was to become, in the succeeding years, the new center for Bloomsbury. While his reputation as a literary figure remained vaguely defined by his association with Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury circle, Woolf's own political career as a member of the labor party was seen to be intimately connected with his experience as a civil servant in colonial Ceylon. The man who is later fictionally reincarnated as Peter Walsh in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) used that colonial experience to author a novel set in colonial Ceylon, *The Village in the Jungle* (1913), a collection of short fiction entitled "Stories of the East" (1921), as well as

critiques of imperialism — *Mandates and Empire* (1920), *Economic Imperialism* (1921), and *Imperialism and Civilization* (1928).

To the postcolonial scholar, Woolf's works present a specific site for excavating a particular genealogy of imperialism, one that accrues around the jagged relationship between imperialism and the emergence of the modern state, and between the latter's metropolitan ethos of its citizens and the consolidation of domestic liberal politics in the twentieth-century era of the British Empire. One commonplace view is that the postcolonial exposure of the collusion between European knowledge and the project of empire has led to a radical reformulation of the humanities. In my view such a characterization of postcolonialism's political and disciplinary effects misses its potentially powerful interventionist role — that of going beyond the "reformulation of the humanities" — to engage in a radical rehistoricization of the continuum across which the categories of "First" and "Third" worlds are constituted, and through which the terms of nationhood achieve their particular political and discursive currency. Without such a re-historicization, these terms are allowed to circulate and reproduce the hegemony of received meanings. My present task of excavating Woolf's colonial work is part of that task of rehistoricization: my attempt is to show how a narrative authored by a member of the bureaucratic order set in place by the modern metropolitan imperial state intervenes in the space established by that very order by disrupting the core from which it imagines, and fantasizes about, its centrality.

It is true that to a large extent Woolf's critical stance on imperialism, as developed in his political career after his return from Ceylon, was fashioned by his location within the metropolitan order. When he published his novel *The Village in the Jungle*, soon after his return from colonial service, it was praised for being a work of "superbly dispassionate observation,"¹ although Woolf's friend and mentor Lytton Strachey remained unenthusiastic, dismissing it as a work with "too many blacks in it" (Woolf, *Letters* 197). It is clear that Strachey, an active member of Bloomsbury, which claimed to offer a radical aesthetics, could not conceal his racist ideas while assessing the merits of the novel. What is also clear is that in Bloomsbury works with "too many blacks in it" could not be expected to make a significant claim — aesthetically or intellectually — on the attention of its members. Not surprisingly, then, Woolf's most radical critique of imperialism, found in the collection of three colonial short stories published in 1921, failed to generate any interest among the Bloomsbury circle. Originally handprinted and published by the family-owned Hogarth Press, it quietly slipped out of memory of Bloomsbury. Woolf's five-part autobiography was to appear much later in the late 60s, during a period when a re-evaluation of the historical legacy of Bloomsbury was well underway (Quentin Bell's *Bloomsbury* was published in 1968). Whether one approaches Woolf as a "literary" figure or as a "political" thinker, it is clear that a reconfiguration of these two aspects of his career as a writer yields a new understanding of the complex relations between his critical stance against imperialism and his own metropolitan identity that had been largely shaped by his association with the Cambridge circle and by the role he played as a colonial bureaucrat in Ceylon

in the post-Cambridge period of life. This aspect comes into its sharpest focus in "The Stories of the East," the body of work that has ironically remained the least known among his writings.² My purpose in this essay is to suggest that Woolf's critique of colonialism, which he developed most extensively in his essays, has its source in a particular narrative about the logic of colonial extraction and accumulation that is visible in his short story, "Pearls and Swine." I want to argue that the story opens up a particular history in the power relations between the modern metropolis and the colony by highlighting the powerful forms of visibility that imperialism consolidated for itself at the scene of labor in the colony. Within the discursive rims of this order of visibility, Woolf crafts a narrative that simultaneously moves inward and outward — toward the core of metropolitan consciousness and the realm of an imperial gaze reaching out beyond metropolitan limits.

Embodied in the form of multiple frames, this inward movement of the narrative refracts and disrupts the centrality of the authorial voice, revealing the very limits inherent in the liberal consciousness that structures that voice. In other words, the narrative frames enact a form of Conradian displacement of the core, so to speak, revealing the powerful effects of ideological interpellation that constitute metropolitan subjects as free members of the modern liberal state. For such members, the colony is always "elsewhere," and as Fredric Jameson has argued, this inability "to include [the] radical otherness of colonial life, colonial suffering and exploitation, let alone the structural connections between . . . absent space and daily life in the metropolis" (51) results from the "spatial disjunction" created by having "a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole . . . located elsewhere" (50). The outward movement in "Pearls and Swine" simultaneously articulates the very form in which the colonial desire for economic extraction is embodied in the visibility of the "other" — in this case colonial labor — revealing the functioning of modern biopower set in place in the colony by the metropolitan state. The visibility of colonized bodies available at this site is an effect of the operation of a state-organized bureaucratic machinery; that visibility sets itself up as the core from which the fantasy of accumulation and extraction coincides with the metropolitan "will to narrate." It is this simultaneity that makes "Pearls and Swine" worthy of our critical and historical consideration, especially in the context of Woolf's other colonial writings. As a political critique of colonialism, the power of a work like *The Village in the Jungle* depends on the authority of an omniscient metropolitan narrator to represent the poverty and destitution of the colony. To this extent, its primary objective to tell the story of the lives of villagers and poor outcasts Woolf had encountered during his service in Ceylon is largely mediated by its detached tone and semi-realist narrative. However, this narrative never grazes against the authorial voice that gives the story its particular form and immediacy. Similarly, as testaments to his anti-imperial stance, Woolf's essays on imperialism articulate a specific metropolitan understanding of the economic ravages unleashed by colonialism and its underlying epistemological rationality by taking recourse to a political voice that remains outside that critique, omniscient and self-assured in its metropolitan critical and authorial stance.

“Pearls and Swine” is set in a fictional landscape among the pearl fisheries of southern India. The action centers on the story of a “little Anglo-Indian” (268), a returned civil servant who had been in charge of supervising the pearl fisheries. The man relates his experiences as an observer and participant in the work of the pearl divers to his metropolitan interlocutors in England who all claim to have their own views on the Eastern question. What distinguishes this story’s rendition of the “Eastern formula” (265) from the critiques of imperialism that Woolf authored in the 1920s is its complex dramatization of the actual fashioning of the phantasmatic power of the colonial state. Michael Taussig has ascribed this power to a “quality of ghostliness in objects” or “an uncertain fluctuation between thinghood and spirit” that is the source of “thralldom . . . which the State holds for its objects” (217-18). As I elucidate later, this sense of the phantasmatic is conveyed in the actual description the narrator provides of the events and scenes at the pearl fishery. The story, however, begins on a very different note: set in metropolitan England, the interlocutors of the narrator’s tale represent a bricolage of voices of old “India-hands” — of established authorities of varying political persuasions, self-assured individuals who bring to the discussion of the “East” different perspectives on imperialism. Even before the story can be framed through the multiple perspectives of the narrators, Woolf locates the narrative act within metropolitan England. Highlighting the performative site, such an act clearly conveys the power of location in constituting narrative authority; in fact, the distance between the colony where the story unfolds and the metropolitan space where, like Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness*, the narrator shares the space, and communicates, with his group of interlocutors modeled after the Bloomsbury circle, symptomizes the “spatial disjunction” (50) that Jameson has noted. However, once the story moves from this narratorial frame into to the colonial site, readers are progressively led into the realm of a particular form of narrated visibility that mirrors the powerful fantasy put in place by the colonial state. Not only does this provide what may be regarded as the “insider’s” views on the effects of the power of the colonial state in regulating a liberal metropolitan consciousness, it also embodies how those effects are registered at the level of the physical body. The ability of the (white) narrator to comprehend the extent to which that power is exercised on himself as a white man and over the labor force it commands symptomizes a specific transformation of physical bodies into fetish objects, a dynamic system that also highlights the racialization inherent in the constitution of modern biopower. This idea of “biopower” has been theorized by Foucault in *The History of Sexuality I: An Introduction*. In that text, Foucault describes “two poles of development” in the exercise of power over life, “linked together by a whole intermediate cluster of relations,” stating that one of these poles centers “on the body as a machine: its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls, all this was ensured by the procedures of power that characterized the *disciplines: an anatomo-politics of the human body*” (139). The second pole, he says, serves “as the basis of the biological processes: propagation, births and mortality, the level of health, life expectancy and longevity, with all the conditions that can cause these to

vary. Their supervision was effected through an entire series of interventions and *regulatory controls: a biopolitics of the population*" (139).

In "Pearls and Swine," the description of the pearl divers — their ethnic and racial identities specified through their bodies and movement, and the pearling station — with its system of habitation and sanitation embodied in its spatial arrangement, convey the colonial formation of this "biopower," and is perhaps the most powerful articulation of Woolf's understanding of the power of colonialism that is fully expressed for the first time in its polemical form in 1920, in the essay *Mandates and Empire*. In this essay, however, the idea of biopower is replaced by the standard economic critique that accents the exploitative impact of colonialism in Africa and Asia. Here, Woolf draws attention to the role played by the new industrial powers in Europe:

It is widely recognized that imperialism, with its economic penetration and exploitation and its autocratic government of Africa and Asia, has been accompanied by very serious evils The Great Powers, when they divided up Africa among them and began the same process to Asia, incorporated enormous stretches of territory in their dominions and claimed and exercised unfettered sovereignty over those territories and their inhabitants. The motives behind this acquisition of territory were economic or strategic. The 'subject races' as they are called, had no control over their own Government, and the Government had subordinated the interests of the inhabitants to the economic interests of its European citizens or to the 'imperial' strategic and political interests of the mother-country.

(5-6)

Woolf's historical perspective on the emergence of imperialism as a global phenomenon is aimed at tracing its impact on the balance of powers within Europe, a balance that ultimately works to secure the interests of European citizens. By locating the politics of imperialism within the historical development of the industrial nation-states of Europe, Woolf provides a new perspective on the formation of modernity as realized by citizens of these nation-states.

Woolf also distinguishes between two systems of administrative and economic control that had evolved on the African continent—one that had allowed natives to retain their rights over the land by refusing to "alienate it to Europeans"; and the other in which they had been completely deprived of their legal rights over land as a result of it being alienated to "white settlers or to European joint-stock companies" (9).³ In the years after his return from colonial Ceylon, Woolf ruminated about the economic aspects of imperialism with the acute awareness of its present "reality." As he states in *Imperialism and Civilization* (1928), "imperialism is a *real thing*," adding that it is a "menacing movement which has developed a political philosophy peculiar to itself and has caused great political, economic, and social upheavals all over the world" (30, emphasis added). Evoking a sense of urgency about colonialism's present power, which he sees as being consolidated through a "political philosophy" fueling the very project of western modernity, he suggests that the world-wide impact of this philosophy had been founded on a rationality rooted in European

civilization.

This particular form of critique, developed by left-liberal thinkers in the early years of the twentieth century, can be traced back to J. Kier Hardie, the maverick labor MP who toured the Indian subcontinent in 1907. In his *India: Impressions and Suggestions*, Hardie advanced his own critique of the economic effects of imperialism on colonial India. Referring to the conventional eighteenth-century image of India that associated it with “unlimited wealth” of “merchant princes,” Hardie asserts that although we “hear less now-a-days about India’s great wealth . . . at no period has there ever been such a regular soaking drain upon its people as now” (1). Diagnosing the present ills besetting the country, he attributes their cause to the changes ushered in by the administration of property and revenue in the colonies, observing that before the imposition of British rule “the revenue was not due from individuals but from the community represented by the headman” (xx). Structural changes made by Britain within India’s political body, he argues, had led to the universalizing of money as a system of exchange, as a result of which the “individual cultivator has to pay his revenue direct, not as collective part of the harvest, but as individual rent . . . paid in coin and not in grain as formerly” (xiii). Extending his argument, he alleges that the colonial government was directly responsible for the widespread occurrence of famine by instituting the policy of exporting food grains, and for religious disaffection that had been created by a “new division behind caste and religious communities” (xv). Hardie’s diagnosis of colonial rule and its impact on the country is throughout patterned on a left critique of imperial economic policies.

Focusing on the system of taxation, for example, Hardie shows how Britain’s extractive policies are revealed in the unequal statistics: “The burden upon India — “5% interest on 5,000,000,000 to bondholders in Britain. 80% taxes raised by revenue assessment.” He then explains the impact of such policies on the taxation of the peasantry that lead to “continuous extortion” (3):

The amount of taxes raised directly from the peasants form 50% to 65% of the value of the yield of the land; in addition to which they have to pay local cesses . . . so that probably not less than 75% of the harvest goes in taxes. To most people this will seem incomprehensible. A 55% tax on income at home leads to heavy and continuous grumbling; and yet the 5% is assessed not on the total produce of the land, but on the profits; but 75% on the harvest reaped? . . . It is this fact which keeps the people of India in a condition of perpetual, hopeless, grinding poverty.

(2)

For Hardie, the processes of extraction that are dependent on the exploitation of labor provided the basis for colonial power. Perhaps the most compelling expression of that rationality of colonial extraction is to be found in Woolf’s story, “Pearls and Swine” — a story that evokes the phantasmatic power of the disciplinary colonial state in regulating labor among the pearl divers and in constituting a racial imaginary that established the very conditions for the production of value through that labor. By situating the white bureaucrat-narrator

at the heart of this experience, Woolf calls into question the legitimacy of a metropolitan civility that both gives assent to that disciplining body and constitutes its chief functional cadre.

Discussing Woolf's rendition of the Arab pearl diver, Elleke Boehmer takes an opposite view: she argues that Woolf romanticizes the worker, occluding the exploitative power relations that underlay its exploitative mechanisms. She says: "Like Yeats, Woolf might admittedly be criticized for surrendering to the embedded stereotypes of an ageless, 'imperturbable' East" (105). As I argue in this essay, the story "Pearls and Swine" is centrally concerned with colonial power relations — first, by narrating the violence that lies within the fantasy of imperial visibility and also by showing how that violence remains unacknowledged in the metropolis. In a sense, the story's narrative also embodies what Michael Taussig has called the spectral "fictionality of the state" within which a bureaucratic order can visualize its own fantasy at the site of colonial labor, and it is this fictionality that Woolf alludes to in describing imperialism as a "real thing." In his other story, "A Tale Told by Moonlight," Woolf's narrator gestures toward that spectral fictionality by breaking off the narrative with the image of the grotesque colonial body, a body that is represented as being transformed and ultimately destroyed by the violence of colonial traffic. Within its narrative, the "life" and "death" of that body remain as markers of an itinerary of colonial traffic that is enabled by securing the primacy of colonial man's freedom to make a "choice" and to take a "risk" in securing a future for himself.⁴ In "Pearls and Swine" Woolf returns to this theme by delineating the spectacle of colonial labor as a site of the disciplinary regime of the colonial State and not as a simple tableau of dignified labor, as Boehmer has argued. Unlike "A Tale," in this story Woolf presents two dead bodies — one that of the white man (referred to as Mr. White) and the other, that of the Arab pearl diver. While Mr. White dies of a contagion caused by the tropical disease infesting the fisheries, the diver meets his death in the depths of the ocean. In juxtaposing these two deaths, "Pearls and Swine" serves as an allegory of the political economy of the colonial State that opens up the very limits that constitute the colonial desire for extraction and accumulation in the name of "freedom."

In January of 1906 Leonard Woolf was appointed Koddu Superintendent to the Pearl Fishery in the coastal village of Marichchukaddi where he was put in charge of supervising the divers of the famous Ceylon pearls. On March 21, he wrote to Strachey:

I sometimes wonder whether I shall commit suicide before the six years are up . . . Depression is becoming, I believe, the mania with me . . . You don't know what it is to be, as I am now, so tired at 10 p.m. that every muscle in your body seems to be felt & to know that you have to keep awake until 2:30 a.m., only to begin another day of the same sort at half past seven. And then there are flies — they are bred in the millions of rotting oysters that lie about the camp. All day long they fly about in clouds, hundreds & hundreds swarming over everything: not a scrap of food can be left uncovered for a second without becoming black with them. They infect the food in some foul way, for all day long I feel horribly sick & many people are

actually sick four or five times regularly a day. They are crawling over one's face & hands all day long & owing to the putrid filth on which they feed every little scratch or spot becomes sore. . . . Can I write to you about Duncan or Society out of this?

(115)

Faced with the raw immediacy of his own experience as a supervisor of the pearl fisheries, and with the real possibility of his own mental breakdown (which seemed inevitable in the face of infection and illness he saw all around), Woolf communicated his thoughts of torment about the vast chasm he sensed between his own world and that of his friend at home, Lytton Strachey. In the letter, the "real" had once again invaded his mental world, but in a manner that seemed essentially incommunicable since the world he currently inhabited presented such a different image of life and labor to what he imagined Strachey experienced in the metropole. As a man committed to the State-ordained principles of efficiency, order, and hard work, Woolf had been totally unprepared for the kind of toll the supervisory job would take on his mental and emotional life. In an earlier letter written on Jan 28, 1906, he had likened his job to that of the laboring "cooly":

It is merely cooly work supervising this & the counting & issuing of about one or two million oysters a day, for the Arabs will do anything if you hit them hard enough with a walking stick, an occupation in which I have been engaged for the most part of the last 3 days & nights.

(Letters 114)

Here Woolf envisioned his job in paradoxical terms, likening it to that of a manual laborer while simultaneously asserting his own mastery over the work force he had been supervising. Leonard Woolf's contradictory identification with the workers is based on an imaginary alignment, which as Kaja Silverman notes in discussing T. E. Lawrence's relationship with the Arabs, "facilitated not only by the intimacy of his working relationship with them, but also by the fact that they are displayed for him within a literal and metaphorical tableau which conforms to his fantasmatic" (337). This personal fantasmatic corresponds, in the story, with a type of scenographic tableau that is structurally ordered in terms of the requirements of a colonial economy based on the extraction of value from laboring bodies. Within the microcosmic world of the pearl fisheries, the conditions of proximity to, and visibility of, colonial labor were not only necessary for envisioning such labor as a source of value but also for producing and maintaining the colonial racial divide. Correspondingly, the singular identity of the white man in charge of the system of extraction is simultaneously produced and threatened by the heterogeneity of racial identification of the divers, itself necessary for the distribution and deployment of labor. Given this, the story is often charged by an abiding sense of "degradation," a word that Woolf obsessively repeats in his letters to Strachey (1905-1909). Keeping "Pearls and Swine" in view, I will argue that the sense of personal degradation intimated in the letters has a wider political meaning that relates the issue of

civility to the workings of the State and his own bureaucratic labor — the duties Woolf himself describes as being those of a “policeman, magistrate, judge, & publican” (*Letters* 141).⁵

In nearly half a century, the civil service that Woolf joined in 1904 had remained largely unchanged in the Crown colony of Ceylon. British rule was still maintained by a small majority of white men — mostly British Assistant Government Agents in charge of the districts and the Government Agents in charge of the Provinces whose authority rested on the power to make on the spot decisions without being directly responsible to the headquarters in Colombo. The hierarchy of power was itself patterned on a feudal system inherited from the Sinhalese kings, in which the British civil servants employed Sinhalese to manage local affairs (Wilson 31-32). Thus, in significant ways Ceylon’s administration, unlike the rest of the Indian subcontinent, still remained unchanged. Solely responsible for the management of entire districts — whether it involved serving as overseer of the pearl fishery, or acting as magistrate and policeman, Woolf constantly evokes the rigor of his own labor in his letters to Strachey and the effects it has on him. From administering the new laws of salt collection to controlling the rinderpest epidemic in 1910, from working on new irrigation projects and the maintenance of schools and hospitals to regulating the cut and burn practices of “chena” cultivation, Woolf found himself as both serving the economic interests of the government as well as arguing for the need to prevent the gradual extinction of local agricultural practices perceived as harmful by the government. His letters often allowed him the opportunity to exchange with Strachey ideas about what it meant for the colonizer and the colonized to be laboring, living, and desiring subjects; how his own middle-class aspirations for social mobility had been channeled as bureaucratic labor into the service of maintaining the principles of civil society based on a paternalistic colonial order; and how the clockwork timing of work and the knowledge of native character and racial difference, central to the ideas of change and efficiency, also designated a desire to exploit an unequal system of exchange, enabling the extraction of surplus; and how that work tested the limits of “experience” and of “reality,” as they had been philosophically conceived in the rarified air of the metropole.

By setting his own labor as a supervisor against the working bodies of the colonized, he described, in his letters, the effects of surveillance on the consciousness of the colonizer. Writing to Strachey, he had once confessed: “I get your moments sometimes when nothing seems to matter & I suppose that most of the time we, or I at any rate, are passively inert to happiness or unhappiness. I mean that we are so persistently automatic that most of the day is a trance. When I do think or feel, it is usually with rage or despair. Don’t you feel often or always that there is so little time to lose, & that we are losing it so fast” (Woolf, *Letters* 77). The suspension of consciousness is symptomatic of the troubled relationship between his own labor and the affect produced by it, one that is recurrently described in ambivalent terms. For example, he says that his work became an obsession that aided him in warding off his own impending madness and that the experience of resting from work was like “gliding into the vegetable state of the East” (Woolf, *Letters* 120). The instability of the “psychic

sphere” is registered at the level of the body of the colonizer that is seen to be threatened by cessation from work, although it is the same work that makes him “half-dead from weariness and want of sleep” (Woolf, *Letters* 114). This paradoxical encounter with the laboring body lies at the heart of the story “Pearls and Swine,” written after his return to England in 1911 in the secure environment of the metropolis. This story also represents an effort on Woolf’s part to narrativize that encounter in terms of his own contradictory engagement with his own labor and the labor extracted from the bodies he supervised. Parts of the story are based directly on his letters to Strachey, but unlike the latter, it possesses a certain dialectical structure that is embedded in his representations of metropolitan men debating the current political questions about “India.” By locating itself at the remote colonial site of the fisheries the narrative attempts to penetrate the heart of the “real” by moving into the scene of extraction — that of precious pearls from the flesh of the oysters fished from the very depths of the ocean that lapped on the edges of colonial *terra firma*.

As in “A Tale Told By Moonlight,” this story initially organizes itself through multiple narrative screens and narrators before the actual story can be presented. The primary narrator — the “I” — an ex-colonial, is described as being in the company of three interlocutors — a retired Colonel, a stock jobber, and the clergyman with a missionary background, a group that is later joined by the “Anglo-Indian man.”⁶ We are told that this man had served as a superintendent overseeing the pearl fisheries in South India. It is the latter, the Woolfean alter-ego’s narrative, that forms the core of the story that is recounted by the primary narrator, the “I.” The Anglo-Indian’s assistant, Robson, described as “a little boy of twenty four fresh-cheeked from England,” who had “passed the Civil Service ‘Exam’” (270) serves as yet another authorial persona, although he does not narrate any part of the story. I have suggested elsewhere that this form of narrative embeddedness — with multiple personas refracting different facets of Woolf’s own experience — can be interpreted as an attempt on Woolf’s part to secure a distance from the raw immediacy of his own experiences as recorded in his letters, so that the “real” could be explored by partially surrendering the experiential self to these multiply narrated (and narrating) selves. This is initially achieved through the separation of the two narrators both of whom are united by a common colonial history, and through the iteration of the distance between the metropolitan setting, from where the story is narrated, and the colonial site where it is originally located.

The primary (unnamed) narrator’s claim to possess a superior understanding of India is based on a orientalist trope utilized in “A Tale Told by Moonlight”: knowledge of the colony is figured as an ability to access the core of the East through the body of the colonized woman: “They hadn’t been there . . . they hadn’t even seen the brothel and cafe chantant at Port Said suddenly open out into that pink and blue desert that leads you through Africa and Asia into the heart of the East” (266). This coupling of the sexual with knowledge of the “heart of the East” is reminiscent of Jessop’s own narrative impulse for “fishing things out of life” (255). Just as Celestinahami’s body in the story “A Tale Told By Moonlight” provides the site for unraveling the elusive operations of desire in relation to the “real,” the brothel here is imagined as a space of entry into “the

real” that lies beyond the metropolitan frame. Similarly, the second narrator, the Anglo-Indian man, presents Robson, his young assistant, as a spokesperson for liberal philosophy and the self-assured belief in scientific rationality and progressive social engineering. As a product of a metropolitan Board School education, Robson sees the empire as a vast crucible for social experimentation (272). Robson’s views, as I will argue later, reflect an ethos of scientific management that had provided the economic and political basis for imperialism in the new century, and which was to find support from capitalist industrial interests operating in far corners of the globe, who all claimed to be intimately familiar with local affairs. Furthermore, the use of scientific knowledge as the basis for moving India into a new progressive era meant greater access to its resources and its laboring masses, and to more efficient systems of extraction.

Once the main actors have been located, “Pearls and Swine” begins to track the political and psychic effects of extracting the pearl from the core of the oyster — a task that thrusts the norms of colonial civility, modern industrial rationality and management of work, as well as the security of colonial knowledge to those very limits that had been called on to consolidate the colonial divide. The pearl fishery industry has had a long history, which is recalled in quasi-mythic language:

They were doing it centuries and centuries before we came, when — as someone said — our ancestors were herding swine on the plains of Norway. The Arabs of the Persian Gulf came down in dhows and fished up pearls that made their way to Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. They still come, and the Tamils and the Moormen of the district come, and they fish ‘em up in the same way, diving out of long wooden boats shaped and rigged as in Solomon’s time, as they were centuries before him and the Queen of Sheba. (270)

At the turn of the century when Woolf was put in charge of Marichchukaddi, the industry came under the renewed scrutiny of British authorities.⁷ Its economic viability was evident although doubts were raised as to whether the operations were being carried out with maximum efficiency. Invariably this meant looking to experts — marine biologists, owners of companies, and civil bureaucrats — for the re-organization of the industry, achieved by introducing new norms of scientifically authorized forms of surveillance and by recodifying the bodies of divers in order to comprehend the link between racial types and extraction of maximum value from their work. The work of the expert — embodied by Robson — is anchored in an understanding of modern “biopower,” that is by constituting the colonial people as a laboring population. Consistent with Foucault’s account of “biopower,” statistical and ethnographic records of different ethnicities of the divers, their nationalities and racial forms provide the categories through which that work of diving for and collecting the pearls is instituted. For example, in “Governmentality,” Foucault has shown how the individualizing and totalizing modalities of power define what David Owen calls the “parameters of modern political reason” (188). In the colonial context of this story, these modalities of power are shown to be related to economic

government of the colony and the moral government of the self, the latter signified by the narrator's constant questioning of the ethical role of the colonial administrator.

The site where the operations of this modern political reason are most visible is of course the pearl fishery located in the colony. One of the earliest accounts in the twentieth century of the growth and consolidation of the pearl fishery as an important economic endeavor is to be found in James Hornell's 1907 *Report on the Pearl Fisheries of the Ceylon Pearl Banks*. Hornell, a manager and marine biologist, refers to the enormously intimidating task of surveillance of the working bodies to prevent theft:

This task is one of the most wearisome I know, as it is one that requires constant personal oversight if theft, with constant vitiation of results, is to be avoided. From 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., one has to sit over a trough full of decayed oysters in process of being washed by the coolies, or else keep ward over the cloths on which the oyster washings are laid out to dry in the broiling sun.

(7)

The need to replace this form of wearisome surveillance with a more "modern" system is reiterated by the principal owner of Burma Shell Company, John I. Solomon. Solomon refers to the losses incurred by an inefficient system of surveillance by reminding his readers that the "final nett profits accruing to them as a result of a fishery represent but a tithe of the actual value of pearls which are contained in the oysters which grow on the pearls banks of Ceylon" (2). Like Hornell and Solomon, Ridgeway acknowledges that the "pearl fisheries in the gulf of Mannar have been for centuries a lucrative source of revenue to the Government of this Island" (111), but is emphatic about the defective method of fishing and washing, which he claims is "is an excellent type of Eastern organization, but is hardly suited to modern conditions." To him the main defect is that

under the old system an undue proportion of the profits of the fishery accrues, directly or indirectly, to the divers and, more especially, to the merchants, as compared with the Government share. These defects would all be cured by the substitution of a new system under which the whole of the operations — both the dredging of the oysters and the extraction of the pearls — would be conducted by the Government with a much smaller number of labourers in its own employ.

(Ridgeway 114)

Hornell's suggestions for improving the efficiency is to "raze the old edifice," by limiting the size of the diving fleet, landing the day's catch in sealed bags instead of in bundles and re-modeling the store (12-13). Solomon's recommendations include, in addition to Hornell's, reducing and streamlining labor, ensuring that the bulk of the work is done by local Sinhalese and not "foreigners" who are "not British subjects" (7), and investigating the possibility of radi-

ographing pearl oysters, a new and relatively undeveloped scientific technology at that time.

The attention drawn to ethnic and racial categories among the workers is closely linked to the details about the working bodies found in Hornell's *The Biological Results of the Ceylon Pearl Fishery of 1904 with Notes on Divers and their Occupation* (1905). His description of the process of washing of the oysters after they have rotted illustrates not only the system of surveillance set in place to observe the details of the work in order to prevent theft, but also a scrutinizing gaze aimed at specific bodies that could ensure greater efficiency in the extraction of value:

After the oysters are rotted, it is time to wash them. The covers are removed from the ballam and coolies fill it to the brim with water . . . The washers range themselves in line along either side, squatting on anything convenient. They are stripped to the loin cloth, and are not allowed to take their hands out of the water save to drop out the empty shells. Rinsing the shells, separating the valves, and rubbing the outside of one valve against the other to remove any detritus in which a pearl might lodge.

(30)

The process of identifying and collecting the pearls ends only when the shells of the oysters are removed, and the “men stand up and stretch their cramped limbs” (30), and the “final search,” Hornell continues, is carried out by children and women. He remarks: “it is amazing to see what a large quantity of small pearls their keen eyes and fine touch enable them to obtain, chiefly by winnowing” (30). The range of visibility offered by this form of surveillance on workers who are literally tethered to the work compares in some degree to observation of the tactile abilities of women and children who harvest the pearls that escape the normal eye. Furthermore, this form of visibility depends on a biological reasoning to ensure a productive division of labor: women's and children's bodies were regarded as being most conducive for work that ensured the maximum extraction of value, and the racial bodies of the divers provided a greater knowledge to the colonialist for ensuring the greatest security and efficiency in the harvesting of oysters. Hornell categorizes the major “racial types” — coastal Tamils, Moormen drafted from villages on the Madura coast; Malayalam men from the Travancore coast; and so-called Arabs from Colombo and Jaffna (31) — in terms of their physical and moral attributes, claiming that while the behavior of the Arabs and Moormen were “generally excellent” — they “worked energetically without complaining even in the rough weather” (33) — the Tuticorun Parawa divers engaged in “purposeless sailing about” in order to “mask and give opportunity for wholesale and illicit opening of oysters for the purpose of extracting the best pearls” (33). Following Foucault's line of reasoning in “Governmentality,” it is clear that by constituting the working population as both *subject* (with known and unknown motives), and *object* of government, a political rationality is circumscribed that has an essentially disciplinary function.

The power as well as the vulnerability of the disciplinary regime is signaled by the continuous call for renewed surveillance in the face of “deception.” In

“Pearls and Swine,” this shadow of deception enters through the story of Mr. White, the itinerant planter and pearl merchant whom the narrator describes as drifting one day from the blue into the fishing village. A great talker, he exhibits the self-confident posturing of an empire builder, but soon he is racked with delusions and pain after his first attack of “D.T.” Tied to the pole on the beach to prevent him from harming himself, Mr. White serves both as an extreme image of colonial delusion as well as the culminating figure in this narrative of trauma through which Woolf repeats his own “madness” expressed in his letters to Strachey. As Mr. White’s paranoia rips apart the structure of colonial surveillance, including the thin line separating the surveyer and surveyed, and the visible and the invisible, the narrator moves towards the limits of his own narrative impulse.

But before that can happen, the narrator evokes the vast land and seascape that surrounds Mr. White and the pearl fishery. Gesturing spatially toward those surfaces and depths that reflect the uncertain structure of visibility and invisibility built around them, it also provides the most dramatic scenographic representation of biopower — with its production of the “truth” about native bodies and the systems of surveillance deployed to regulate them, its management of health, sanitation, and civil design, and its control over the processes of economic extraction and accumulation. After describing the location of the fisheries and the population of the divers in the area, the narrator depicts the surrounding landscape as a vision that operates between an expansive order of visibility and invisibility, evoking a form of spatiality against which he can identify the tiny pearl that lies embedded in the oyster:

Well, Providence had so designed it that there was a stretch of coast in that district which was a barren wilderness of sand and scrubby thorn jungle — and nothing else — for three hundred miles; no towns, no villages, no water, just sand and trees for three hundred miles. O, and sun, I forget that, blazing sun. And in the water off the shore at one place there were oysters, millions of them lying and breeding at the bottom, four or five fathoms deep down. And in the oysters, or some of them, were pearls.

(269)

Although the working bodies of the native are significantly absent, the scene metonymically links the ownership of the gaze to the extraction of pearls harvested from this expanse:

Well, we rule India and the sea, so the sea belongs to us, and oysters are in the sea and the pearls are in the oysters. Therefore of course the pearls belong to us.

(269)

However, this direct and unmediated link between the gaze and the “commodity” made visible by the gaze is hampered by the awareness that the process of extraction and accumulation involves an “immense gamble” (270). This sets the body of the colonial master against the multiplicity of racialized bodies of colo-

nial subjects produced by the system of knowledge. — those of “Tamils, Telugus, fat Chetties, Parsees, Bombay merchants, Sinhalese from Ceylon, the Arabs and their negroes, Somalis” (270). Although the Government claims “its share of two-thirds of all the oysters fished up” (270), the risks involved in this gamble range from the Government Superintendent having to discern among the various claims to the ownership and distribution of the pearls to the prevention of “Known Depredators . . . small pox and cholera,” to maintaining order and sanitation in a town that had “[sprung] up in a night” to accommodate the swarming masses of people. As part of the fantasy of pure extraction, this risk, like Reynold’s desire in “A Tale,” is also about the willingness to participate in the play of possibilities, in the game — as it were — of life and death, often evoked phantasmagorically through the juxtaposed images of disease, rotting oysters, maggots feeding and reproducing in the flesh of the oysters, and of shining pearls extracted from the core of these rotting oysters.

Although both human bodies at work — divers and cleaners — and the swarming flies and maggots feeding on the rotting oysters are captured through a singular vision of the Empire extending beyond the land into the ocean, this vision soon begins to be threatened by the enormity of the task. Behind the frenzied activity is the specter of death: “He [Robson] saw men die — he hadn’t seen that in his Board School — die of plague and cholera, like flies, all over the place, under the trees, in the boats, outside the door of his own hut” (270). The dizzying interplay of life and death is further accentuated by the sense of putrefaction and the unmitigated feeding frenzy of the maggots, which conveys not only the raw power of colonial accumulation, but also the accompanying consumption of bodies that produces the clear visibility of the pearl, the object that is the end-product of the process of extraction. The fantasy of pure extraction, earlier conveyed by the narrator, is here coded across the image of laboring body, pushing *beyond* the turmoil, death, and putrefaction: “Why is it allowed? The pearls, you see, the pearls: you must get them out of the oysters as you must get the oysters out of the sea” (270-71). In this sense, the fantasy of pure visibility also asserts the intrinsic simplicity behind the process of extraction: “They rot very well in that sun, and the flies come and lay eggs in them, and the maggots come out of the eggs and more flies come out of the maggots, and between them all, the maggots and the sun, the oysters’ bodies disappear, leaving the pearls and a little sand at the bottom of the canoe” (271). The gaze is seen to have direct access to the heart of that which constitutes value: as the bodies of the flies reproduce, they feed on the oysters leaving them with bare shells, from which the deft hands of men, women, and children reap the precious pearl. In short, what yields the pearl is both the gaze of surveillance as well as the labor of working bodies, with the former subsuming the latter.

In the pearl fishery, bureaucratic work lies mainly in observing the bodies of these working men. Time stretches out in this kind of work, creating a sense of ennui: as the narrator says, “forty eight hours at a stretch doesn’t leave one much time or inclination for thinking — waiting for things to happen” (275). The action occurs in the story as the narrator observes

. . . the dark shadows, which lay like dead men about the boats, would leap into life — there would be a sudden din of hoarse voices, shouting, calling, quarrelling. The boats swarmed with shadows running about, gesticulating, staggering under sacks of oysters, dropping one after the other over the boats' sides into the sea.

(277)

In March of 1906, when Woolf described in his letter to Strachey his physical and mental condition after a day of supervision spent among hundreds of swarming flies and men toiling in their boats, he was able to perceive the link between bodies of men exhausted by labor and the oysters consumed by the maggots and flies. What happens in this period of waiting in "Pearls and Swine" is the sudden reversal in Mr. White's self-assured stance. The narrative juxtaposes and contrasts two different kinds of spectacles — that of the delusional Mr. White and that of the divers in their period of inactivity. The very embodiment of the spirit of colonial enterprise, Mr. White is consumed in slow degrees by the very object that he had set his eyes on — the valuable pearl. Tied to the pole where he comes to occupy the center of the divers' gazes, he becomes a spectacle for them:

They gathered about him, stared at him. The light of the flares fell on their dark faces, shinning and dripping from the sea. They looked calm, impassive, stern. It shone too on the circle of the eyes: one saw the whites of them all round him: they seemed to be judging him, weighing him: calm patient eyes of men who watched unastonished the procession of things.

(277)

The very man who had "talked a great deal about the hidden wealth of India and exploitation," and who had said that he "would work for the good of the native" (273) is himself immobilized by his own delusional fever.

Figures who had appeared as anonymous bodies in Hornell's statistical accounts of native workers suddenly acquire specific features that threaten to overcome the singularity of Mr. White's racial identity:

The Tamils' squat black figures nearly naked watched him silently, almost carelessly. The Arabs in their long dirty, night-shirts, black-bearded, discussed him earnestly, together with their guttural voices. Only an enormous negro, towering up to six feet at least above the crowd, dressed in sacks and an enormous ulster, with ten copper coffee pots slung over his back and a pipe made of a whole coconut with an iron tube stuck in it in his hand, stood smiling mysteriously.

(277-78)

Is this another version of the spectacle of oriental barbarism embodying all of the hidden fears that coalesce and give shape to colonial anxiety, or is this the flip side of the very disciplinary regime founded on colonial biopower? Do the figures evoke Conrad's shadowy forms or are they animated in their inactivity

by the very force that harnesses their labor for profit? What is clear is that, faced with these spectacles, the narrator describes himself as retreating to his position as a mere recorder of events, one who continues to “write his report” in the midst of the unfolding scene of Mr. White’s madness. That self-imposed equipoise is soon disrupted when he confronts the lifeless body of the Arab diver brought up to the shore. The man, the narrator states, had “lived, worked and died” (278). However, this quiet acknowledgement of the labor of the diver is followed by an image of his lifeless body brought up to the shore, repeating the description of the naked dead woman that Woolf had recorded in his letter to Strachey (*Letters* 141). In both of these descriptions, the toes are described as “pointing up, very stark” (278). Unlike Mr. White, who dies in the midst of putrefaction, the dead Arab’s body is concretely located at the site of life and labor. While the narrator has to move away immediately to “make arrangements for White’s funeral,” the effect of the diver’s death on his fellow workers is signified by the mournful words of the Arab sheikh who presides over the funeral — “Khallas” — “all is over, finished.” This solemn ceremonial scene, repeated almost verbatim from his letter to Strachey of March 4, 1906, can be read as an attempt on the part of the narrator to counter the finality of the word, “Khallas,” but it is through the repeated echoes of that word that the narrative enacts its own reiteration of memory as well as its own impossibility. If the word signifies the end of a life, it also marks the interrupted moment in the narrative — signifying a “nothing beyond what is” — when the Archdeacon, one of the interlocutors, says, “It’s too late, I think. . . . Don’t you think you’ve chosen rather exceptional circumstances, out of the *ordinary* case?” (279; emphasis added).

It is by re-establishing the link between the colonial and metropolitan worlds that “Pearls and Swine” brings out the power of the modern state, the authority to provide the necessary fantasy of extraction and accumulation. Located in a postcolonial critique of power, my essay therefore serves to rehistoricize the legacy of Bloomsbury by restoring its links to the politics of empire and state of that era. It also serves the necessary function of pushing this rehistoricization into a critical understanding of the politics of the present. The “fantasy” that Woolf evoked in his fiction seems to operate in different ways in the post-industrial global era, but its politics of visibility resonates and remains inescapably real. For example, the domain of an instantaneous global visibility as embodied in the new tools of present-day communication, say the website, often occludes the complicitous relations between transnational capital and national state, relations through which traditional forms of extraction and accumulation continue to be practiced in the name of globality. I think “Pearls and Swine” invites us to be vigilant against that visibility, and to be retrospectively aware of the kind of fantasy and desire that it masks. By pointing toward the relationship between the objectifying and reifying discourses of colonialism as it mediates the power relations between the two domains in the early part of the twentieth century, “Pearls and Swine” is a work of immense historical significance. Not only does the story dramatize the metropolitan norms of “civility” under colonialism that inform these reifying discourses, it also provides us with a critical site for understanding the power of that civility in the global era

of the West. If Woolf represented the power of that civility through a narrative of crisis in “Pearls and Swine,” the story’s interruptions only magnify and highlight for us the conditions within which civil authority is evoked in our own times, and through which these conditions maintain the form of our present metropolitan subjectivities.

Notes

1. This quotation is taken from a blurb on the the back cover of *The Village in the Jungle*.
2. The most recent, and in my view the only, study of the story is to be found in Elleke Boehmer’s “Immeasurable Strangeness’ in Imperial Times: Leonard Woolf and W. B. Yeats,” in which she calls for a reassessment of his colonial short stories, based on a re-thinking of modernism’s troubled relationship with its own metropolitan identity, particularly during the last phase of the “age of empire.”
3. Leonard Woolf’s critiques of imperialism may have also been shaped by his relations with the two Fabian socialists, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, who are said to have “discovered” Woolf through the article he wrote for the *New Statesman* in 1914, and who were responsible for his entry into labor politics (see Woolf, *Letters* 583). Both Beatrice and Sidney Webb had toured India in the early years of the century.
4. “A Tale Told by Moonlight” is the first story in the collection, “The Stories of the East.” One of the outstanding features of the story is its persistent concern with defining and capturing the “real,” a word that is repeated so obsessively that it begins to dominate the language of the narrative. The story is a simple one: the unnamed narrator and his metropolitan friends have gathered under a moonlit sky on a fine summer evening in England to talk about their first love. When asked about his definition of love, the narrator opts to tell them a story from his own life. The story he relates is about his friend in the colony, Jessop who had once invited his friend, Reynolds, to pay him a visit. Reynolds was a struggling novelist, worn out by life in England, looking for an opportunity to revive his failing artistic inspiration. He arrived in Ceylon and was introduced by Jessop to a local prostitute, Celestinahami. Attracted by her, Reynolds eventually married the prostitute and settled down with her in a little cottage by the ocean. He started writing again, and this time it was a novel about the “East.” However, as time passed Reynolds lost interest in the woman, and eventually left her to return to England after making a monetary settlement with her. Soon after Reynold’s departure, Celestinahami’s western attired body was found floating on the waters outside the cottage. This is the point where the un-named narrator ends his story and we are left with his interlocutors wondering if the story they had heard was not just another “sentimental” tale about love.
5. For a detailed account of Woolf’s career in Ceylon, see Duncan Wilson’s biography of Woolf.
6. The page numbers indicated in parenthesis refer to the story published in the 1963 edition of *Diaries in Ceylon 1908-1911, and Record of a Colonial*

Administrator, put out by Hogarth Press and edited by Woolf.

7. Here it might be worth noting what Daniel Bivona has argued about Kipling's vision of "work." According to him, it represented a "complex form of social endeavor" based on a "complex division of labor" that fitted into an image of organic and "natural" order, instead of being part of a specific historical arrangement in industrial societies. Bivona suggests that this bureaucratic vision rested on the sense that hierarchies within the order were "founded on inequalities of power and ability," (71) which, unlike the traditional patterns of Indian caste relations, served "utilitarian rather than cosmically authoritarian ends" (72). Although the native population of divers were never imagined as being part of a "natural" order, the distinctions of nationality and race being so evident to the colonial observer, the systems of surveillance operating in these pearl fisheries were founded on observable and calculable utilitarian distinctions. The level of specificity in describing the different kinds of labor involved in the process highlights a modality of order that is based on what I have described as "modern biopower." Such biopower also rested on determining the level of health and sanitation in the pearling station and in preventing diseases such as cholera and small pox.

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