

THE DRAMATIC WRITINGS OF GERTRUDE STEIN, VIRGINIA WOOLF
AND SYLVIA PLATH, 1913-1962: THEATRES OF IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dramatic writings of three twentieth-century women writers: Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, ranging from Stein's first play, What Happened, in 1913 to Plath's Three Women in 1962.

Chapter 1 establishes the critical, theoretical and theatrical contexts of the discussion. It gives an overview of the modernist literary scene, which provides the immediate background to the work of Stein and Woolf, and discusses the place of drama in this context. It also offers a brief survey of women's theatre in the period, and in the 1950s, the period when Plath was writing, and highlights the main areas to be discussed in the following chapters, in particular the texts' staging of identity and subjectivity.

Chapter 2 examines the theatre work of Gertrude Stein, focussing on selected representative plays: What Happened, For the Country Entirely, Counting Her Dresses, Four Saints in Three Acts, Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights and The Mother of Us All. The chapter considers how Stein plays with literary and theatrical conventions to interrogate norms of gender and selfhood, as well as addressing the autobiographical dimension of her work.

Chapter 3 offers a detailed discussion of the two versions of Woolf's Freshwater, analysing the development of the play in terms of its autobiographical encoding of both maternal and lesbian relations, and of its self-reflexive exploration of gender representation in theatre and art.

Chapter 4 examines the dramatic writings of Sylvia Plath as texts which appropriate and transform modernist concerns and techniques. Setting 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board' and Three Women in the context of verse dialogue, poetic drama and radio drama, the chapter examines the interplay between theatricality, gender and language in both texts. It discusses the allegorisation of writing and creativity in the first text, and the dramatisation of split subjectivity in pregnancy in the second.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis began as a study of women's life writing, bringing together my interests in autobiography, drama and modernism, and exploring questions of identity and subjectivity which are central concerns of literary modernism. These issues are also central to the work of the three writers I eventually selected: Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and, for reasons outlined in Chapter One, Sylvia Plath. In the course of my research, genre became an important issue. I discovered a neglected group of plays which brought to light a marginalised aspect of the corpus of each the writers selected. Stein is usually regarded as a purveyor of experimental prose, Woolf as a novelist and essayist, and Plath as a poet. All three writers have become the subjects of critical growth industries but, with the exception of a couple of full-length studies of the plays of Gertrude Stein, attention has mainly focussed upon their work in these familiar fields.

Woolf's only play, Freshwater, is a footnote (at most) to critical discussions of her work; the two Plath texts which I discuss, 'Dialogue over a Oujia Board' and Three Women, are generally treated as poems rather than as texts which bear a significant relation to the dramatic medium. Moreover, the omission of these texts from any serious discussion of their authors' work seemed to me symptomatic of a broader

neglect of drama within the history of modernist women's writing. In this respect I found my research to be situated between (at least) two fields of enquiry, and between a number of differently-accented paradigms of literary and theatrical history. As I argue in Chapter One, though the place of women in literary modernism has recently begun to be re-evaluated, women's drama of the period continues to occupy a peripheral position. The increasing interest in women and theatre has, apart from paying some attention to the drama of the New Woman and Suffrage eras, tended to focus upon the postwar period. In addition, the concept of 'modernist drama' is itself problematic, in that the term derives from, and may well be most appropriate to, literary rather than theatrical history. Finally, as is also noted in Chapter One, a number of recent studies have pointed out that the periodisation of modernism (particularly in relation to 'post'-modernism) is itself contentious in relation to women's writing. This perspective informs the decision to include Plath in the study, as a writer whose work falls outside of the established period of 'high' modernism but which nonetheless has identifiable and important affinities with that of the modernist epoch, and which also points to the relations between the modernist and the postmodern.

The thesis presents a stage-centred reading of the texts in question, drawing upon psychoanalysis, feminist theory and literary history as contexts for the reading. The aim is to explore the relations between modernism, postmodernism and women's drama in the twentieth century, focussing upon three figures who are largely peripheral to theatre history. These figures operate in a marginal space between the literary and the theatrical; the relations between the literary and the theatrical in the texts themselves is central to my discussion. The reading is stage-centred in a broad sense, ranging, in the case of Stein, from my own experiments with texts to professional productions. In the case of Freshwater, I consider the ways in which conditions of production and reception are encoded in the text; for Plath the theatrical dimension lies in the texts' relations to the conventions of verse drama and radio drama. The discussion is conducted in the context of feminist post-structuralist theory and criticism, and evaluates the relevance of the concept of écriture féminine to the texts. By focussing upon the dramatic work of these three writers, the thesis offers a tripartite perspective upon the question of the relations between modernism, drama and women's autobiographical writing.

Chapter One sets the historical and conceptual parameters of the thesis, firstly, by briefly establishing the scene of modernism and the place of both drama and theatricality within it; secondly, by addressing questions of the gendering of both modernism and theatre history. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues arising from the contentiously autobiographical elements in the dramatic texts under discussion, with reference, in particular, to what I see as a recurrent theme in these texts: motherhood, and the construction of maternal subjectivity.

Chapter Two examines a selection of the plays of Gertrude Stein, focussing upon the ways in which they experiment with the forms and definitions of drama and theatre themselves, and identifying what I see as their complexly autobiographical dimension. This is seen in terms of the construction of the subject in language, and, in the case of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, in coded exploration of sexuality. The final part of the chapter discusses The Mother of Us All as both an autobiographical text and one that stages Stein's problematic relation to the feminism of her modernist contemporaries. A central feature of this chapter is that the reading of Stein's texts is interlinked with an analysis of their theatrical potential in a range of performance contexts, from my own practical work with

students on the early plays to Virgil Thomson's Four Saints in Three Acts and Robert Wilson's recent production of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights.

Chapter Three traces the composition and evolution of the two versions of Virginia Woolf's Freshwater, offering what is to date the only extended critical discussion of the play. The text is read in terms of its self-reflexive exploration of gender representation, and for its codedly autobiographical staging of both maternal and lesbian relations. As well as drawing upon published material, my discussion also refers to the original manuscripts of Freshwater in order to highlight important material omitted from the published text. Chapter Four discusses two texts by Sylvia Plath which have usually been treated as poems: 'Dialogue over a Oujia Board' and Three Women. In this chapter I argue that their dramatic form mediates between poetic dialogue and verse drama. This is a vital constituent of their meaning and effect, in terms of their treatment of the relations between language, poetry, subjectivity and motherhood.

This thesis thus examines what might be called the three writers' 'theatres of identity'. In all of the plays studied, the linguistic resources of the dialogic genre of drama are seen to provide an apt medium for

the multiple voices of a decentred and fragmented female subjectivity. These voices are not always projections of the subject, but sometimes of elements in the cultures which conditioned the existence of the writers and against which they sought to define themselves. These theatres of identity are not, therefore, narrowly or exclusively autobiographical; in fact, I will argue, they offered a mode of release, a space of fun and mischief as well as of experimentation and deviance. For all three writers, the dramatic form provided the opportunity to rehearse - to play with - the textual production of subjectivity.

CHAPTER 1

SETTING THE SCENE.

1.1. LITERARY CONTEXTS: DRAMA AND MODERNISM

'These fragments I have shored against my ruins''

The nameless voices of Eliot's apocalyptic poem have become representative of the avant-garde literary and cultural consciousness of the early twentieth century. The landscape of modernism, which forms the immediate context for the work of two of the writers examined in this study and is a vital part of the literary heritage of the third, is often regarded as a 'wasteland', and T. S. Eliot's paradigmatic text has been central to the canonical definition of this literary movement.

Although I will argue that considerations of gender and genre are important to our definitions and perceptions of modernism, the vision of dislocation, alienation and ontological insecurity which is explored in The Wasteland (1922) provides an apt summary of the prevalent modernist psychic condition, as well as a response to the sociocultural context within which the writing I discuss was produced.

Virginia Woolf, writing in 1924, famously and half-jokingly dates the period of 'high' modernism as beginning 'in or about December, 1910', when 'human character changed.'² The following decade was one of radical uncertainty; a time of profound and rapid social and political change in which the very notions

of reality and the real were destabilised. The economic, religious and political values of the Victorian period disintegrated amid the pressures of war, mass industrial production, technological change and revolutionary politics. At the same time, the presumed stability of the self was also challenged by the forces of Darwinian science, Freudian psychoanalysis and Nietzschean philosophy. The culture of modernism, in Peter Faulkner's account, emerged from 'the breakdown of prevailing assumptions, artistic, ethical and social': thus Eliot, also writing in 1924, refers to 'the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.'⁴ Breakdown, fragmentation, crisis, alienation, futility, scepticism and anarchy: this is the rhetoric of modernism. In modernist fiction and poetry in particular, these concerns were reflected not only in a new treatment of the physical and social environment, radically rethought in terms of time and space, but also in a newly focussed attention upon the processes of consciousness, and upon the constitution of subjectivity and the psyche themselves.

The prevailing sense of social and personal crisis in modernist art was articulated in extreme terms. The literary terminology of Eliot and his contemporaries is violent and bloody, as the baby of the self was thrown out

with the bathwater of nineteenth century realism. One effect of this was the negation even of the traditionally controlling, ordering and creative force of the individual artistic personality. The death of the author was proclaimed by Roland Barthes in 1977⁶, but his terminal illness was first diagnosed by Eliot in 1919, with his proclamation of the poetics of impersonality: 'the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.'⁶ Hence, perhaps, the depersonalising and anonymous initials adopted by a number of modernist writers: T. S., D. H., H. D., e.e. Referring to Joyce's strategy in Ulysses (1926), Eliot advocated the use of the 'mythical method', as opposed to the 'narrative method' as a means of achieving the desired aesthetic of depersonalisation. An alternative response was to insist upon the Nietzschean transcendence of the artistic ego, as in W. B. Yeats's celebration of the writer's 'blood, imagination, intellect running together.'⁷ In Lady Chatterley's Lover (1928), D. H. Lawrence's imagination and intellect produces a grim and anarchic Darwinian vision: 'all vulnerable things must perish under the rolling and running of iron.'⁸ In much modernist writing, the industrialised and urbanised landscape is inhabited by the alienated products of a soul-less machine age. These take the form of Eliot's 'hollow

subjectivity... threatened with the possibility of becoming no more than a thing in the world of the other.'¹⁰ Throughout modernist writing we find descriptions of depersonalisation, with individuals presented as automatons, fragmented things with eyes and limbs detached and repositioned in a literary equivalent form of cubist art. This reifying effect, as Randall Stevenson points out, is both a 'literary device' and 'a real condition of modern labour'¹¹. In some respects it recalls Karl Marx's formulation in Capital, where the mechanisation of the subject is directly produced by industrialism; 'within the capitalist system all methods...mutilate the worker into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine.'¹²

This acute sense of crisis and alienation, then, underpinned and motivated the formal innovations of modernist writing. The supposedly stable epistemologies of realism were repudiated in favour of non-realist techniques of representation, in what could be described as an aesthetics of fragmentation. Clearly the ordering of the real that was inscribed in the discourse of realism was no longer appropriate to this artistic climate; indeed, the persistence of what seemed to be moribund literary forms could be diagnosed as symptomatic of the general cultural malaise.

In fiction, the innovatory impetus involved an assault upon linear and chronological models of narrative, with the traditional Aristotelian constraints of plotting replaced with modes of patterning and montage. As Stevenson notes, these strategies are also found in the music and art of the period:

The conventional structuring of tones in Western composition, the diatonic scale, was replaced in 1908, by Arnold Schoenberg, with a free a-tonality - a kind of creative anarchy of semi-tones - which he organised around 1920 into a new serial arrangement of twelve tones, interrelated independently of traditional systems... This kind of 'dissolution' is equally clear in contemporary European painting. As in modernist fiction, artists made changes not necessarily in their subject nor theme, or in the nature of what was represented, but in the form and structure of the representation, the style and strategy of the art itself.'¹³

The emphasis here is upon form rather than content: the repudiation of realism did not entail an abandonment of the real but a reconfiguration of the terms within which it could be understood, as well as a redefinition of the relationship between life and art. Far from withdrawing into an enclave of 'art for art's sake', as some of the rhetoric (of, for example, Eliot and Yeats) might suggest, many modernist writers and artists aimed for a more heightened and intense apprehension of the real, and of its capacity to impinge upon the consciousness of the artist. Perhaps paradoxically, the extinction of personality could lead to a

heightening of perception, so that the text, cleansed of the detritus of the old literary forms, could become almost identical to the object of representation itself. 'To paint the thing as I see it' was, in Ezra Pound's view, one of the 'ultimate attainments of poesy.'¹⁴ In its early phases, this non-realist mimesis took the form of Imagism, and many important developments within modernism can be seen to stem directly from this movement. The concern to depersonalise poetic voice, and to foreground the immediacy of a reality, apprehended moment by moment, through presentation rather than representation, were characteristics of the Imagists. As Pound put it: 'language is made out of concrete things'¹⁵; elsewhere he described Imagist poetry as that 'sort of poetry where painting or sculpture seems as if it were "just coming over into speech".'¹⁶ It is this emphasis upon speech that is, for my purposes, crucial: the distinction that Pound is making is between a conventionally 'literary' and a more 'authentic' mode of address, whereby poetry becomes a kind of verbal music. It is significant here that literariness is associated with artifice, hollow utterance, abstraction and superfluity. Conversely, speech-as-music is seen as direct, economical, immediate, concrete, and true. It is a discourse which is both self-expressive and capable of encapsulating the thing-in-itself in a way

that writing is not and, perhaps, never can be: it is the point at which writing seems to evaporate and the lyric form dissolves into the performative. It is also, I would suggest, an aspiration which is at the heart of the modernist project.

This brings me to a consideration of the dramatic dimension of modernism. In modernist writing theatre and theatricality, drama and the dramatic, are recurrent, both formally and thematically. There are numerous examples within the modernist canon of fiction and poetry seemingly emulating the condition of drama. Eliot's The Wasteland displays a classically Shakespearean five-act structure, while its securest points of reference derive from Elizabethan and Jacobean drama: The Spanish Tragedy, Hamlet, The Duchess of Malfi, and so on. The Nighttown episode in Ulysses (1926), is closest in style to the Ibsen of Peer Gynt (1867) or the Strindberg of A Dream Play (1901) and The Ghost Sonata (1907). Significantly, this episode is where Joyce digs deepest in his exploration of the psyche in that it attempts to stage the unconscious fantasies of the novel's protagonists. Many of Joseph Conrad's later novels, which utilise the framing device of the narrator Marlowe, are, effectively, extended dramatic monologues. Gertrude Stein's The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933), as

I shall discuss in Chapter Two, is both an extended feat of uncanny impersonation and a quasi-Brechtian exploration of the dialectic between the author-actor and her role. Woolf's Mrs Dalloway (1925), To the Lighthouse (1927) and Between the Acts (1941) all conspicuously adhere to the Aristotelian unities of time and place; moreover, Woolf's dispersal of the single, omniscient authorial voice into the diverse, quotidian perspectives of her large casts of characters is a dialogic method: it mirrors the dissolution of the authorial point of view that is intrinsic to drama. The replication of dramatic and theatrical techniques and conventions in modernist writing might suggest that replacing the artifice of realist prose with the simultaneous immediacy and artifice of theatre was in some ways more attuned to the lived experience of modernity. In this respect the technical appropriation of dramatic devices in prose fiction and poetry can be linked with the deployment of theatricality and role-playing as metaphors for selfhood. It was a means of representing not only the volatility and dynamism of the modernist self but also its inauthenticity, its hollowness, its lack of depth and interiority. As Woolf puts it in Orlando (1928), this protean quality of the self is its organising principle and defining characteristic:

these selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) so that one will only come if it is raining, another in a room when Mrs Jones is not there, another if you can promise it a glass of wine - and so on; for everybody can multiply from his own experience the different terms which his different selves have made with him - and some are too wildly ridiculous to be mentioned in print at all.'⁷

Woolf uses the concept of the theatricality of the self positively here, but it could also serve as part of the modernist critique of alienation and reification. In Eliot's poetry, for example, social being is often seen in terms of empty role-play; as Sanford Schwartz points out:

Eliot's personae are most often men who observe themselves posturing on the social stage...incapable of objectifying his subjective life, he remains alienated from his own external actions, a passive spectator who suffers the indignity of participating in a culture he despises but cannot transform.'⁸

What I find interesting here is that this convergence of textual experiment and theatricality is nonetheless a predominantly literary phenomenon: drama and theatre may have enjoyed a degree of technical and thematic currency within modernist writing, but modernist drama per se is an altogether more elusive and problematic critical entity. Interestingly, when a number of the most radical male modernists did turn to

writing drama, they tended to adopt theatrical forms which were strongly conservative. For all the madcap free-association of the Nighttown episode, Joyce's only play, Exiles (1916), is a scrupulously naturalistic, Ibsenite exercise; the plays of D. H. Lawrence (notably A Collier's Friday Night, [1909] and The Widowing of Miss Holroyd [1911]) show a similar commitment to the technique and principles of nineteenth-century naturalism. Thus even as Lawrence was evolving a literary technique which led him to declare that the reader 'musn't look in my novel for the old stable ego of the character'¹³, he was contributing to a dramatic mode within which that sense of stability was central. Eliot's drama raises issues of a different order, as I discuss below.

Moreover, if there is an inconsistency, even within the work of individual writers, between literary and dramatic practice, there is also a considerable divergence between the picture of the early twentieth century offered by literary history and that presented within theatre history: generally speaking, modernism is a predominantly literary rather than theatrical category. Although poetry and prose of the early twentieth-century are often categorised as modernist, theatre history tends to talk of the movement between Naturalism and Surrealist and Symbolist theatre, and

from there to Expressionist and Epic theatre.

According to Malcom Bradbury and James McFarlane:

Any ordered account of Modernist drama depends ultimately on the identification or hypostatization of 'sets'...the search for 'sets' in Modernist drama that combine comprehensiveness with firm containment is sadly unrewarding...Certain rough categories - like the 'intimate theatre', the 'problematic theatre', 'the drama of illusion'...sometimes help, but as practical working devices chiefly; beyond them lie formidable - and, one suspects, in this present context unrewarding - complexities.²⁰

The diverse collection of playwrights considered in Bradbury and McFarlane's overview only serves to endorse the inconclusiveness of this somewhat apologetic introduction. Even the title of the section, 'Modernist Drama: Wedekind to Brecht' seems to demonstrate the tenuousness of the definition, begging the question of what 'modernist' drama is if it incorporates such a diverse collection of disparate practices. These range, supposedly, from the naturalisms of Chekhov and Strindberg to the overtly and differinglly anti-naturalistic strategies of Jarry, Eliot, Mayakovsky and Brecht. As McFarlane concedes, 'while in the novel it is possible...to discern a general aesthetic metamorphosis which basically takes the form of narrative involution...no such single direction can be mapped out for the theatre'.²¹ It is possible, nonetheless, to identify certain aspects of

the European drama in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as modernist or proto-modernist in orientation and technique: for example, Strindberg's Intimate Theatre, and the Symbolist and Expressionist Theatres for which it was a prototype. In Strindberg's A Dream Play (1901), according to the author:

Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble.²²

Here and in subsequent developments in the Surrealist and Expressionist theatres, we can find a drama which attempts, like the verse plays of Eliot in Raymond Williams's account, 'to dramatise consciousness rather than behaviour'.²³ This drama is primarily concerned with the mechanisms of subjectivity, and thus approximates to modernist fiction's dislocatory, anti-realist techniques of interior monologue, stream-of-consciousness, and non-linear narrative. Writing in 1922, the dramatist Ivan Goll defended his own mode of theatrical surrealism (or 'dramatic alogic') in terms which pinpoint the subjectivist ethos of the Expressionist theatre: 'alogic will serve to demonstrate the multi-hued spectrum of the human brain, which can think one thing and say another and leap with

mercurial speed from one idea to another without the slightest ostensibly logical connection.'²⁴

Such experiments in the drama of subjectivity, which reveal the strongest links between the predominant concerns of literary modernism and the formal and technical innovations in the theatre, can be seen to form the theatrical background to the dramatic work of the first two writers studied in this thesis, Gertrude Stein and Virginia Woolf. In the case of Stein, I trace the dramatic trajectory of a writer whose work in the medium spans the period from Expressionism to Absurdism, by focussing upon a selection of key plays, beginning in 1913 with her first play, What Happened and ending in 1946 with her last, The Mother of Us All. The chapter on Woolf, by contrast, focusses upon the writer's far more limited and tentative engagement with drama in her only play, Freshwater, which occupied her in its various forms between 1924 and 1934. Both writers are established as key figures within the recognised period of high modernism; as such, their drama can also be positioned within this critical and historical framework.

Modernism was invented as a literary critical category during the 1950s in America and the early 1960s in Britain, as I discuss in Chapter Four, and

this forms the context for the work of Sylvia Plath, the other writer whose work is explored in this thesis. I see Plath's dramatic writing as a successor to the modernist dramas of Stein and Woolf which is situated on an interface between modernism and postmodernism. In the postwar period, the major strands of modernist-orientated theatrical exploration were to develop primarily into the Theatre of the Absurd and the work of Samuel Beckett; but it was also to provide the impetus for the brief renaissance of verse drama in the English theatre of the 1950s, particularly that produced by Eliot and Christopher Fry, and, in the medium of radio, by Louis MacNiece, Dylan Thomas and others. In Eliot's plays, as Raymond Williams points out, the disavowal of realism represents an attempt to produce 'a drama in which, essentially, states of consciousness would be an action'; in Thomas's 'play for voices', Under Milk Wood (1954), the emphasis upon associative verbal patterns rather than expository dialogue 'can include not only things said, but things left unsaid, the interpenetration of things seen and imagined, the images of memory and dream...' ²⁵ These are both the central concerns and the key technical problems of literary modernism; but they are also the key formal and contextual co-ordinates for Plath's two verse dramas, 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board' (1957) and Three Women (1962). There is a crucial difference,

however. For Eliot, the revival of a classically-based, ritualistic verse drama represented a return to a sense of hierarchy and fixed order, in a retreat from the chaotic implications of his early poetry (and of the fragmented, unfinished prototype dramas like Sweeney Agonistes [1932]). By contrast, the multi-layered subjectivities that are given voice in Plath's verse dramas achieve only provisionally, if at all, the sense of coherence, integrity and unity that is central to Eliot's project. As in earlier forms of modernism, the contradictions remain unresolved.

Of the three writers I discuss, only Stein has yet secured any substantive recognition within theatrical as well as literary history (and even this is only limited and partial); certainly in the case of Woolf and Plath I am concerned with writers who are quite evidently occasional playwrights rather than significant contributors to the development of twentieth-century drama. Yet it is perhaps this very marginal and peripheral status that lends the work in question its particular interest; occupying an ambiguous border zone between literary modernism and the theatre, the dramatic experiments of Stein, Woolf and Plath reveal the tensions in the interaction between literary and theatrical experimentation as well as its creative potential. As Derek Paget points out,

one of the characteristics of the established canon of English drama in the twentieth century has been its parochial refusal of radical experimentation: 'Nothing could better underline that narrowness which is "British and proud of it" than the wilful ignoring of modernist theatrical techniques which prevailed both before and after the Second World War'.²⁵ The work of these three writers exemplifies a different kind of engagement: far from ignoring the innovations of modernism, they tackled them head-on.

1.2. MODERNISM, GENDER AND DRAMA

In the previous section, I have been concerned to establish the broad parameters of literary and theatre history within which this study is situated, with particular reference to the historical scene of modernism. In this section I wish to establish some further parameters for my discussion, in terms of the gendering of modernism, and in relation to the history of women's theatre in the first half of this century. Conventionally, modernism has been defined within the existing literary canon in a predominantly male frame of reference. Modernism is characteristically represented by the works of Eliot, Pound, Joyce,

Lawrence and Yeats, although Woolf and, less frequently, Stein, have also made appearances. In historical terms, modernism is seen as a movement which spans the second and third decades of the twentieth century - from about 1910 to the early 1930s. As I have indicated in the previous section, the traditional periodisation of modernism sets it up as a reaction against not only the aesthetic values and methods of the nineteenth century (particularly with regard to the mode of classic realism) but also its ethical, philosophical and religious beliefs. It has also been defined in terms of crisis and breakdown, the collapse of consensus and a shared, stable sense of social and historical order and purpose. In artistic terms, the results were a new aesthetics of depersonalisation and objectivity, together with a new interest in the psyche and new strategies for exploring its workings.

As feminist critics have demonstrated, however, the agenda that has been drawn from the conventional modernist canon has tended to reflect the masculine perspective that has dominated the literary landscape of the period. In recent years, the masculinist map of modernism has been contested by feminist critics, most notably in the full-length studies of Gilbert and Gubar, Shari Benstock, Rachel Blau Du Plessis, and Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia Smythe.²⁷ This work

not only seeks to reclaim the modernist women writers, such as H. D., Katherine Mansfield, Djuna Barnes and Rosamond Lehmann, who have been overshadowed by their male contemporaries; it also seeks, as Gilbert and Gubar put it, 'to theorize about the ways in which modernism...is differently inflected for male and female writers'.²⁹ One particular effect of the traditional male bias has been that the (masculine) sense of dislocation and alienation mythologised by writers such as Eliot has been regarded as the articulation of an essential truth of the human condition rather than a specifically gendered perspective. For the women writers of the period, the modernist ethics of fragmentation and impersonality were, for reasons of gender, more problematic.

Patricia Waugh notes:

The central modernist preoccupation with the transcendent artist, the impersonal author seeking 'objective correlatives' for 'his' state of mind, or paring 'his' fingernails in the background like an indifferent Deity, bears only a very partial resemblance to the fictional concerns of, for example Woolf, Richardson, Mansfield or Stein. In these writers, an emphasis on the relational embeddedness of artistic production in social and historical forms and experience and in personal relationships also gives rise to a very different conceptualization of subjectivity. In their writing, alienation is expressed not as a necessary condition of 'human existence' (a consequence of the opacity of the 'soul'), but as a consequence of the social and historical contradictions of women's experience (their constitution as 'others' who help to coalesce masculine subjectivity through the denial of their own).³⁰

While many male modernists eventually responded to the personal and historical contradictions which they registered by mystifying them, the interpenetration of modernism with feminism meant that some female writers - Woolf particularly - attempted instead to make sense of them in political terms. Furthermore, if the male modernist typically perceived the climate of crisis in terms of a loss of centre, transcendence, security or order, he did so from what was still a position of power and cultural centrality; the female modernist, conversely, addressed the same social and historical situation from the position of subordination and marginality. The negation and anonymity which were voluntarily embraced by male modernists in the 'poetics of impersonality' were, for the women writers of the same period, less options than oppressive, involuntary facts of literary history: a history from which women had, until recently, been more or less excluded. As Woolf put it in A Room of One's Own in 1929:

...since freedom and fullness of expression are of the essence of art, such a lack of tradition, such a scarcity and inadequacy of tools, must have told enormously on the writing of women. Moreover, a book is not made of sentences, laid end to end, but of sentences built...into arcades or domes. And this shape too has been made by men out of their own needs for their own uses.³⁰

While the male modernist could simultaneously lament the hollowness of the modern self and celebrate it through the masquerade of artistic impersonality, the female modernist started with the fact of having 'never...experienced a sense of full subjectivity in the first place.'³¹ For some female modernists, consequently, the response was not to eradicate but to emphasise the personal and autobiographical dimension of their work, as in H. D.'s Her (1927), where the protagonist is a barely-veiled portrait of the author, who embarks upon 'a project and a determination...[to] tell someone, the story of herself'.³² A similar autobiographical impetus, as I will go on to argue, underpins the work of Woolf, Stein and Plath.

H. D.'s protagonist, like the author herself, relocates herself geographically in the course of the novel, leaving behind the nuclear family, home and the patriarchal systems which have hitherto defined her. The move from America to Europe is an occupation of a new textual as well as physical space:

Her feet were pencils tracing a path through a forest. The world had been razed had been made clear for this thing...Now the creator was Her's feet...she trailed feet across a space of immaculate clarity, leaving her wavering hieroglyph as upon white parchment...her feet seemed to be filled with memories.³³

Both the idea and the reality of dislocation are recurrent concerns for women writers in the modernist period. The search for creative space involved many female modernist artists moving away from their countries of origin to 'other' geographical and cultural spaces, where they might achieve a degree of liberation from cultural and familial constraints (Shari Benstock's study of the writing^{of} female expatriates in Paris in the first half of the century, Women of the Left Bank, demonstrates the importance of this spatial relocation to the emerging creativity of these writers). H. D.'s image of the tabula rasa created by geographical displacement also applied to many female modernist writers' sense of their relation to history and tradition. As Gabriele Griffin observes, 'while many men struggled to hold on to those continuities - such as a sense of history as linear and evolutionary which had ensured their socio-cultural centrality - women in their work were interrogating these continuities and the precepts on which they were founded.'³⁴ This entailed a rejection of the teleological linearity of masculine history in favour of discontinuous and cyclical chronologies. For Woolf, however, the redefinition of women's relationship to history involved a consciousness of a female tradition defined in maternal terms: as she wrote in A Room of One's Own, 'we think back through our mothers if we are

women.'³⁵ Indeed, Woolf's preoccupation with her maternal origins (both literary and personal) is arguably, the subject of Freshwater. Like Orlando, it is a text in which the concepts of historical time and truth, and consequently of identity itself, are playfully interrogated.

Bearing in mind this problematisation of the traditional order of history in many modernist women's writings, the traditional periodisation of modernism, particularly with regard to the work of women writers, can be seen to raise methodological and theoretical issues for literary history and criticism. If the modernist template has been established in terms of the existing canon of male writers, it may mean that women writers are being defined as modernist largely in relation to this canon. One thing that periodisation tends to minimise is the importance of continuity for women writers in the twentieth century. Gilbert and Gubar highlight this point, returning to the middle of the nineteenth century to trace the genealogy of modernist women's writing, but also reaching forward to 'the move beyond modernism that was made by Sylvia Plath.'³⁶ Patricia Waugh, similarly, challenges the received historical configuration by proposing that Woolf is a precursor of postmodernism rather than the high modernist of literary tradition. Woolf's concerns

and techniques, Waugh argues, anticipate the postmodern drive to explore 'human subjectivity and history in terms of non-systematised particulars, forms of collective expression, formal principles which suggest connection rather than fragmentation, history conceived as an ongoing human process.'³⁷ As I argue in Chapter Two, Gertude Stein has also been seen to anticipate postmodernism: her drama in particular has recently been rediscovered and redefined by postmodern theatre practitioners. Hence also the inclusion in this thesis of the work of Sylvia Plath, who in many ways serves as an example of a writer whose work highlights the problems of the periodization of modernism. As I mentioned in the previous section, Plath was writing during the period which saw the emergence of modernism as a concept within literary-critical discourse; a factor which significantly affected both the production and reception of 'literature' itself. This convergence, which was also signalled in the theatre in the revival of modernist verse drama, was not a coincidence but arose from a shared perception of historical and cultural crisis. Just as Stein and Woolf, once liberated from the constraints of periodisation, can be regarded as both 'modernist' and 'postmodernist' in orientation, so too can Plath be seen within both frameworks. One of my discoveries in - and hence one of the main arguments of - this thesis

is that, as practitioners of experimental theatre particularly, my three writers can be more accurately and productively read within the framework of a dialogue between modernism and postmodernism - or rather between a variety of modernisms and postmodernisms.

Modernism, then, is not altogether straightforward critical category in relation to women's writing in the twentieth century; it is also problematic, as I indicated in the previous section, in relation to drama. Here I wish to consider a further context for the dramatic writings of the authors under scrutiny, which is the wider scene of women's drama during the periods in question. If women writers of fiction and poetry have been marginalised in the construction of modernism, the work of women playwrights has been marginalised within both modernism and theatre history. During the early years of the twentieth century in Europe and the United States, the growth of feminism prompted a proliferation of dramatic activity produced by and for women, often outside of the theatrical mainstream. This included suffragette plays such as How the Vote was Won (1909), by Cicely Hamilton and Christopher St John, and Elizabeth Robins's Votes for Women (1907); as well as the 'New Woman' school of plays ranging from Robins's and

Florence Bell's pioneering Alan's Wife (1893) to Elizabeth Baker's Chains (1909). The alliance between women's theatre and feminism led, in Britain, to the founding of the Actresses' Franchise League in 1908 and the formation of Edy Craig's Pioneer Players in 1911; but the political impetus also significantly shaped both the form and the content of the drama. Operating in the radically critical spirit of the original Naturalistic movement of the 1880s and 1890s, these plays typically presented a feminist critique in the form of the realist exposure of oppressive social and gender relations. As Judith Barlow observes, 'The vast majority of women playwrights in the early part of this century, like most of their male counterparts, used basically realistic dramatic forms.'³³ Realism in form was tied to the foregrounding of previously hidden or marginalised female experiences. Consequently, as Viv Gardner notes in her introduction to a representative collection of New Woman plays, 'Three preoccupations dominate the plays - marriage, motherhood and work. The theme that unites [them] is the question of choice.'³⁴ Thus while the women's drama of this period was strongly politicised, it seemed little influenced by the experiments of the Surrealists and Expressionists. In the decades that followed, Susan Glaspell, in plays like The Verge (1921), and Sophie Treadwell, in Machinal (1928), made explicitly feminist

use of Expressionist techniques. Barlow points out in relation to the latter:

the expressionistic form - flat characters, repetitive dialogue and action, numerous short scenes, harsh audio effects, confusion of outer and inner reality - is the perfect medium for presenting the life of a young woman who asks an impersonal society 'Is nothing mine?'⁴⁰

As I have argued above, the Expressionist form was where the drama came closest to the preoccupations and innovations of modernism; and yet such experimentation was not typical of women's theatre during the period. This disparity may also indicate the extent to which the self-conscious language-games of Stein and Woolf were more closely connected to literary experimentation than to the theatrical avant-garde. Such apparently divergent practices of women's theatre might lead us into the trap of assuming a false dichotomy between feminist and non-feminist drama. In fact, the dramatic writings of my three writers provide instances of a drama which, although not explicitly feminist, nonetheless repays attention in gendered terms. As I shall argue, the one theme that they do share with the women's drama of the period is that of motherhood. The difference is that the realist stability of character, which is assumed in the New Women plays, is

comprehensively subverted in the work of Stein, and, albeit less spectacularly, in Woolf's play.

Despite the contemporary impact of some of their work, women playwrights have until relatively recently been absent from accounts both of theatre and of women's writing in the first half of the century. Given that this is the case for women writers who are identifiably playwrights, and who enjoyed a degree of contemporary recognition and success, then it is perhaps hardly surprising that the largely unperformed corpus of plays by Stein, and the sole play by Woolf that was afforded a single, private performance, have at best a peripheral place in existing histories of twentieth century theatre. These are both instances, moreover, of dramatic writing uneasily poised between literature and theatre. As writers who played with drama, remaining on the borders of the theatre; Stein and Woolf were to a large extent isolated from the broader context of the experimental and women's theatres of their time; but there are also, perhaps surprisingly, some unexpected connections to be seen with those movements. As I argue in Chapter Three, key figures in the development of women's theatre, such as Edy Craig and Christopher St John, find their way into Woolf's Freshwater; while the character of Terry herself could be read as a parodic reconstruction of

the New Woman role. In Stein's The Mother of us All similarly, the New Woman is revisited in a different guise, in the shape of the play's protagonist, the pioneering suffragist Susan B. Antony: in Stein's hands, feminist commitment to historical and political progress is itself questioned through the anachronistic, anti-realist subversion of stage time, and hence of history itself.

Broadly, however, one must concede that Stein and Woolf were not only on the margins of, but also at odds with, the women's theatre of their period. A similar claim, though nuanced according to different historical and cultural conditions, can be made in relation to Sylvia Plath. As I pointed out in the previous section, the closest contemporary dramatic models to Plath's two dramatic texts are the verse dramas of Eliot and his imitators, and the associatively-structured radio dramas of Thomas and MacNiece; most commentators upon Plath tend to treat 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board' and Three Women as poems for reading, rather than as works for performance. Such women's drama as there was during the 1950s was, as in the early years of the century, predominantly naturalistic in form and content. As Lib Taylor notes, 'both the 1950s and 1960s...follow the familiar historical

pattern of being characterized by the absence of women playwrights':

Noted as a time of challenge to the prevailing theatrical establishment, the particular conjunction of historical events of the 1950s, and the subsequent social and political climate, gave voice to a generation of rebellious, disaffected young men, but did not operate as the same catalyst for the generation of women. What is frequently termed a progressive period in theatre history is, ironically, noted as regressive for women.⁴¹

Feminist drama was represented by plays like Doris Lessing's Each His Own Wilderness (1958), which centres upon a mother-son conflict, and Shelagh Delaney's A Taste of Honey (1958), which anatomises the mother-daughter relationship within the squalid confines of a one-room set. A more experimental approach was found in Anne Jellicoe's The Sport of My Mad Mother (1958), which adopts a fractured, disruptive form derived from free-form jazz to explore the relations between violence, leadership and motherhood. As these examples indicate, the theme of motherhood was an insistent one in the drama of the period: it is the overt subject of Three Women; it is also (as I argue in Chapter Three) the covert subject of 'Dialogue'. The key difference, however, lies in the theatrical form employed by Plath. Like Stein and Woolf, Plath played with the dramatic medium in order to investigate its possibilities - but

also, in the process, to extend them. In this respect Plath's work provided a postscript to the modernist experiments of her predecessors.

1.3. PERFORMING SEXUALITIES

One element that unites the three writers in this study, and which is explored in their dramatic writings, is their preoccupation with gender identity as a kind of cultural performance. For Stein and Woolf particularly, their playwriting activities operate in the context of a whole range of transgressive 'theatrical' activities which are not necessarily confined to the circumscribed spheres of drama and theatre. The transgression and interrogation of female roles in various artistic practices during the early twentieth-century was a continuation of 'the subversion of the female norm' which Viv Gardner describes 'in diverse areas of nineteenth-century theatrical activity', including 'the music hall and circus, opera, cafe concert and film.'⁴³ Moreover, feminist politics in the period was itself highly theatricalised, as Lizbeth Goodman notes: 'the demonstrations of the suffrage movement may be seen as some of the earliest feminist theatre productions; they were infused with

and informed by dynamics of gender and power.'⁴³ One notes, in particular, the practice of female cross-dressing as a focus for gender conflicts and anxieties. As J. S. Bratton points out, 'it cannot be a coincidence that the high-water mark of male impersonation on the halls coincided with the period of suffrage agitation'.⁴⁴ Practised by Sarah Bernhardt, Emmaline Ethardo and Vesta Tilley onstage, cross-dressing was also adopted offstage by lesbians such as Radclyffe Hall. In the process, the boundaries between theatre and life were surreptitiously blurred. Susan Gubar has highlighted the significance of female modernist cross-dressing:

As a metaphor that flourished when the success of the suffragists paradoxically and tragically marked the temporary destruction of the women's movement, cross-dressing was closely related to lesbianism and expatriation in the art of female modernists. On the one hand a sign of self-division, even self-contempt, on the other an effort at expressing love for other women (and, by extension, for the female self) cross-dressing reflected their anxious sense of transition and uncertainty, even as it demonstrated their remarkably self-conscious experimentation with sexual role-playing.⁴⁵

Although the historiography is somewhat spurious here and I do not see a causal relationship between the demise of the theatrical militancy of suffrage and the theatrical sexualities of women modernists, this was, nevertheless, a period in which gender identities were

destabilised and in a state of flux. Cross-dressing was a disturbing and controversial practice even within the liberated expatriate community of Paris, as Shari Benstock has noted. For some women, most notably Natalie Barney and Colette, cross-dressing was problematic:

The two forms of female separatism did not live comfortably with each other...Barney was put off by Hall's assumed identity as 'John', an image of denied womanhood that Barney both pitied and despised. The nymph-like creatures draped in gauze who danced in Barney's garden inhabited a world different from that of the monocled women in tuxedos...These women reacted to the heterosexual norm by aping its forms; Barney preferred to ignore those forms altogether..to pursue the elemental, sensual, feminine.⁴⁶

It is important to be aware then of the diversity of performance practices among modernist women and the different feminisms, anti-feminisms and modernisms these represent. My interest, however, is in the theatricality common to these various strategies. As Benstock observes:

...the use of costuming in ritual celebrations to honour female goddesses (documentary evidence of such practices at Natalie Barney's Temple a l'Amite shows women dressed in tissue-thin Greek robes, their long hair entwined with flowers); the use of male clothing in masquerades (again, evidence is provided from Natalie Barney's photograph collection); the adoption of male clothing and the assumption of a male identity as part of a homosexual code; the use of male clothing as a sign of masculine authority. Distinct as these forms of behaviour would seem to be, there is evidence that

some women in the Paris lesbian community variously adopted such costumes according to the occasion, their choices depending on whether the 'audience' for such practices was heterosexual or homosexual. And certainly these various reasons for costuming and cross-dressing differ entirely from efforts by women to 'pass' as 'men'.⁴⁷

Cross-dressing thus incorporated a diverse and complex range of practices. According to circumstances, it could be both a coded declaration of lesbianism and a paradoxical denial of it; an appropriation and simultaneous subversion of masculine authority; a joke and a serious gesture. Recent work by Judith Butler provides a useful means of understanding these developments as symptoms of what she calls 'gender trouble' during the early twentieth century. Such practices draw attention to the performative nature of gender identity through parody and impersonation, which proliferated amidst the cultural conflicts of the period:

The parodic repetition of gender exposes...the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an 'act', as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmic status.⁴⁸

I have already suggested that the preoccupation with drama and theatricality is central to modernism; cross-

dressing is a further elaboration of that concern. The proliferation of transvestite activities among female modernists is particularly pertinent to Freshwater, which makes climactic use of cross-dressing in the first version, and which revolves around mocking references to a lesbian triangle in the second. The theatricalisation of identity involves the suspension of belief in sexuality and gender as a matter of fixed or inherent essences. It is rather a fiction sustained through performance which is no more or less fictional than the 'reality' of the gendered self. Freshwater theatricalises the (im)possibilities of the gender transformation that provides the pivotal moment in Orlando: 'we have no choice left but to confess - he was a woman.'⁴²

Similar preoccupations are also evident, although in a more abstract form, in Stein's early plays. These fracture and disperse the speaking subject, staging divided identities within a non-illusionistic form. This is also where the status of the texts as drama, that is, as scripts designed for performance, is of central importance. The dramatic mode is one in which the authorial voice is dispersed and redistributed among a chorus of performers and dramatis personae: consequently, the impression of an originating self that is conventionally supposed to stand behind,

mediate and control the text's generation of meaning is also subject to dispersal and dissolution. When, as in the case of Stein and, later, Plath, we have a drama which is concerned to depict psychic landscapes (in Stein's case playtexts which abandon the co-ordinates of character, scene and narrative), then this results in a complex interplay between selves and others, merging composite and distinct identities which are constituted by variant and conflicting subjectivities. It is a drama in which identifications are always partial, shifting, volatile, provisional and uncertain. As Stein asks in Four Saints in Three Acts, how many saints are there in it? Or, as I ask of Plath's Three Women, how many women are there in it? As drama, the texts under discussion are, in Barthes' terms, writable (scriptable) rather than readable (lisible)⁵⁰; just as meaning circulates unpredictably and disruptively within and around these texts, so do the gender identities that they stage. They are examples of what Belsey defines as the 'interrogative' text, which 'above all...differs from the classic realist text in the absence of a single privileged discourse which contains and places all the others'⁵¹ - and their status as drama is what defines this difference. As Bertolt Brecht put it in 1926:

Even when a character behaves by contradictions that's only because nobody can be identically the

same at two unidentical moments. Changes in his [sic] exterior continually lead to an inner reshuffling. The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew. ⁵²

These are, I would emphasise fundamentally theatrical as well as literary effects. It is not just the dialogic form of the text, nor the fact that its status as a script rather than a work of literature makes it by definition provisional, unfinished, with meanings unfixed until realised in performance; there is also the fact that a non-illusionist, experimental, self-reflexive theatre practice has the capacity to foreground rather than efface or resolve the contradictions in the texts, generating yet further contradictions between text and performance, signifiers and signifieds.

Viewed in these terms, the dramatic writings of Stein, Woolf and Plath call into question the author's proprietary claims to the text. Yet they remain directly and intimately (but complexly) linked to the autobiographical self-fashionings of their authors. More controversially, perhaps, I will argue that the texts under consideration are also examples of theatrical autobiography, in a sense which destabilises the term itself; I do not, however, offer the autobiographical component as the definitive or

authoritative meaning of the texts in question. The plays stage those aspects of the self which for the three writers are both central and off-limits, all-pervasive and invisible. It is perhaps necessary here to establish how I will use the term 'autobiographical' in this thesis. Conventionally, the autobiographical mode is identified with prose and, less frequently, with poetry: it is often a confessional discourse which, in the former medium especially, reveals the unity and 'truth' of the writing self through a linear, semi-novelistic narrative of self-becoming. But, as feminist work on autobiography has demonstrated, the apparent coherence and facticity of the autobiographical text's mediation of the space between the 'self' and the 'life' is misleading; as Shari Benstock puts it, 'autobiography reveals gaps, and not only gaps in time and space or between the manner and matter of its discourse. That is, autobiography reveals the impossibility of its own dream.' The autobiographical impetus was, in different ways, a vital element in the work of all three writers in this thesis; further, all three writers experimented with modes of autobiographical writing which challenged the given model. In Woolf's case, the diary form offered a space in which writing could trace the movements of memory and the unconscious - a writing practice which Benstock concludes could 'radically redefine the whole

autobiographical project'.⁵⁴ Stein, equally, subverted conventional autobiography, first by representing the self from the perspective of the other, in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, and then by 'universalising' her own life story in Everybody's Autobiography (1937). Plath also plays with the conventions of autobiography, both inhabiting and interrogating the 'confessional' mode in her poetry, and proferring and withholding identifications between the author and the subjects of her fictions. Jacqueline Rose, who sees this ambivalence in subsequent biographical and critical accounts of Plath, puts it thus:

Like the child caught up in a hideous divorce case between its parents, the writing of the life of Sylvia Plath, both by herself and by those who knew her, forces you - and makes it impossible for you - to take sides. Whom to believe, how to know, what is the truth of the case? Behind the self-interest of the protagonists lies a drama about the limits and failure of knowledge and self-knowing.⁵⁵

Insofar as, for the purposes of this thesis, I shall be claiming the plays of all three writers as autobiographical, I read them in these ambivalent and uncertain terms; thus these texts adopt the practice that Benstock ascribes to Woolf, of 'systematically cut[ting] out from under herself the props that hold up her authority as an author, turning authority back to

the matter that constitutes her "subject" - and that subject is not necessarily the "self" of traditional autobiography.⁵⁶ Again, I would stress the significance both of genre and of form. These are not autobiographical dramas in the conventionally realist sense, where the play stages events in the author's personal history, and generally includes a central, authoritative character who can be identified as the author. They are, rather, texts which play with elements of memory, fantasy and desire in a Woolfian strategy of 'scene making' - scenes which, Benstock observes, 'arrange themselves...in moments when the "sealing matter" of identity and selfhood cracks.'⁵⁷ Many of the plays are primarily concerned with the mechanisms of subjectivity rather than with the reproduction of reality, offering a mode of theatrical autobiography which, as Stein put it, 'without telling what happened', circumvents narrative and representation in order to 'make a play the essence of what happened.'⁵⁸ I see the plays as staging sexuality and its discontents: lesbianism in the case of Stein, bisexuality in that of Woolf, and the ambivalences and contradictions of motherhood, in the case of Plath (although motherhood is also represented covertly in Woolf and Stein, as I discuss below).

Drama was for Woolf and Plath, and for Stein at first, a non-habitual space, within which these ambivalences could be playfully (or not so playfully) rehearsed. But this was not unproblematic: for all three there are, as I argue, difficulties, anxieties and struggles with authorship - not only because of the otherness of the medium to their usual writing practice but also because of the material each of the writers chose to dramatise. In Stein's case this involved a retreat from the radical experimentation of the early plays to the more cautious innovations of her later work; in Woolf's it meant that Freshwater was shelved for nearly a decade. For Plath, her ventures into radio drama (she apparently wrote two more radio scripts in December 1962⁶³), were terminated by her suicide.

In discussing issues of authorship and identity in this thesis, the role of the mother and of motherhood has emerged as an important concern to the texts I discuss. Here I have draw upon E. Anne Kaplan's analysis of mother representations in modernism in her illuminating recent study, Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama. Kaplan identifies a number of 'historical eruptions' which 'affected the historical mother and produced corresponding changes in mother-discourse'⁶⁰

during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The 'pre-modern mother', in Kaplan's analysis, was supplanted by the 'early modern mother in the modern nuclear family' as a consequence of the industrial revolution and the transition for women from 'producers in the old pre-industrial economy into that of consumers in the new middle class home.' The impact of the first world war on the nuclear family, as women returned to the public sphere of work and campaigned for equality of opportunity, produced changes in the social definition and organisation of the institution of motherhood; changes which can be seen both as a significant biographical factor in the case of Stein and Woolf, and as a discursive context for representations of motherhood in their work. During this period, Kaplan suggests, 'the nuclear family remained intact and the mother was still central, but defensively so. This shift may be said to mark the "high-modernist" mother.'¹⁰ Another element of change was the relatively large proportion of women entering higher education in this period: Stein attended university and Woolf protested that she was denied access to the university education which her brothers benefitted from. There were also changes in the rising numbers of women opting to remain childless, and the increasing visibility of lesbian relations, both factors which apply directly to Stein and Woolf. I

would also note here the significant personal factor that both Stein's and Woolf's mothers died during their daughters' teens (Woolf was thirteen, Stein fourteen). The loss of the mother for Stein and Woolf is, I suggest, an important consideration as a further disruption of the familial structures each inhabited, and is manifested in the texts I discuss.

In Stein's case the key text in respect of motherhood is her final play and last completed work, The Mother of Us All; as I argue in Chapter Two, the play recapitulates Stein's view of motherhood after a career spent - arguably - attempting to erase the mother from her texts. Stein's is both a personal response and a representative one, for as Kaplan notes, there was considerable 'hostility' towards mothers within modernist feminism: 'most of the early feminist literature ignored the mother, when not blaming her for women's ills...The hatred of the mother here is similar to that found in psychoanalytic theory, and was perhaps produced by the fusional mothers that psychoanalysis addresses - mothers themselves produced like psychoanalytic theory, by patriarchy.'⁵² Woolf constructs a different mother paradigm which, nonetheless, also conforms to Kaplan's definitions. Throughout Woolf's writing the mother is presented as a nurturing, self-abnegating 'angel woman', as typified

by Mrs Ramsay in To The Lighthouse. As I argue in Chapter Three, the initial impetus for Freshwater came from Woolf looking back through her maternal history to reclaim her great aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron; but as the play evolved through its different versions, the focus shifted to the surrogate mother-daughter dynamic between Mrs Cameron and Ellen Terry. As Woolf's birthday entertainment for her *niece* and own daughter-substitute, Angelica Bell, who also played the role of Terry, Freshwater is itself a text enmeshed in a network of displaced and theatricalised maternal relations, with Woolf as prompter playing to Bell the role that Mrs Cameron plays to Terry in the text.

Pregnancy and motherhood is, of course, the overt concern of Plath's Three Women; a text that dramatizes the ambivalence associated with the role of what Kaplan calls the 'post-modern' mother, and which 'signals the political and feminist ambiguities in relation to recent changes.' This discourse took shape after the Second World War, as a consequence of 'even more drastic challenges to the family through the electronic revolution and its impact on corporate capitalisms.'⁵³ The shift in the distribution of labour that was initiated in the period of the high modern mother accelerated during the 1950s and 1960s, with increasing numbers of middle class women employed in full time

professional work: it is an appropriate context for considering Plath's representations of motherhood. Again, the biographical fact of bereavement had a specific impact in this respect: the death of Otto Plath when his daughter was eight forced Aurelia Plath to occupy the position of the post-modern mother, as she returned to her full-time teaching career. It was a situation to which Sylvia Plath reacted with considerable distress: when her mother was offered a promotion which would have entailed her spending less time with her children, the teenaged Plath is reported to have objected 'For your self-aggrandisement you would make us complete orphans!'⁵⁴ On the one hand, Plath hankered after a traditional, idealised understanding of motherhood; on the other, she was part of the nascent second wave of feminism, which posited a challenge to existing patriarchal definitions of the role. Plath's own experience of motherhood was similarly conflict-ridden, both as a result of personal circumstances and as a consequence of wider changes in the organisation and conceptualisation of motherhood in the period in which she was writing. These tensions, conflicts and contradictions are explored in Plath's dramatic texts. Like the other plays discussed in this thesis, they dramatise female subjectivities in a state of crisis, transition and change.

In the light of these theoretical, theatrical and historical considerations, this thesis addresses a series of related questions to the dramatic writings of the three authors discussed. Firstly, there is the question of form. Why did these writers choose the dramatic medium to explore the related concerns of identity and subjectivity which are common to the texts discussed? This involves examining each writer's manipulation and transformation of existing literary and dramatic modes and genres, which range from the epistolary novel to romantic comedy and verse drama. This is a question of gender as well as genre, in that all three writers, in various ways, appropriate and subvert traditionally masculine models to their own ends. The plays are read in terms of their engagement with questions of gender identity, sexuality and motherhood, and in terms of their problematic relations to feminism. I aim to tease out the ways in which the texts encode meanings which are buried within, ... even at odds with, their ostensible meaning. In that my reading of the texts is informed by psychoanalytic and post-structuralist accounts of the relations between language, subjectivity and the performative nature of gender identity, the thesis also situates the texts within the framework of a dialogue between modernism and postmodernism. This sense of dialogue and negotiation between different spheres of activity -

role-playing and self-revelation, literature and theatre - is central to my reading of the texts themselves. The other question, then, that I am asking of these plays is a fundamental one. It is, quite simply: how do these texts generate meaning? As we shall see, the answers to this question are by no means as obvious or straightforward as this deceptively simple formulation might suggest.

CHAPTER 2

WHEN THIS YOU SEE REMEMBER ME:

GERTRUDE STEIN'S THEATRE OF IDENTITY.

2.1. AN OVERVIEW

Gertrude Stein is popularly known for her ventriloquial authorship of what was in many ways an atypically mainstream work, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas; and, in the light of feminist re-readings of the literary landscape of the first half of the twentieth century, she has begun to be seen as an important and neglected modernist innovator, lesbian poet, literary theorist and anticipater of post-structuralism. Her plays, however, have remained firmly in the shadow of her prose and, to a lesser extent, her poetry. Despite the fact she wrote over a hundred plays, ranging from page-long curtain-raisers to full-length opera librettos, Stein's drama has until recently received remarkably little critical attention.¹ Equally they have been largely absent from the theatre and from the official theatre histories of her period.² With the exception of Four Saints in Three Acts (written in 1927, published and first performed in 1934), the majority of Stein's plays remained unperformed in her own lifetime; although there are signs that they are beginning to be rediscovered in the context of postmodern performance. In particular, Robert Wilson's 1992 production of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights at the Hebbel Theatre, Berlin, proved Stein's modernist text to be particularly amenable to a postmodern

directorial project which one reviewer characterised as 'splaying the unitary subject'.³ For the most part, however, the theatrical potential of Stein's plays remains untested.

In this chapter I aim to offer a re-evaluation of the plays, analysing them in terms of their subject-matter (both ostensible and covert) and their performance possibilities. Often when Stein's plays are discussed, their unique and specific status as texts for performance, and the implications this status has for the range of meanings these texts may generate, have tended to be minimised, ignored or even denied. This problem is not peculiar to Stein; given the extent to which the study of drama has traditionally operated as simply another aspect of literary studies, it is perhaps not surprising that Stein's plays have typically been read, more or less unproblematically, as 'literature'. Indeed, in her recent full-length study of Stein's plays, They Watch Me as They Watch This: Gertrude Stein's Metadrama, Jane Palatini Bowers explicitly sets them against the medium of theatre, arguing that while they are predominantly self-reflexive, they 'oppose the physicality of performance', and that 'Stein's is a theater of language: her plays are adamantly and self-consciously "literary"'.⁴ As we should see, Stein's apparent

refusal of the most fundamental dramatic and theatrical principles (especially in the early experiments) might seem to support the view that these are plays for reading only. I agree with Bowers that Stein's plays do not immediately 'facilitate the physical realisation of the play on a stage.'⁴⁵ However, I hope to show that this very refusal to comply with the conventions of scriptwriting is both an element of their radical performability, and a component of the problematic of identity that Stein, in her dramatic writing, wishes to construct. Indeed, the two arguments are interlinked.

Further problems of evaluation and interpretation arise from the fact that Stein's own views on the theatre medium, as they are set out in her theoretical and expository writing, are, even for her, curiously idiosyncratic, so that her use of the generic term 'play' relies upon a purely personal rather than shared meaning. Moreover, she reputedly had little experience of, or sympathy with, the theatre. Her 1934 lecture 'Plays' provides evidence of this, in that it is for the most part a critique of existing theatre forms. Stein identified a disjunction between the performance and the spectator in the disparities between stage time and real time, between real emotion and the emotions depicted on stage, and between hearing, seeing and understanding. As she saw it, 'the thing that is

fundamental about plays is that the scene as depicted on stage is more often than not one might say it is almost always in syncopated time in relation to the emotion of anybody in the audience.'⁶⁶ The effect of these asymmetries was 'what makes the being at the theatre something that makes anybody nervous.'⁷

Pointing to the difference between theatrical and real-life excitement, Stein notes that the difference is 'in the real thing it is a completion of the excitement, in the theatre it is a relief from the excitement.'⁸

Despite their conventional narrative drive towards catharsis, plays, Stein maintains, did not resolve the agitation they provoked in the spectator.

Stein's comments on theatre have a curiously naive quality as she casts herself in the role of the slightly bewildered, vulnerable and innocent spectator whose undeveloped sensibilities are not capable of coping with the sophistication of theatrical discourse. Stein's perspective is like that of a child, remembering bits and pieces from their first pantomime. Her characteristically idiosyncratic syntax contributes to the childlike quality of her commentary. Stein's plays, particularly her early experiments, have a similarly childlike quality; she enjoys games with language and theatrical conventions, teasing her audience by refusing to abide by the 'rules' of drama.

In my experience, the most productive approach to Stein's drama in practical terms is to treat her texts as vehicles for playing with and upon. Many of the early plays embody a sense of fun and mischief; in her later drama and particularly in the transition between Four Saints in Three Acts and Dr Faustus Lights the Lights something happens to change Stein's practice. Her later plays are more serious, we could say more responsible, in form and content. In terms of their chronology we can see a development in Stein's drama but the process of maturation involves a growing conservatism, cautiousness and wistful nostalgia for the lost age of innocence which, for me, the early plays represent. This nostalgia, as I shall argue, reaches its apotheosis in The Mother of Us All.

Stein's declared incomprehension of, or antipathy to, the theatre has led to a number of curiously literal readings of both Stein and the plays. In his critical biography, Gertrude Stein in Pieces, Richard Bridgman alleges that her theory of drama is 'chaotically expressed, for the normal theatrical experience upset Gertrude Stein', and ascribes what he sees as the eccentricities of her theory and practice to her being temperamentally incapable of appreciating the medium: 'Her torpor was everywhere evident...the lively pace of the theater was generally too demanding

for Gertrude Stein's nervous system.''¹⁰ Bridgman also characterizes the theatrical reminiscences with which she illustrates her lecture as 'strangely trivial and incongruous': he notes that 'she mixed drama and opera together, remembering Uncle Tom's Cabin and Faust, Buffalo Bill and Lohengrin from early childhood, then later melodramas starring William Gillette'''; to these we can add her memories of a Pinafore in which 'I do not remember at all seeing a stage', of Booth playing Hamlet 'lying at the Queen's feet', and of 'Isadora Duncan and then the Russian ballet and in between Spain and the Argentine and Bullfights.''¹² The apparently random quality of Stein's reminiscences appears to provide evidence of her theatrical illiteracy. But what if the fragmentary quality of these Woolfian 'moments of being' is itself symptomatic of Stein's approach to the theatre medium? What Stein derives from theatrical performance is isolated, incandescent and often inexplicable moments, separable from character psychology and dramatic narrative. These moments are what her plays attempt to stage. Indeed, the problem of emotional syncopation that Stein identifies in 'Plays' lies not in the medium of performance as such but in the dominance of narrative in dramatic fiction: it is drama rather than theatre that is the subject of her critique. With this distinction in mind, I will argue that Stein's

repudiation of what is conventionally 'dramatic' in her plays make them more theatrical rather than less.

The tensions between the dramatic and the theatrical in Stein's work are also relevant to their staging of subjectivity. I find it significant here that Stein, by defining her response to the theatre as the explicitly physical one of 'nervousness', locates the disruptive quality of performance within the body of the spectator: the disparities between its sensory impact and the attempt to apprehend it intellectually opens up a division between mind and body that, for Stein at least, is potentially destabilising of the subject. My argument in this chapter is that Stein's dramatic experiments offer a distinctive, radical and (in a double sense) self-reflexive exploration of the theatricality of the subject. I would also suggest that the performative nature of identity is a central concern of Stein's work as a whole. The circular, rhythmical and repetitive character of Stein's prose, designed to replicate the movement of a depthless consciousness existing in the continuous present, constructs subjectivity as an incessantly improvised performance; it is a performance, moreover, which is dependent upon the recognition by the Other which is the audience. As Stein repeatedly asked herself, 'am I

I because my little dog knows me'¹³; identity is not intrinsic but the effect of difference.

This is the structural principle of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. As the quintessential modernist autobiography, Toklas inverts the basic premise which underpins conventional, realist autobiography, drawing attention to the constructed nature of the 'truth' of autobiographical self-revelation by re-presenting it as ironic masquerade. By appropriating the space and voice of the Other, Stein in Toklas empties the autobiographical subject of its interiority in what is both a sustained feat of impersonation and a quasi-Brechtian distancing of the actor-narrator from her role - while still placing the persona of Gertrude Stein centre stage. But while this strategy might offer a means of contesting the narcissism of traditional autobiography, so that, as Sidonie Smith puts it, 'instead of the autobiographical narrative emanating from the consciousness of the autobiographical subject, that subject is situated as an object of autobiographical discourse'¹⁴, it offers instead the flamboyance of Stein's own self-defining status as a 'genius'. It is impossible to separate the writing from the personality here, especially since Stein assiduously promoted the interdependence - indeed, the inextricability - of her public persona and

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her work. Stein's performative conception of identity was enacted on a personal level, in her adoption of the roles of witty saloniere and of performer on the lecture circuit, but also in her semi-parodic impersonation of a bourgeois heterosexual marriage in her coupling with Alice B. Toklas, a role-play which both proclaimed and concealed Stein's sexuality.¹⁵

In what follows I explore the range of Stein's dramatic writings by focussing upon selected plays from her early, middle and late periods. In the first three sections I examine in turn three early plays, paying particular attention to Stein's disruptions of the 'rules' that govern playscripts as texts, and to the ways in which readers, performers and spectators are implicated in this disruption. In particular, I address the implications that this has for the construction and deconstruction of dramatic character. In order to offer a practical perspective upon this, I also include in the third of these sections an account of some workshops that I conducted with students on Counting her Dresses. This use of personal practical work, which constitutes one of the stage-centred perspectives which inform the whole study, is a unique feature of this chapter in relation to the thesis as a whole. I include it mainly because it illustrates both the difficulties and the rewards of working on Stein

within a naturalistic, character and narrative-centred framework of expectations.

The next section discusses Stein's only popular success, Four Saints in Three Acts, first in terms of its staging of sainthood as a model of selfhood, and secondly in terms of its metadramatic exploration of Stein's ambivalence towards the theatre. The performance perspective here is provided by a discussion of the Stein-Virgil Thomson collaborative adaptation of the piece in 1934. Analysing some of the staging strategies of the opera, and the critical response to it, I will argue that Four Saints dramatises a crisis of authorial control, which is manifested in the tension between literary and theatrical texts.

Stein reflects further on this problem in Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, the subject of the fifth section. As well as analysing its covert autobiographical and sexual subtexts, the section features a discussion of Robert Wilson's recent revival of the play, as an appropriation of a modernist text for a postmodern theatrical practice. The sixth and final section considers Stein's last work, The Mother of Us All, in the light of debates about Stein's relations to feminism, but also for its

autobiographical implications, in particular in relation to the treatment of motherhood. I see Stein's most straightforward, even quasi-realist, theatrical script as recapitulating in their clearest form the ambivalences and conflicts concerning sexuality, feminism and motherhood which have informed her entire dramatic oeuvre. As a text which utilises techniques later identified as characteristically postmodern by consciously pastiching the theatrical forms of the nineteenth century, The Mother of Us All explores Stein's historical, textual and personal relations with the past.

2.2. PLAYTIME WITH STEIN: WHAT HAPPENED: A FIVE ACT PLAY (1913)

According to her account in 'Plays', What Happened: A Five Act Play¹⁶ was Stein's first attempt at drama. In a series of rather oblique comments about the source, composition and style of the play (written in 1913, first published in 1922), Stein identifies its method as one of observation without narrative. Initially, it would appear to be an inconsequential example of bourgeois domestic drama; it was occasioned, Stein records, by 'a pleasant dinner party' which had led her

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to realise that 'anybody can know that something is always happening.'¹⁷ At first then, the move towards playwriting was for Stein a development of the literary Cubism of her portraiture, where the evocation of the subject had incorporated the writer's own continually shifting perspectives upon the subject; as she put it in 'Portraits and Repetition', she was 'doing what the cinema was doing...making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one thing.'¹⁸ She saw her early plays as attempts to apply this technique to the group portrait:

I came to think that since each one is that one and that there are a number of them each one being that one, the only way to express this thing each one being that one and there being a number of them knowing each other was in a play.¹⁹

At the same time, in What Happened, Stein wanted 'to express this without telling what happened, in short to make a play the essence of what happened.'²⁰ This seems quite clear and straightforward. Then I turn to the beginning of the play:

ACT 1

(One.)

Loud and no cataract. Not any nuisance is depressing.

(Five.)

A single sum four and five together and one, not any sun a clear signal and an exchange.

Silence is in blessing and chasing and coincidences being ripe. A simple melancholy clearly precious and on the surface and surrounded and mixed strangely. A vegetable window and clearly most clearly an exchange in parts and complete.

(SO&P, p. 5)

This is very reminiscent of the cryptic language-games of Tender Buttons (1910-12): indeed, so close is it (and other plays written around the same period) in technique and style to Stein's 'verbal still lifes'²¹ that a number of commentators have doubted that it is a play at all. For Richard Bridgman, 'the only theatrical characteristics to "What Happened" are its title, which announces that it is a play, and its division into five acts'²²; according to Palatini Bowers, its 'formal dramatic conventions seem to have been superimposed on texts that exhibit no other signs of having been dramatically conceived.'²³ One way of making sense of the text, then, is to treat it as a literary experiment in the mode of Tender Buttons, an attempt to represent 'what happened' while avoiding the practice of naming, since, for Stein, 'things once they are named the name does not go on doing anything to them and so why write in nouns...it you feel what is inside that thing you do not call it by the name by which it is known.'²⁴ Accordingly, the text of What Happened can be seen as an attempt to rupture representation, breaking the link between signifier and

signified by combining and juxtaposing words in free-form, associative, anarchic patterns.

A comparison with Tender Buttons is in order here. In that text, the evocations of objects, rooms and food comically defy the logic of description and definition, so that the absurdly disparate words used to convey the essence of a thing 'as often as not had as I say nothing whatever to do with what any words would do that described that thing.'²⁵ This technique of making the familiarity and stability of the domestic environment strange, thus alerting the reader to the arbitrariness of the linguistic codes that order the apparently 'natural' social world, parallels Brecht's Verfremdungseffekt, which, as John Willett puts it, turns 'the object...from something ordinary, familiar and immediately accessible into something peculiar, striking and unexpected.'²⁶ But whereas for Brecht the technique of estrangement was used for political ends, for Stein it was a way of re-focussing attention upon the psyche of the artist. In Tender Buttons, what matters is not the mimetic relation of language to the thing described but its relation to the system of correspondences within the consciousness of the writer, so that, for example, under 'Rhubarb' we are told that 'Rhubarb is Susan', and under 'Salad', 'It is a winning cake'.²⁷ The verbal still-life is a means to explore

the consciousness and perceptions of the writer rather than the external world.

Seen in this light, What Happened can be read as an early attempt to extend this technique from objects, rooms and food to actions. The 'essence of what happened', then, is Stein's perception of what happened: the consciousness of the author is very much centre stage. The writing exhibits some of the random breaks, nonsensical conjunctions and juxtapositions of Tender Buttons (as in 'A tiger a rapt and surrounded overcoat' and 'what is length when silence is so windowful' [SO&P, p.5]), but what I find striking is that despite Stein's disavowal of storytelling it is possible to discern a sense of movement and narrative. Taking the cue from Stein's hint that the piece was inspired by a pleasant social evening, I find in it a recurrent preoccupation with food, cooking, eating and festivity, and with the related rituals of social 'exchange' (the word recurs five times). In Act 1 we hear mention of 'Christmas' and 'a sage brush with a turkey' as well as 'a vegetable window', prunes, apple blossoms, a cake ('well a cake is a powder') and, in a pun which perhaps meditates upon the aridity of dinner-party conversation, 'a desert [sic] spoon' (pp. 5-6); in Act 2 we move to 'a very wide cake, a lightning cooky', 'the very kindness there is in all lemons

oranges apples pears and potatoes' and 'a clam connection' (pp. 6-7). Although the chronology of this gargantuan meal is rather scrambled, Act 3 seems to present the climax of the social event:

(Two.)

A cut, a cut is not a slice, what is the occasion for representing a cut and a slice. What is the occasion for all that.

A cut is a slice, a cut is the same slice. The reason that a cut is a slice is that if there is no hurry any time is just as useful.

(Four.)

A cut and a slice is there any question when a cut and a slice are just the same.

(p. 7)

We might hear in this the voices of a fractious social or family group, gathered around the cake: it could signify Christmas, a birthday or, with the references to 'the best reception' (p. 7) and 'a photograph' (p. 9), a wedding. In Act 4 a postprandial mood is suggested with speeches, tobacco and coffee cups:

(Four and four more.)

A birthday, what is a birthday, a birthday is a speech, it is a second time when there is tobacco...

A clever saucer, what is a clever saucer, a clever saucer is very likely practised and even has toes...
(p. 8)

The play concludes with the dying fall of the fifth act, the slightly melancholy leavetaking of the diners,

which is framed by the doorway through which they make their exits:

(Two.)

A regret a single regret makes a door way. What is a door way, a door way is a photograph.

(p. 9)

Read in this way, What Happened starts to make the sort of 'sense' that Tender Buttons does: as an interior monologue that combines sensuous evocation of material reality with a transcription of the perceptual processes of the observer. The problem with this reading is that in order to sustain a degree of coherence it tends to treat the play as a primarily literary rather than theatrical text: it takes no account of its performability as a determinant of meaning. As Elaine Aston and George Savona point out, 'to examine a play for its literary qualities alone ignores its fundamental function as a blueprint for production, a theatrical event which is to be realised in two planes (time and space), not one.'²⁶ The play's status as drama is, however, problematic. In common with her other early dramatic experiments, What Happened lacks setting, plot, characters and stage directions, fails to match dialogue to identifiable speakers, and does not appear to dramatise any recognisable sequence of events (thus confounding the

basic Aristotelian definition of drama as 'a representation of an action'.²⁹

However, the identification of the piece's genre is important; as Stein asserts 'I think and always have thought that if you write a play you ought to announce that it is a play and that is what I did'.³⁰ By calling a text a play, Stein both offers an invitation to its reader to read that text in a certain way and invokes a set of conditions which frame, contextualise and, to a certain extent, limit and determine the ways in which the text may be read. As Keir Elam puts it, the playtext is 'radically conditioned by its performability':

...it is the performance, or at least a possible or 'model' performance, that constrains the dramatic text in its very articulation...The written text, in other words, is determined by its very need for stage contextualization, and indicates throughout its allegiance to the physical conditions of performance, above all to the actor's body and its ability to materialize discourse within the space of the stage.³¹

The problem with Stein is that the allegiance to the stage which is customarily signalled in the dramatic text is not clearly established here, thus undermining the reader's capacity to read the text as something to be staged - whether in the imagination or in the theatre. Rather than seeing this as evidence that

Stein was not writing plays, however, I suggest that the lack of the usual textual signs of theatrical allegiance, such as speech prefixes and stage directions (as well as what Elam identifies as the 'deictic' orientation of dramatic dialogue to theatrical context, or the 'I addressing a you here and now'³²), are part of her plays' distinctive performability. Take, for example, the opening of Act 2 of What Happened:

(Three.)

Four and nobody wounded, five and nobody flourishing, six and nobody talkative, eight and nobody sensible.

One and a left hand lift that is so heavy that there is no way of pronouncing perfectly.

A point of accuracy, a point of a strange stove, a point that is so sober that the reason left is all the chance of swelling.

(The same three.)

A wide oak, a wide enough oak...

(pp. 6-7)

Reading this as a script I am presented with a potentially bewildering range of interpretative and staging possibilities. Perhaps the most straightforward approach is to identify the bracketed numbers here and throughout the text as particular speakers, so that Act 3 becomes a monologue spoken by 'Three'. Act 1 would then be a series of monologues spoken by One, Five, Two and Three, and Act 3 by Two, One and Four. But then what of 'The same three'? Do

the bracketed figures indicate instead the number of performers in the scene, in which case the script is distributed in chorus or as individual utterance according to preference? Alternatively, the bracketed figures could be taken as a kind of time signature, establishing the tempo and rhythm of the verbal delivery. More radically, since the text provides no definitive instructions either about who says what or how many characters there are, which immediately puts the director or performer in the position of having to make radical interpretative decisions, then there is no reason to assume that the whole text (if any of it) is to be treated as verbal utterance: could certain lines be treated as cryptic stage directions, mood indicators, impressionistic notes for the performer, director or designer? There is, usually, a hierarchy of discourse that governs intelligibility by regulating the playtext in terms of recognisable stage directions and dramatic speech. In the absence of this hierarchy, there is every reason for the performer to treat the text as flexible, open-ended material for 'play': in this sense the written text is not pre-scriptive but a point of departure.

Treating Stein's early plays in this manner, as they invite us to do, means that any production, by making distinct interpretative choices which are not

verifiable by recourse to the text, must necessarily assume a unique authority over that text. As I shall argue below, Stein subsequently drew back from the more disruptive implications of this self-inflicted attack upon her authorial role by refusing to surrender her stake in the dramatic event. Here I wish to stress the extent to which What Happened, by enlisting the reader-performer as an active participant in the production of meaning, offers a framework for consideration of Stein's later drama. To adopt an analogy which I develop in my discussion of the musical quality of Stein's texts, the role of the playtext is rather akin to that of the score in the performance of jazz; that is, as material for appropriation and improvisation rather than straightforward, authorially-sanctioned 'production'. Terence Hawkes's use of this model to describe criticism's relation to the text is pertinent here:

The abstract model I reach for is of course that of jazz music: that black American challenge to the Eurocentric idea of the author's, or the composer's, authority. For the jazz musician, the 'text' of a melody is a means, not an end. Interpretation in that context is not parasitic but symbiotic in its relationship with its object.³³

It is in this fashion that Stein's early plays are to be played with (and upon), just as Stein plays with the mimetic conventions of drama. In this respect, the

very uncertainty and indecipherability of the playtext orientate it towards a genuinely experimental performance practice.

As seen in this first play, Stein's fun and mischief with the conventions of drama presents a formal and textual experiment which appears to be neither female nor feminist in aim or content. Seen from the perspective offered by poststructuralism, however, Stein's disordering of conventional dramatic form, and its consequent involvement of performers and audiences in the improvised production of meaning, correspond directly with Irigaray's vision of a 'feminine syntax':

what a feminine syntax might be is not simple nor easy to state, because in that 'syntax' there would no longer be either subject or object, 'oneness' would no longer be privileged, there would no longer be proper meanings, proper names, 'proper' attributes... Instead, that syntax would invoke nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities, any establishment of ownership, thus any form of appropriation.⁷⁴

Read in this light, the experimentation and linguistic game-playing of Stein's drama anticipates, in formal terms, the more recent concerns of feminist post-structuralism. Summarising the arguments along these lines, Clare Brant suggests that Stein's linguistic

experiments belong 'to a realm which challenges patriarchal systems of signification - the pre-symbolic or semiotic...Stein's writing takes us close to the new language demanded by Cixous and Irigaray, one which has shed the old accretions of values, controls and suppressions sanctioned by patriarchy to celebrate instead plenitude, pluralism, playfulness.' Thus the absence of feminist content in Stein's early work (defined in the women's drama of the time, as we saw in Chapter One, mainly in terms of motherhood, marriage, work and choice) does not detract from its formal radicalism: 'Stein's rebellion is not against what is said but against the whole set of linguistic structures which determine what can be said.'³⁵

According to this reading, Stein's wordplay is a revolutionary gesture, which subverts the patriarchal order of language from the standpoint of a transgressive female sexuality, destabilizes the normative categories of gender identity, and celebrates plurality, dispersal, and polymorphous perversity. However, as I shall argue with particular reference to The Mother of Us All, the subversive potential of Stein's work was complicated by her conservatism and her problematic relation to feminism, which was reflected in the development of her playwriting in a movement towards a more recognisably conventional,

although still problematic and contradictory, theatrical mode. In What Happened, and in similar pieces written around the same period, such as White Wines, Turkey and Bones and Eating and We Liked It, Not Slightly, and the self-reflexive I Like it to Be a Play³⁶, Stein tested the limits of dramatic form in a fashion which certainly has the potential to 'preclude any distinction of identities'. In this sense, the plays are amenable to a postmodern theatre practice in ways that Stein could hardly have countenanced. The challenge of these plays is that they directly implicate readers, performers and spectators in the contradictions and conflicts that are inherent in the process of constructing theatrical meanings and identities. As we shall see, Stein was to pull back from this position in subsequent work - but the conflicts remained.

2.3. WHY DO YOU PLAY IN LETTERS: FOR THE COUNTRY ENTIRELY (1916)

By 1916, when she came to write For the Country Entirely: A Play in Letters³⁷, Stein's dramatic style had moved some way towards a dialogue-based mode of drama. For the Country Entirely is more obviously performable than What Happened, but as in that play,

Stein experiments with dramatic conventions, stretching the possibilities of what she considered appropriate dramatic material. As she notes in 'Plays', 'I concluded that anything that was not a story could be a play and I even made plays in letters and advertisements.'³⁶ Here Stein combines what are apparently two disparate genres, drama and the epistolary novel. Accordingly, the play is inconsistently divided into chapters in the first instance, and then into acts. Clare Brant records that the epistolary novel was of particular relevance to Stein's artistic project of expressing 'the complete actual present':

The resulting coincidence of action with representation so that the writing becomes dramatic, itself part of the continuous present in which characters supposedly exist, has an unexpected precedent in the epistolary novel's 'writing to the moment', especially Samuel Richardson's Clarissa, a favourite novel of Stein's.³⁷

The idea that the prose of the epistolary novel is 'dramatic' is, however, curiously paradoxical. As Graham Holderness points out:

The epistolary novel could in some ways be described as a particularly dramatic form, since the utterances of the characters, like the speeches of actors on stage, are offered directly to the reader, rather than mediated through some form of fictional narrative. In other ways the epistolary novel is not dramatic, or at least not like a play, at all. The

basic convention of epistolary fiction presupposes distance: you would not (except in very exceptional circumstances) write a letter to someone who was actually next to you. The basic convention of stage drama is physical proximity: dramatic action needs people on stage together to secure its most characteristic effects.⁴⁰

The difference Holderness discerns between the textual properties of epistolary fiction and those of theatrical performance points to the incongruity of the concept of epistolary drama, and to the comic contradiction inscribed in Stein's subtitle, 'A Play in Letters': if a play usually consists of physical confrontation and oral communication, what are we to make of a play which announces itself as composed of texts premised on absence? Once again, a plethora of staging possibilities present themselves:

Almond trees in the hill. We saw them to-day.
Dear Mrs Steele.

I like to ask you questions. Do you believe that it is necessary to worship individuality. We do.

Mrs Henry Watterson.

Of course I have heard.

Dear Sir. Of course I have heard.

(SQ&P, p. 11)

This differs from What Happened in that it comes close to recognisable written or spoken dialogue, but questions of how many speakers there are, and who utters what, and to whom, remain exhilaratingly open-ended. Who is to speak each 'letter' - the sender or the receiver?

Where does one letter begin, merge with another, end?
There are more than forty names attached to the senders
and receivers of letters, but how many of them can be
included in the dramatis personae?

The immediate fun of this play (much of it directed
at the englishness of the English) lies in the social
comedy of epistolary formality, in comic cross-cultural
misunderstandings, in the solemnity and pomposity of the
questions and answers, and in the occasional absurd
epigram:

Dear Sir.

Extra dresses.

Oh yes.

See here. Extra gloves.

I do not like the word gloves it has a combination
of letters in it that displeases me.

Since when.

Since this evening.

(pp. 17-18)

Why do you play in letters.

Because we are English.

It is an English custom.

It is not an American.

(p. 13)

Dear girl.

Grandfathers can not make sacrifices for their
children.

It is not expected of them and they are not
sacrificed. A great many people are sacrificed.

Oh dear yes.

Helen.

(pp. 12-13)

Playing with the incongruity of epistolary drama in realist terms, a theatre production could also make much of the dialectics of presence and absence in the inter-relations between senders and addressees. As Holderness suggests:

proximity in representational space...need not, of course, signify proximity in space and time with the 'real-life' space represented...In a theatre where anti-naturalistic conventions are possible on stage, there is no reason why simultaneity and physical proximity should not be read as distance in time and space...⁴¹

The main effect of such spatial disruption is to disperse the subjective unity of the writer-speakers and reader-listeners of the letters. If the epistolary novel is a dramatic genre, then in its conventional form it is a pre-eminently illusionistic and character-centred one. Letter-writing in fiction is a monologic discourse, invoking a supposed transparency of language that offers access to the consciousness of the writer-speaker, and sustaining the illusion of a continuous, unified and self-contained subjectivity. In a series of notes suggesting a cast of characters of epic proportions, Stein shatters the expected integrity of the speakers, presenting the dislocated voices of the letter-writers as fragments of identity, dismembered into textual scraps and traces. Moreover, the letters are texts, which seem to have escaped the control of

their authors to become quasi-autonomous utterances, texts which themselves speak and answer back as actors in the drama. In this play the distinctions between speech and writing, sender and recipient, and self and other have collapsed, as the writing and reading of a letter are inextricable from the verbal responses it provokes:

Dear Mrs Lindo Webb How can you break your teeth.
By falling down in the street.
You mean now when the pavement is so dark.
Naturally.
It would not have happened otherwise.
This is because of the necessary condition of
lighting.
We all suffer from that.
(p. 21)

This passage reveals another important difference between For the Country Entirely and What Happened: its relation to contemporary history. The earlier play attempts a hermetic isolation from social reality. It stands as an art object (like the French theatre production she refers to as having rekindled her interest in drama) which 'created a thing in itself' and 'existed in and for itself'⁴²; For the Country Entirely reflects a more immediate sense of engagement with its cultural and political moment. The latter play was written against the backdrop of the First World War, which was to have a decisive impact on Stein's writing. Topical references creep into this play: the letter to

(or dialogue with) Mrs Lindo Webb seems to refer to the inconveniences of the blackout; one voice in Act 2 issues the reprimand, 'You know very well that we have not conscription' (SO&P, p. 14); Scene 7 of Act 4 includes an invitation to 'come today and wear three diamond rings and an officers [sic] suit. You have a perfect right to wear an officer's suit. You are a major' (p. 21); while one of the tersest of the letters is an ironic piece of political advice (with, perhaps, a reference to one of the key players in the war, the commander-in-chief of the British forces in France, General Sir Douglas Haig):

Dear Sir. Do not be angry with your government.
Sincerely yours.
William Hague.
(p. 17)

There is also an apparently unfinished letter addressed to 'Woodrow', invoking the American president, which begins and ends with the bald assertion that 'This is a name' (p. 20). The main impact of the war upon Stein's writing, however, was stylistic and thematic. Richard Bridgman notes that 'it was in this period that her prose began to absorb heard speech seriously', although frequently 'it is impossible to determine whether the dialogue is between Gertrude Stein and another, or between Gertrude Stein and herself.'⁴³ In view of its

collapsing distinctions between senders and receivers, speakers and listeners, and self and other, Bridgman's comment has a bearing upon this play: the confusion of dialogue and monologue reflects a sense of selfhood as volatile, shifting, multiple and divided. While the verbal texture has moved a little in the direction of naturalistic speech, the form remains emphatically anti-realist: the major change from What Happened being the transition from literary Cubism to a more identifiably modernist dramatic style, and to more recognisably modernist preoccupations. Again, the impact of the war, both personally and on a broader cultural level, can be seen as critical. As the title of the piece suggests, its themes are national identity, landscape and territory; the fragmented form of the play reflects these concerns in terms of personal and cultural displacement. In this respect, Stein's multivocal exploration of the disintegration of the old European cultural and political order in this play anticipates Eliot's similarly dialogic treatment in the disconnected, polyglot voices and desolate landscapes of The Wasteland - which was published in the same year as Geography and Plays, 1922.

Although For the Country Entirely is less confrontational than What Happened in terms of its theatrical intelligibility and performability, it

remains characteristic in its interrogation of what a play is, should, or can be. This predominantly metadramatic emphasis might lead us to conclude, as Jane Palatini Bowers does, that the plays are primarily about language itself, which Stein foregrounds 'by placing it at the apex of the performance hierarchy and by minimizing or eliminating the other components of theatrical art.' According to Bowers, this prioritisation of words suggests that 'there is no nonlinguistic world, that the world exists only when the word is written or uttered.'⁴⁴ While I agree with Bowers about the centrality of language in Stein's drama, I want to emphasize that their linguistic concerns are inextricably linked with their exploration of the self: the plays are not just about language, but about the subject's position within language. I also want to stress that identity is staged in the plays as fluctuating and fragmented, rather than linear and unified. In Tender Buttons, Stein's voracious linguistic consumption of foods, artefacts and environments unleashes an excess of signification within the framework of mundane domesticity that borders on the chaotic; but the threatened dissolution of the observing self that this entails is nonetheless contained by the controlling and co-ordinating presence of a single narrative voice. In the plays, this precarious unity is

dispersed into a proliferation of voices, offering no secure ground either for the author or the spectator.

As in other early plays, Stein addresses issues of gender in For the Country Entirely only implicitly, through form rather than content. Again, the disruptive qualities of the text suggest Irigaray's 'feminine syntax': in particular, the staging paradoxes of presence, absence and juxtaposition which I have discussed connect with a syntax 'which would invoke nearness, proximity, but in such an extreme form that it would preclude any distinction of identities.'⁴⁵ With its bizarre mixing of inconsequential chat, non-sequiturs, made-up characters, and the personalities of contemporary history and politics, the play unsettles the letter-writers' attempts to impose order, meaning and coherent personal narrative upon what Stein perceives as the discontinuities and indeterminacies of history. For the purposes of my analysis, it is significant that Stein's play with letters makes use of what is an autobiographical as well as a realist form. Importantly, Stein brings herself, her own life and her acquaintances into a text which interrogates the possibility of autobiography itself. The 'autobiographical' element of the play, that is, lies in its fragmentation of an autobiographical discourse which is already provisional and discontinuous, but also, as

Shari Benstock suggests, specifically female.⁴⁶ What Benstock calls the 'fissures of female discontinuity' that run through modernist women's autobiography also provide the structure for this play. In this respect, For the Country Entirely is poised between the abstraction of Stein's earliest plays and the more overtly autobiographical later works.

2.4. A PRACTICAL EXPERIMENT: COUNTING HER DRESSES (1917)

Stein's drama is a theatre of identity which does not centre upon a naturalistic conception of character. This presents difficulties for practitioners in the context of a twentieth-century theatre which has been dominated by the Stanislavskian approach to acting within a predominantly realist dramatic tradition. Bowers suggests that there is paradox here, which is particularly evident in Stein's early plays: while they are at odds with the physicality of performance, Stein nonetheless 'intended her plays to be performed.' The contradiction lies in the fact that any performance of Stein's playtexts will almost inevitably naturalise them through characterisation, since 'once language becomes attached to living people, the playwright loses

control of it as a medium. Speech becomes identified with the individual who utters it...speech is a characterizing act.'⁴⁷ In my view, this need only be the case for a theatre practice which is wedded to the values and techniques of illusionism; in the context of non-naturalistic and anti-illusionist staging strategies a different picture emerges. The problems arising from the disparity between Stein's mode of theatre and the expectations generated by realism were revealed to me in concrete terms, in a series of practical workshops I conducted with students on another of Stein's early plays, Counting Her Dresses, which was written in 1917.⁴⁸

Consisting of a series of one or two-line 'acts', the play on the page typically lacks characters, narrative and dialogue. Thus the initial response from the students, 'This isn't a play', served as a useful point of entry into a discussion of what, in textual terms, 'a play' is, and what they had been conditioned to expect in terms of language, action, characterisation, and so on. Having distributed the script to the students, I asked them to read it as prospective directors; in the first instance by dividing into small groups and improvising theatrical images of their immediate impressions of the text. Three of the four groups opted to counterpoint the

abstract, non-referential, characterless, non-dialogue with specific, concrete settings: a modelling agency, a schoolroom, a kitchen with maids; the fourth offered a less realistic frame of reference by centring their interpretation upon a solitary female figure bound in a white sheet. What I found striking - and unexpected - was that all of the images dealt with gender oppression and female madness: concerns which were perhaps prompted by one reading of the play's title, as obsessional and neurotic.

This commonality of theme provided a productive framework within which to approach the play, so we decided to combine the images in a collective interpretation of the text. The event began with the performers seated around a bare stage, waiting for the performance to commence. Once the audience had entered to confront an empty space, devoid of set and scenery, the cast applauded them as an ironic indication of their active role in the performance, and also as a means of unsettling initial expectations. The set was then constructed in front of the spectators; it provided few clues as to the subject of the play, consisting of a dress hanger stage right, a table centre stage, a screen upstage and a formal arrangement of chairs stage left. A pair of bathroom scales, some items of kitchen equipment and an assortment of dresses

on the clothes rail were the only props. The action commenced ritualistically, with one female performer bound in an institutional white sheet and forced to sit downstage left, where she remained as a spectator for the duration of the performance. This device established a metadramatic frame for the action, indicating that the scenes depicted were memory and dream fragments of varying degrees of reliability - moments of being which brutally impinged upon her current consciousness. The action that followed consisted of a series of vignettes, illustrating the bound figure's imprisonment in gender roles, culminating in her literal confinement in a straitjacket.

The three lines that constitute Act I served as a prologue which the woman bound in white addressed to the audience:

When they did not see me.
I saw them again.
I did not like it.
(G&P, p. 275)

In the next sequence, she watched a figure who may or may not have been herself as a model, parading before a camera lens with the other performers. As she moved across the stage, this figure stage left caught a

glimpse of the haggard, pale figure stage right: 'the monster in the mirror', an image of repression which manifested itself in grotesque form. The next three lines, which Stein defines as Acts II, III and IV, were spoken as meditative reflections by the figure in white, supplying captions for the onstage images:

ACT II.

I count her dresses again.

ACT III.

Can you draw a dress.

ACT IV.

In a minute.
(p. 275)

This sequence established one of the central themes of the performance: the creation of the identity of the protagonist through subjection to the gaze of the other, whether the male gaze of the camera lens, the scrutiny of the audience or the ambiguous surveillance of the present (or future) self seated stage right.

Subsequent scenes partially followed a conventional auto/biographical trajectory, construing the disjointed utterances of Stein's text into a series of quasi-Absurd dialogues between the protagonist and a range of representative authority figures. She was

depicted as a child, the 'model' pupil in a classroom, anxious to please while also endeavouring to attract attention as she persistently pushed herself (literally) centre stage. 'I am careful', she tells her teacher 'and obedient...and industrious', and is assured 'Yes you are' (pp. 275-76). There was no sustained development of character in the naturalistic sense, as the performers doubled in clearly identifiable, stereotyped social roles: teacher and pupil, mother and daughter, employer and employee. The elliptical exchanges between the protagonist and the rest of the cast constantly reinforced the sense of her identity as other in relation to the self of each of her interlocutors. But the logic and linearity of the conventional auto/biographical plot was recurrently ruptured as the action went on. While there were frequent surprising convergences between words and setting, often the theatrical effect derived from the contrast, or contradiction, between verbal utterance and visual image. Scene shifts were rapid, with frequent flashbacks and a disrupted chronological structure, as if the protagonist was recalling moments of being, impulsively, sporadically, even chaotically.

Out of the generalized themes of gender oppression and female madness, a more specific psychopathology become the central subject of exploration, as the

anorexic implications of the modelling agency scenario were recapitulated in a series of key scenes. In Part XII, the protagonist jumped onto a pair of scales, with the rest of the cast declaiming in unison 'A feather': to which she responded 'It weighs more than a feather' (p. 278). The obsessional exchanges between body image, food control and the performance of selfhood were continued in the next scene (Part XIII), which immediately shifted to an encounter between her and another performer over the table. The protagonist insistently declared that 'it is not tiring to count dresses', while miming the action of toying with her food. After a lengthy silence, the figure opposite ventured the query, 'what is your belief', provoking another silence. The performers then changed places and a negotiation ensued:

ACT I.

In exchange for a table.

ACT II.

In exchange for or on a table.

ACT III.

We were satisfied.
(p. 278)

This configuration was used for several further scenes, suggesting a series of confrontations between a mother

and daughter. The mother's voice was always anxious, sometimes angry and sometimes concerned, while the daughter remained defiant:

Part XXI.

ACT I.

[Mother] Have you any way of sitting.

ACT II.

[Daughter] You mean comfortably.

ACT III.

[Mother] Naturally.

ACT IV.

[Daughter] I understand you.

PART XXII.

ACT I.

[Mother] Are you afraid.

ACT II.

[Daughter] I am not more afraid of water than they
[are.

ACT III.

[Mother] Don't be insolent.
(p. 279)

The peculiarly evocative quality of this scene arose from the contradictory combination of the inconsequential and the apparently significant, arbitrariness and referential specificity: a familiar, even archetypal, domestic scene twisted into absurdity

through the emphatically non-naturalistic quality of the dialogue.

But does this method of staging confirm Bowers's argument that performing Stein's abstract work inevitably characterises it and naturalises it? In some ways, the treatment did this, in that Stein's text was ascribed a degree of character-centred thematic unity through the performance's exploration of the psychopathology and symptomology of anorexia nervosa. This was one way of making sense from nonsense: treated as dialogue, the bizarre shifts and juxtapositions of Stein's text are indeed readable as a rather satirical version of the tragi-comic failures of communication that occur between the anorexic and others; wherein, as Marilyn Duker and Roger Slade put it, the confusion between food and weight control and the sufferer's own sense of self result in 'the sufferer and the controlling anorexic...making opposing metaphysical statements' so that 'conversations between them reach unreconcilable end-game moves very rapidly.'⁴⁹ This is one reading among many possible ones: what seems to have happened is that the script catalysed the imaginations of the performers as a kind of textual Rorschach, its random patterns generating personally revealing associations which, while they were perhaps

not 'there' in the text could nonetheless be plausibly mapped onto it.

On the one hand, bearing out Bowers's point, this construction of the script was, in part, an auto/biographical appropriation, which shifted the focus from language-games to an exploration of the psychic history of an unnamed 'character'. On the other hand, however, this aspect of the interpretation was only one element, and one which was not necessarily visible to all members of the audience: other readings of the performance, as of the text, were proposed by members of the audience. Significantly, the post-production discussion centred upon the associations and emotions provoked by the piece rather than the interpretation of it. Nonetheless, I had observed considerable pressure in the rehearsal process towards a quasi-naturalistic, representationally specific approach to the play. This involved a search for a character-centred performance language which, by taming and rationalising the fragmentary, disjointed utterances of the text, would provide the key to solving the riddle of the play. In a way, the pathologising of the protagonist was itself a way of avoiding the real challenge posed by the text, since it suggested that hers was less a representative than aberrant psychological state. Rather than depicting

the fragmentation of, and discontinuities within, identity as a general condition, the narrative movement towards institutionalisation meant that these threats to unitary subjectivity were, ultimately, safely confined to the 'other' space of madness and hysteria, confirming instead of subverting the realist norm. Such is the normalising power of realist dramaturgy, with its capacity to impose its values upon the most experimental of dramatic texts.

Whether what was generally agreed to be a thought-provoking, funny and in places moving animation of Counting Her Dresses was a reductive or a productive appropriation of Stein's text is a difficult question to resolve. In effect, this returns us squarely to the central questions of this thesis: at a very fundamental level; what is at issue here is what the text is 'about' and how it generates meaning. For the performers in this production, anchoring the text in an admittedly oddball reality meant that it became recognisably about the psychopathology of an eating disorder: clearly an imposed and selective reading of the text. Since the text refuses to profer an 'authorised' set of meanings, inviting (as I argued in the second section) improvisation and appropriation, then the reading seems entirely legitimate on its own terms. As plays, Stein's texts are not about anything

until they are made to be about something. What is more problematic here is the means employed to construct meaning, order and pattern on the basis of the text, in that the finished product made much more obvious and coherent sense than it might have done. My own attempts to bring Stein's text into a theatrical situation which was structured by fairly conservative conventions and expectations ended in a compromise between experiment and tradition. As we shall see in the following section, this compromise was also experienced by Stein herself, once she moved into the public arena of the stage.

2.5. SAINTHOOD AND SELFHOOD: FOUR SAINTS IN THREE ACTS
(1934)

In 1923, following the flurry of playwriting activity that produced her early dramatic experiments, Stein temporarily abandoned drama to concentrate upon prose writing. This, she declared, was because, as she saw it, 'I had gone as far as I could then go in plays.'⁵⁰ When, after a four-year hiatus, she returned to the theatre with what was her first commissioned work for performance, her conception of drama had developed into the notion of the play as 'landscape'. Stein's drama

was ostensibly designed to provide an antidote to the 'nervousness' provoked by the existing theatre: hence her avoidance of narrative and action, and the emphasis upon stasis and tranquility. In Stein's account, the decisive point came in the mid-1920s:

Then I began to spend my summers in Bilignin in the department of the Ain and there I lived in a landscape that made its own landscape. I slowly came to feel that since the landscape was the thing, I had tried to write it down in Lucy Church Amiably and I did but I wanted it even more really, in short I found that since the landscape was the thing, a play was a thing and I went on writing plays a great many plays. The landscape at Bilignin so completely made a play that I wrote quantities of plays.⁵¹

And so Stein aimed to write plays which were 'exactly like a landscape'⁵², which avoided the unsettling effects of emotional syncopation by simply existing as self-sufficient entities, to be contemplated with equanimity. If we take Stein's landscapes as representing a psychic as well as a physical terrain, this promise of a balanced relationship between the spectator and the idealised rural spectacle offers an image of secure and stable selfhood, in a perfect reciprocity of gazes exchanged between self and other:

there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there and so the play being written the relation

between you at any time is so exactly that that it is of no importance unless you look at it.⁵³

Stein's anthropomorphosis of the rural scene is, I think, significant: once again, identity is constituted in terms of vision and visibility. Elinor Fuchs points out in a recent article that landscape in Stein is 'a metaphor for a phenomenological spectatorship of theater, a settled-back scanning or noting, not necessarily of a natural scene, but of any pattern of language, gesture and design as if it were a natural scene'. Moreover, this is an essentially pastoral vision: 'Like the shepherds of traditional pastoral who populated Arcadia, landscape to Stein was wholly present to itself, simple and un-anxiety-provoking to the spectator.'⁵⁴ But, as Raymond Williams cautions, the pastoral tradition to which Stein's analogy belongs is actually dependent upon the ideological eradication of both the relations of production and the conflicts involved in those relations, that is, 'the suppression of work in the countryside, and of the property relations through which this work is organised.'⁵⁵ In a similar fashion, the mental landscape is one in which the signs of psychic imbalance and disorder have been repressed. My reading of Stein's earlier plays has already emphasized these aspects of fragmentation and disarray; as I shall argue, we do not have to look very

hard for them to become visible in Four Saints in Three Acts.

Before moving to a more detailed consideration of this play, however, I would also note that the move towards landscape was accompanied in Stein's dramatic work by an increasingly musical technique of composition. As we have seen in the previous sections, this was already evident in the early dramatic experiments, which can very readily be seen as scores orchestrated with lyrical movements, melodic phrases and arias, for voices working in harmony and counterpoint. In a number of plays written in the 1920s, the musical interest became more explicit, resulting in the collection of pieces, Operas and Plays.⁵⁶ Here and subsequently, Stein does not appear to have differentiated between plays and operas; the 1931 play They Must Be Wedded To Their Wife was performed as a ballet, A Wedding Bouquet, at Sadlers' Wells in 1937. Stein was not much interested in music, seeing it as an adolescent concern which was 'a mark of barbarity in nations.'⁵⁷ In 1938, pondering the processes whereby her scripts had been turned into operas and ballets, she wrote that 'I hope sometime that they will do one as a play', although she continued doubtfully, 'I wonder can they.'⁵⁸ Nonetheless, Stein's turn towards music is of

considerable interest, not only as a further development of a non-representational theatrical language in which sound was to be elevated over sense, but also as an appropriation of a discourse whose incorporation has significant implications for Stein's dramatic exploration of identity, in terms of its foregrounding of the body as the primary focus of theatrical event. The medium of opera, where it is the singing subject rather than the speaking one that is the centre of attention, is one which Barthes characterises as having 'nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression.'⁵⁹ It is a mode of performance in which 'the grain of the voice' becomes audible and which, in marked contrast to realist dramaturgy, radically destabilizes the subjectivity of the spectator:

The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. If I perceive the 'grain' in a piece of music and accord this 'grain' a theoretical value...I inevitably set up a new scheme of evaluation which will certainly be individual - I am determined to listen to my relation with the body of the man or woman singing or playing and that relation is erotic - but in no way 'subjective' (it is not the psychological 'subject' in me who is listening; the climactic pleasure hoped for is not going to reinforce - to express - the subject but, on the contrary, to lose it).⁶⁰

Like the theatre, music, in Stein's terms, could be said to induce a certain 'nervousness' which both excites and appals.

Four Saints in Three Acts was written at the request of the composer Virgil Thomson, whom Stein befriended in Paris early in 1926. Thomson had already scored some of Stein's pieces for voice and piano, in particular 'Susie Asado'.⁵¹ At the outset it appeared that Thomson's characteristic musical style was well suited to Stein's work. As Joseph Machlis summarises, he 'sought a musical language that would be elegant, precise, and not above spoofing itself'⁵²; he offered a simplicity and lightness of touch, that perhaps unexpectedly, complemented Stein's literary style. For Thomson, the non-referential quality of Stein's prose poetry geared it towards musical adaptation, as he later observed, 'With meanings already abstracted, or absent, or so multiplied that choice among them was impossible, there was no attempt at tonal illustration.'⁵³ For the sleeve notes to the RCA recording of Four Saints, Thomson offered a shrewd assessment of Stein's own musical attributes:

She wrote poetry, in fact, very much as a composer works. She chose a theme and developed it, or rather, she let the words develop themselves through the free expansion of sound essence. Putting to music poetry so musically conceived as Gertrude Stein's has long been a pleasure to me.

The spontaneity of its easy flow, and its deep sincerity have always seemed to me just right for music.⁶⁴

At first glance, Thomson's view of Stein's technique emphasizes its associative and performative elements; an account which would seem to square with the anti-essentialist construction of subjectivity in Stein's texts. Language, in this account, does not express // the inner self but rather constitutes it. And yet there is a contradiction here: the accent upon 'spontaneity' and 'deep sincerity' indicates that Thomson is nonetheless committed to a concept of unified identity, integrity and the inner self with which Stein's work might seem to be at odds. Indeed, as 'one of the most articulate proponents of the new romanticism'⁶⁵, Thomson aimed to develop an aesthetic which could be seen to be fundamentally different from Stein's; as he put it, the 'guiding motive' of his musical project was 'the wish to express sincere personal sentiments with a maximum of directness and of spontaneity.'⁶⁶ If, like Stein, Thomson wished to create art that sought to articulate the experience of being in the 'complete actual present', then he did so in terms which confirmed rather than interrogated the traditional coherence and continuity of the subject: his mentors were Satie and Stravinsky rather than Schoenberg.

Early in 1927, Thomson commissioned Stein to write a libretto, its theme, he later recorded, 'the artist's working life, which is to say, the life we both were living.'⁵⁷ The fact that the piece was written to order was a new and (from her point of view) not altogether welcome departure for Stein. Initially Stein proposed the life of George Washington as the subject, but this was rejected by Thomson for the eminently practical theatrical reason that 'performance in eighteenth-century costume would make everyone look alike.'⁵⁸ Eventually they settled on saints in a Spanish setting: in theory, the opera would exist in and for itself, possessing the simplicity and stability of what were for Stein the interrelated concepts of landscape and sainthood. As far as the first concept was concerned, Four Saints was, in Stein's retrospective account, largely successful in achieving the combination of stasis and movement that she had been working towards:

Anyway I did write Four Saints an Opera to be Sung and I think it did almost what I wanted, it made a landscape and the movement in it was like a movement in and out with which anybody looking on can keep in time. I also wanted it to have the movement of nuns very busy and in continuous movement but placid as a landscape has to be because after all the life in a convent is the life of a landscape, it may look excited as a landscape does sometimes look excited but its quality is that a landscape if it ever did go away would have to go away to stay.⁵⁹

Stein emphasizes the qualities of repose, order and continuity in the pastoral scene; but a more sceptical reading might suggest that the features of this landscape, and the relations between them, are not as unproblematic as she claims. Central to the dramatic scene of Four Saints are, of course, the saints themselves, who are not just figures in the landscape but part of it. The existential as well as aesthetic implications of Stein's conception of sainthood have been widely discussed, in predominantly positive terms: mostly they are seen as the epitome of a kind of secular spirituality, offering, as Bridgman puts it, 'a statement on behalf of accepting the present life.'⁷⁰ In Donald Sutherland's summary, Stein used the perspective of the saint for 'the creation of a more real reality'; the saints were thus useful to her 'as they offered a stable metaphor on which to maintain and sustain her own generically poetic exaltation, her own vision of a world saturated with miracles.'⁷¹ For Norman Weinstein, 'a saint is defined by the quality of his [sic] presence, his ability to be within the world and at the same moment transcend it'⁷²; while in Clare Brant's account the saints 'embody duality by being simultaneously mortal and divine, body and spirit and, as Stein works it, paired by complementary gender.'⁷³ The particular appeal of Saint Theresa to Stein has also been pointed out. Bridgman notes the biographical

parallels in that Theresa 'was a passionate, witty, individualistic young woman whose mother died when she was thirteen and whose father exhibited a stern moral probity'⁷⁴; while Hobhouse records that Stein had 'been particularly moved by Avila and its saint, Theresa, when she had gone with Alice to Spain in the summer of 1912.'⁷⁵ There is good reason to suppose, then, that sainthood, particularly as embodied in Saint Therese, represents for Stein an idealised state of selfhood, a mystical (but non-religious) union of mind and body existing in the continuous present. And yet there are problems with this view. If sainthood traditionally stands for integral, self-sufficient and unified subjectivity, Stein's account of the composition of Four Saints undermines this by drawing attention to the socially-constructed nature of the saint's identity:

While I was writing the Four Saints I wanted one always does want the saints to be actually saints before them as well as inside them, I had to see them as well as feel them. As it happened there is on the Boulevard Raspail a place where they make photographs that have always held my attention. They take a photograph of a young girl dressed in the costume of her ordinary life and little by little in successive photographs they change it into a nun. These photographs are small and the thing takes four or five changes but at the end it is a nun and this is done for the family when the nun is dead and in memoriam...when I was writing Saint Therese in looking at these photographs I saw how Saint Therese existed from the life of an ordinary young woman to that of a nun. And so everything was actual and I went on writing.⁷⁶

What this account reveals is that in her efforts to invoke the authentic presence of her subject Stein is forced to draw upon images and representations in which the self is clearly subordinated to the social role signified by the costume; indeed, the self is not expressed but constituted by this externally-imposed identity. The succession of photographs, moreover, suggests the discontinuous nature of this transition from ordinariness to sainthood: it is anything but a 'natural' process.

Sainthood is traditionally a negation of self rather than its affirmation, in that it is a state of being constituted by subjection to the Absolute Other of the Christian deity. And, of course, in order to be a saint you have to be dead. These considerations suggest that Stein's sainthood is a more problematic and unstable construct than it might appear. Saint Therese's first appearance is in the midst of disturbance, 'Saint Therese in a storm at Avila' 77 and her initial state is one of anxiety and uncertainty:

If to stay to if to stay if having to stay to if
having to stay if to cry to stay if to cry stay to
cry to stay.

Saint Therese half in and half out of doors.
(SO&P, p. 46)

This is as much 'character' as we are to get. The effect of Therese's momentarily dramatic entrance/exit is immediately dissipated, as the play repeats variations on the theme of 'Saint Therese seated' (p. 47). So the play works to transform Saint Therese into an icon in a pastoral scene, whether surrounded by 'Pear trees cherry blossoms pink blossoms and late apples and surrounded by Spain and lain' (p. 54), 'in a car drawn by oxen moving around' (p. 57), or against the 'ordinary setting' of 'ordinary pigeons and trees' (p. 79). But the depiction of identity as tranquil inactivity is repeatedly undermined by more threatening, disruptive elements. Ominous references to death recur in the text:

Did she want him dead if now.

...

Could she know that that he was not not to be to be very to be dead not dead.
(p. 49)

Saint Therese. A widow weeded way laid way laying and as spelled.
(p. 80)

With wed led said led dead said with dead led said with said dead led wed said wed dead led dead led said wed.
(p. 82)

With the threat of non-being always imminent, the integrity of the self in the present moment can only be

sustained through considerable force of denial and repression. The most graphic instance of this comes at the end of the first Act 1, where a vision of catastrophic violence is conjured only to be instantly suppressed:

If it were possible to kill five thousand chinamen by pressing a button would it be done.

Saint Therese not interested.

(p. 47)

This sense of negation is also articulated in the text through the insistent impression of an enforced silence, as if about some mysterious, traumatic secret:

Saint saint a saint
Forgotten saint.

(p. 41)

Saint Therese can never mention the others.

(p. 50)

How many saints can remember a house which was built before they can remember.

(p. 52)

Planting it green means that it is protected from the wind and they never knew about it. They never knew about it green and they never knew about it she never knew about it they never knew about they never knew about it she never knew about it.

(p. 56)

Saint Therese. Completely forgetting.

(p. 70)

Stein's saints occupy a landscape with no past and no future, and with no memory and no history. But despite Stein's assertion that such a landscape might be contemplated without nervousness, the world of the play is in a disturbing state of flux. Not only are the tenses of Four Saints perpetually changing, but the play's world seems to doubt its own capacity to come into existence. The play struggles to get started, and seems always to be on the brink of dissolution. As a number of commentators have recognised, there is a strongly self-reflexive dimension to the text: a representation of the author's difficulties in dramatising her subject, the play foregrounds the mechanisms of its own composition. Bridgman observes that 'almost two-thirds of the text is composed of authorial statement and commentary'⁷⁹ and attributes this to Stein's own bafflement and uncertainty about the project. Bowers, similarly, sees the play as 'about the artist at work; the artist is Gertrude Stein, and her work is the writing of the play'. The aim is to get the reader 'to see the writing and the performance as simultaneous acts.'⁸⁰ The opening prologue (like much of the play) reads like a series of notes, at first confidently proclaiming 'To know to know to love her so/ Four saints prepare for saints' (p. 41); but almost immediately running out of steam

with 'Forgotten saint' (p. 41). The action is suspended and a digression follows, 'What happened today, a narrative' (p. 42), which is itself interrupted: 'Begin suddenly not with sisters' (p. 43). The promised play flickers in and out of view, retreating into 'a narrative to plan an opera' (p. 45) and emerging impressionistically in glimpses of 'a croquet scene', 'large pigeons in small trees', and a list of twenty-one saints.

Many of these, however, do not appear in the play, while other saints enter the play who have not been introduced in the initial castlist. Such inconsistencies reiterate in metadramatic terms the theme of forgetting that I have already noted. As we might expect, the play's title is playfully misleading: Act 1 is followed by a 'Repeat First Act', Act 2 has two first scenes before the action reverts to Act 1, Scene 3 and 4 of the second Act 2 are run together, followed by nine different versions of Scene 5, Scene 10 switches places with Scene 11, and there are two versions of Act 3. Act 4 brings the total number of acts to eight. As the play goes on, both the author and her characters repeatedly ask (of each other?) Pirandellian questions about its form and content: no certain or consistent answers are supplied:

Saint Cecilia. How many saints are there in it.
Saint Therese. There are as many saints as there
are in it.
(p. 62)

Saint Plan Ask how much of it is finished.
(p. 65)

Saint Therese. Could Four Acts be when four acts
could be ten Saint Therese.
(p. 66)

How many acts are there in it. Acts are there in
it.
(p. 83)

Saint Therese is often at the centre of these question-
and-answer exchanges, as her voice echoes and fuses
with that of the author-narrator:

 Could Four Acts be Three.
Saint Therese. Could Four Acts be three.
(p. 66)

At one level, the play's metadramatic dimension is an
example of modernist game-playing, a means of
highlighting the artifice and fictionality of the
action. But the instability of the play's, and its
characters', existence also has, I suggest, a semi-
autobiographical dimension: the dialectic of being and
non-being can be directly paralleled with Stein's
sense of her own being as precarious, conditional upon
the non-being of an other:

Anybody can think if I had died before there was
anything but there is no thinking that one was

never born until you hear accidentally that there were to be five children and if two little ones had not died there would be no Gertrude Stein, of course not.²⁰

The play's central preoccupation lies in the repeated refrain, 'When this you see remember me', a favourite phrase of Stein's which 'echoes through her writing', as Bridgman observes, 'no matter what the occasion.'²¹ Thus, as Bowers concludes, the text works to render Stein visible, so that 'we can see Gertrude Stein, the playwright, at work.'²² But this linking of authorial presence, identity and visibility is problematic - particularly when Four Saints is considered as a text for performance rather than reading. If it is possible to 'see' an image of 'Gertrude Stein' when Four Saints is read, it may be less easily done when that text is transplanted into the medium of the theatre, where the author is usually expected to surrender her claim to ownership of the play. As Aston and Savona point out:

Once the 'doing' of theatre is reinstated, then the notion of individual authorship is also challenged, given that the 'doing' also requires the collaboration of the performers, director(s), technical staff, and so on, all of whom contribute to the making of the theatrical event.²³

Or, to literalise Barthes' suggestion that once writing moves into the space of performance, it loses its

character of personal communication and becomes contingent and collective, the theatre is one place where we can see the death of the author take place, as we watch 'the Author diminishing like a figurine at the far end of the literary stage.'²⁴ With this image of the dwindling author in mind, Stein's pleas 'remember me' sound increasingly plaintive: the more fully the play is realised, the less visible the author becomes. There is a practical as well as theoretical issue here: if the play is to be staged, how is Stein's writerly presence in the text to be represented? Would the only authentic means be to have the author playing herself? Given the religious concerns of Four Saints, I find another of Barthes's comments particularly pertinent here: to remove the author, is, he says, 'an anti-theological activity, an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God...'²⁵ Can we see Stein as the reluctantly disappearing God of her own textual creation?

This leads us to a consideration of Virgil Thomson's celebrated production of Four Saints. Stein's script, adapted into a libretto by Thomson and Maurice Grosser, was the basis for what proved to be a critically-acclaimed and commercially-successful production: it opened at the Wadsworth Atheneum in

Hartford in February 1934, ran for a week, and then transferred to Broadway. In some respects, the stage version resolved certain problems posed by Stein's text by adapting it to a more familiar theatrical vocabulary: one key difference was that the lengthy interpolations which constitute the self-reflexively autobiographical dimension of the play were divided up and distributed among members of the cast: in this manner, Stein's authorial death was engineered as her solo voice was transformed into a form of chorus. Thomson also added a compere and a commere, and split the part of Saint Therese (amended to St Teresa) between two singers. Stein's text divided critics, with some praising it as 'inspired nonsense like Mother Goose rhymes'²⁶ and others viewing it as the product of narcosis or even madness: one reviewer wrote that 'the words show evidence of a private playfulness which makes them more difficult to fathom than if they were written under gas.'²⁷ Yet another view was that Stein's repetitions were psychotic, a form of 'acute mania' in which the patient repeats 'ad libitum, with slight variations, a word or phrase that frequently is meaningless except to the trained psychoanalyst.'²⁸ But if Stein's text engendered a confusion which could be regarded as either comic or vaguely disturbing, critics and audiences found other aspects of the production more congenial, even if these did not make

it any clearer what the play 'meant'. The production was widely praised for its musical quality and for its spectacular staging. With its 'sophisticated naivety...its provoking simple harmonies, its unsolicited references to hymn tunes and its intentional vulgarities'⁸⁹, Thomson's score offered a secure grounding for Stein's words. For some, this treatment was too conservative, serving up 'backward looking music'⁹⁰, but the majority of reviewers concurred with Stark Young that it was a central element in a 'delightful and joyous' production.⁹¹

Another way of regarding Thomson's musical intervention, with its self-conscious simplicity, its use of pastiche and its playful eclecticism, is to see it as a remarkably prescient postmodernist response to a modernist text. The setting and choreography, which arranged the action as a series of leisurely tableaux vivants, could be seen in the same light. Carl Van Vechten described the scene in a letter to Stein:

Imagine a crinkled sky-blue cellophane background, set in white lace borders, like a valentine against which were placed the rich and royal costumes of the saints in red velvets, etc. and the dark Spanish skins...⁹²

The cellophane scenery suited the play in that it emphasized the artifice of the proceedings, of course,

but, even more pertinently, perhaps it also invited the spectators to 'see through' the production - not in order to disclose some theological scheme, but to view the scene before them simply as a thing in itself, without hidden depths or secrets; in this sense the scenery was itself an example of the kind of text in which, as Barthes puts it, 'everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered; the structure can be followed, 'run' (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath...'²³ It was precisely this sense of depthlessness that made Four Saints a controversial production: the division lay between those who were willing to enter into the game, revelling in the production as a primarily sensory experience, and those who felt insulted by it.

Stein herself, when she finally got to see the production in Chicago, in November 1934, approved of its general look and feel. She recorded later that 'I liked looking at it and liked hearing...It looked very lovely.'²⁴ She was less pleased, however, by Thomson's other major interpretative device, which was to use a black cast. According to Janet Hobhouse, the idea came to Thomson during an evening of what she describes as 'high-society slumming'²⁵, when he accompanied Carl Van Vechten on a tour of Harlem night clubs. Thomson's

casting was not motivated by concerns about realism: Four Saints was, according to the Sleeve Notes for the RCA recording, 'a work that had nothing to do with Negro life'; it was, rather, an attempt to utilise what Thomson saw as the simple, instinctive physicality of the black singers: 'I had chosen them purely for beauty of voice, clarity of enunciation, and fine carriage.' He nonetheless professed himself surprised by 'their understanding of the work', in that they 'got the spirit of it, enjoyed its multiple meanings, even its obscurities, adopted it, moved in on it'.⁹⁶ This casting (an anti-racist gesture? or an instance of the insidious racism which celebrates the 'primitive' sensuality of the black?) has been interpreted as part of the joky tone of the production; as Gerald Bordman concludes, the production's 'absurdities' were 'underscored by having all the Spaniards played by Negroes.'⁹⁷ Stein's own response was ambivalent. While she recorded in Everybody's Autobiography that 'Saint Theresa was very lovely', and quoted the singer's comment that 'all the words were such natural words to say'⁹⁸, she had written to Thomson in an early stage of the production to complain that 'I still do not like the idea of showing the Negro bodies...It is too much what modernistic writers refer to as "futuristic". I cannot see its relevance to my theme.'⁹⁹ The curious preoccupation with 'bodies' is

suggestive: Stein's phrasing intimates that the physical presence of the black performer is not only intrinsically disruptive, but in the context of Stein's work as a whole, possibly also connected with wayward, uncontrolled sexuality. Racist stereotyping is evident elsewhere in Stein's oeuvre: as Catherine Stimpson points out, in Melanchtha, 'problematic passion is transferred to blacks, as if they might embody that which the dominant culture feared...the primitive darker race, especially in the South, embodies sensuality.'¹⁰⁰ Read in this light, Thomson's casting inadvertently underscored the opera's spiritual meditations with hints of a disruptive sexuality. In connection with this, the use of female Blues singers, as well as introducing a further musical idiom into the opera, set into circulation some interesting new meanings around Stein's saints. As Hazel Carby points out in her study of the sexual politics of women's blues in 1920s America, the black female blues singer was an ambiguous, marginal figure:

Within black culture the figure of the female blues singer has been reconstructed in poetry, drama, fiction, and art and used to meditate upon conventional and unconventional sexuality...Women blues singers frequently appear as liminal figures that play out and explore the various possibilities of a sexual existence; they are representations of women who attempt to manipulate and control their construction as sexual subjects.¹⁰¹

The liminal figure of the woman blues singer, who 'has become a cultural embodiment of social and sexual conflict'¹⁰² can be seen as a parodic inversion of the female saint: in Thomson's version of Stein's opera, spiritual identity was shadowed by a problematic sexual identity uneasily displaced onto the black performer. Perhaps Thomson had unintentionally realised a dimension to the text unacknowledged by Stein herself.

Witnessing the performance of her work revealed to Stein 'the reason I write plays and not novels':

whenever I write a play it is a play because it is a thing I do not see but it is a thing somebody can see that is what makes a play to me. When I see a thing it is not a play to me because the minute I see it it ceases to be a play for me, but when I write something that somebody else can see then it is a play for me.¹⁰³

Having written a text which attempted to position the author centre stage as the origin and guarantor of meaning, Stein found that, in the theatre, meaning is contingent, public, and no longer subject to the control of the author, so that, as in the above passage, she assents to her own 'death' as a playwright. The issue of authorship and identity, then, is at the centre of Four Saints, but is further problematised by the question of ownership. As we have seen, the text self-reflexively questions its

construction and operation, while the anxiety of authorship is played out in a dynamics of presence and absence. Stein's awareness of the dramatic text's vulnerability when subject to the interpretation of anonymous theatrical others - directors, actors and audience - is evident in the strategies she employs to make her play self-conscious and autonomous, with a life of its own. The paradox is that theatre necessitates the deaths of both author and performance text. Feminist criticism's association of female creativity with birth and reproduction is pertinent here. Stein's desire to 'own' her plays can be seen as a maternal one in that she is reluctant to relinquish her 'offspring' and to accept the inevitable changes that occur through interaction with others. Stein is indeed the reluctant disappearing mother of her own creation.

2.6. GOD AND MAMMON: DOCTOR FAUSTUS LIGHTS THE LIGHTS (1938)

The public success of Four Saints coincided with Stein's spectacular arrival on the popular literary scene with The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, which was one of the unexpected bestsellers of 1933, and with

the lecture tour of America which followed it in 1934. The central irony in all this was that whereas Stein had from the outset of her writing career sought public recognition, 'la gloire', as she called it, she was finally to achieve it in terms which, by her own standards, were the 'wrong' ones. Having endured years of obscurity as a purveyor of opaque, experimental writing, she suddenly became a celebrity on the basis of a work whose accessibility and clarity was completely at odds with her other work; moreover, 'Gertrude Stein' had become famous by successfully assuming the voice of her alter-ego, 'Alice B. Toklas'. Public acceptance seemed to depend upon the erasure of Stein's own distinctive voice, in total immersion in the persona of an Other. While she had long held to the principle that identity was an effect of visibility, and thus conditional upon recognition by the Other, Stein found that public esteem threatened to overwhelm her precarious sense of self. As Janet Hobhouse records, the sudden fame brought on by Toklas was 'as disturbing as it was pleasant', and actually provoked sufficient anxiety in Stein to cause a temporary writer's block:

It was profoundly upsetting to think that the character she had created in The Autobiography could have an impact which her real self had not. It worried her with questions about who she was and whether a 'real' Gertrude even existed...Never

before had the audience been so evidently there. In the winter of 1933-4 Gertrude stopped writing altogether. The impact of The Autobiography had made her too frightened to put pen to paper.¹⁰⁴

One of Stein's responses to these difficulties was to re-assert the authority and integrity of genius, which involved a move from the reciprocal view of subjectivity to a more solipsistic one. As she declared in Four in America, written in 1934, 'I am not I any longer when I see, that is, when I am conscious of the outside world, or audience. This sentence is at the bottom of all creative activity. It is just the exact opposite of I am I because my little dog knows me.'¹⁰⁵ This confident declaration that identity was no longer constituted by the gaze of the other, but was intrinsic to the state of genius, was, however, belied elsewhere in Stein's writing. Success for Stein threatened her with the collapse of the boundaries of the self:

The thing is like this, it is the question of identity. It is all a question of the outside being outside and the inside being inside. As long as the outside does not put a value on you it remains outside but when it does put a value on you then it gets inside or rather if the outside puts a value on you then all your inside gets to be outside.¹⁰⁶

The self could be not only compromised but destabilised by the forces of fame and commercialism, but, even at

the best of times, inside and outside could not be securely held in place.

Once again, Stein invoked religious terminology in her theoretical exposition of these problems. In Lectures in America, Stein presents the conflict between the author's need to be true to her own vision and (amongst other things) the demands of her public as an opposition between 'god' and 'mammon':

When I say god and mammon concerning the writer writing, I mean that any one can use words to say something. And in using these words to say what he has to say he may use those words directly or indirectly. If he uses these words indirectly he says what he intends to be heard by somebody who is to hear and in so doing inevitably he has to serve mammon. Mammon may be a success, mammon may be an effort he is to produce, mammon may be a pleasure he has from hearing what he himself has done, mammon may be his way of explaining, mammon may be a laziness that needs nothing but going on, in short mammon may be anything that is done indirectly. Now serving god for a writer who is writing is writing anything directly, it makes no difference what it is but it must be direct, the relation between the thing done and the doer must be direct.¹⁰⁷

According to this scheme, Toklas, as something 'that is done indirectly', was 'mammon', as were the public lectures ('his way of explaining') and the public performance of Four Saints ('a pleasure he has from hearing what he has done'). Stein's more uncompromisingly experimental work, on the other hand,

is implicitly closer to godliness. Appealing to public taste is thus seen as a kind of blasphemy against the self: the artist's duty, Stein asserts, is to her own genius rather than to her audience.

This passage appears in the middle of Stein's discussion of Elizabethan literature; appropriately enough, this also furnishes a related textual model for the conflict between aspiration and expediency: the Faust myth. Stein's meditations eventually took a dramatic form in (1938) in the shape of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights. Following the Sadler's Wells production of A Wedding Bouquet in 1937, Stein corresponded with the ballet's composer, Gerald Berners, about her opera libretto; however, the outbreak of the Second World War put paid to the proposed collaboration, and the piece remained unperformed until after Stein's death. In comparison with the earlier plays, which challenge the organisational rules of written drama, Doctor Faustus is immediately recognisable as a play, with clearly designated dialogue, characters and stage directions. Moreover, the verbal emphasis of Four Saints has given way to a more visual stage language. The play opens with a precisely-described, striking tableau:

Faust standing at the door of his room, with his arms up at the door lintel looking out, behind him

a blaze of electric light. Just then Mephisto approaches and appears at the door.¹⁰⁸

Stein's use of the Faust myth further situates her play within the mainstream theatrical tradition, invoking the treatments of Marlowe and Goethe, and Gounod's opera. Except in the broadest terms, however, Stein's version of the story bears little relation to previous ones. Apart from the titular hero, variously named Faustus and Doctor Faustus, the only characters to link the play to its predecessors are Mephisto (or Mephistopheles) and the compound character Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel. Nor does the action concern itself with Faustus's anguished deliberations over the selling of his soul: the play opens with him reflecting upon the fact that he has sold his soul to Mephisto to gain the gift of electric light, and that he now exists in perpetual daylight. Then we are presented with Faustus's dialogues with his dog and his involvement in the killing of an unnamed boy and the attempted seduction of 'Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel'. The play closes with him sinking into darkness.

Stein's deployment of the Faust myth is at one level an autobiographical allegory, in that the idea of selling one's soul for questionable gains has obvious parallels with Stein's own situation in the 1930s.

Read in this light, Faustus's unease about the limits of his accomplishments reflects Stein's ambivalence over the terms upon which she had achieved 'la gloire': as, indeed, the electric lights are themselves an apt image of the blaze of publicity surrounding Stein the popular writer and performer. If this seems to reiterate the terms of Stein's opposition between god and mammon, the artist and the audience, the genius and the public, it also suggests a conflict between self and other. Stein's Doctor Faustus, on this level, is concerned with the nature of the self, and of identity. In the majority of critical interpretations of the play, this is how it has been read.¹⁰⁹

What I find striking about the play, however, is that despite its title, and despite its initial concentration upon Faustus, the real focus of interest is in the figure(s) of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel. She/they is/are introduced into the action towards the end of the first scene, following Faustus's violent dismissal of Mephisto and his duets with the dog and the boy. Faustus in this scene is preoccupied with the unreliable, volatile state of the electric lights, and with 'day-light and night light./ Moonlight and star-light/ electric light and twilight' (p. 209). Interestingly, when Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is first mentioned, her name is subject to dispute

(recalling the equivocating prologue to Four Saints).
At first, 'her name is Marguerite Ida and Helena
Annabel', but a few lines later Faustus contradicts
himself: 'her name is not Marguerite Ida and Helena
Annabel' (p. 209); a little later, even more
emphatically:

She will not be says Doctor Faustus never never
never, never will her name be Marguerite Ida and
Helena Annabel never never never never well as well
never Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel never
Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel.
(p. 210)

But Faustus's repudiation is quietly qualified by the
chorus: 'It might be it might be her name her name
might be Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel it might be'
(p. 210). The dispute is symptomatic of Marguerite Ida
and Helena Annabel's capacity to act as a source of
disruption and disturbance in the text. Combining the
antithetical roles of the destructive, sexually-
voracious Helen of Marlowe's play and the self-
sacrificing Margerete of Goethe's version, Marguerite
Ida and Helena Annabel is a plural subject: the
arbitrariness of the practice of naming is itself made
central through the double double-take of the
foregrounding of the conjunction 'and'. In Irigaray's
terms, Margeurite Ida and Helena Annabel is 'this sex
which is not one': an embodiment of the 'feminine

syntax' in which 'oneness' is 'no longer...

privileged'''' Her opening words (echoing Saint Therese in Four Saints) establish the connection between identity and naming, as well as introducing a note of instability and uncertainty:

I am I and my name is Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, and then oh then I could yes I could I could begin to cry but why why could I begin to cry.
(p. 210)

Like Red Riding Hood in Cixous's analysis, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel then 'does what women should never do, travels through her own forest.''' As she moves into the 'wild woods' she begins to voice disquiet with her own name:

Would it do if my name was not Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel would it do as well I would give up even that for a carpet and a chair and to be not here but there, but (she lets out a shriek,) I am here I am not there and I am Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and it is not well...
(p. 211)

Recalling both the Eve of Christian mythology and Persephone, she is then bitten by a viper (or serpent), although she hardly seems to register it at all, and is uncertain as to 'was it a sting was it a bite' (p. 213). Nonetheless, the unity of her compound name has been disrupted by the event:

And I am I Marguerite Ida or am I Helena Annabel
Oh well
Am I Marguerite Ida or am I Helena Annabel
Very well oh very well
Am I Marguerite Ida very well am I Helena Annabel
(p. 213)

Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is sent to Faustus for a cure for her bite, appearing to him in the next scene in a soft glow of electric light and immediately mocking, challenging and undermining his precarious authority:

Well and yes well, and this is yes Doctor Faustus
Doctor Faustus and he can and he can change a bite
hold it tight make it not kill not kill Marguerite
Ida and Helena Annabel and hell oh hell not a hell
not well yes well Doctor Faustus can he make it all
well.
(p. 215)

Faustus's response to this is to burst out 'Leave me alone/ Let me be alone': faced with the spectacle of difference in the shape of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel he is forced to confront his own lack of interiority: 'I have no soul I had no soul' (p. 215). As Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and the country woman implore Faustus to cure her, he finds her plurality even more disturbing:

I cannot look no no I cannot see and you you say
you are Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and I I
cannot see I cannot see Marguerite Ida and I cannot

see Helena Annabel and you you are the two and I
cannot cannot see you.
(p. 216)

Faustus cannot look at Marguerite Ida and Helena
Annabel because, Medusa-like, she has the power to
destabilise the integrity and singularity of masculine
identity. Mysteriously, his inability to offer a cure
means that by the end of the scene she has cured
herself, and 'I am Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel
and enough said I am not dead'. (p. 219) Yet by the
next scene she has shifted again, as 'Some one comes
and sings...her name is Marguerite Ida Marguerite Ida'
(p. 219) and the question is posed a 'deep voice':
'Would a viper have stung her is she had only had one
name would he would he.' (p. 220) It is this
plurality, her refusal of a single, male-authored
subject-position that makes Marguerite Ida and Helena
Annabel so threatening to Faustus and the rest of the
male dramatis personae. She then appears in a
mystical, luminous tableau which both confirms and
subverts her sanctified status:

The curtain at the corner raises and there she is
Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel and she has an
artificial viper there beside her and a halo is
around her not of electric light but of candle
light, and she sits there and waits. The chorus
sings
There she is
Is she there
Look and see
Is she there

Is she there
Anywhere
(p. 220)

By now, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel has decisively upstaged Faustus as the protagonist of the drama. The glow of the candlelight frames a composite icon of contradictory images of femininity: she is a complex amalgam of the natural and the artificial, at once Helen of Troy, Margerete, the Virgin Mary, Eve and Shakespeare's Cleopatra. As she emphasizes to Faustus at the end of the play, 'I can be anything and everything' (p. 235). Presenting a simultaneous, parodic performance of mutually-contradictory gender roles, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel subverts the norms of gender identity. It is a performance which has the capacity, in Judith Butler's words, to 'enact and reveal the performativity of gender itself in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire.'¹¹²

If Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel offers a parody of femininity/ies, she meets her match (literally) in a figure who offers a more singular parody of masculinity: a man from over seas who appears to pay court to her in this scene. His first words establish what is to be his refrain:

Pretty pretty dear
She is my love and always here
And I am hers and she is mine
And I love her all the time
(p. 223)

The man from over the seas is a comically perfect narcissist: on the one hand, his entire identity is structured around his subjection of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel to his gaze; on the other, the version of romantic love that he offers entails the complete collapse of the self into the other. Or, as the conclusion of the play demonstrates, it entails the enclosure of the female in the male self, as Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel 'falls back fainting into the arms of the man from over the seas' and he sings 'I am he and she is she and we are we' (p. 235).

The inability of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel to resist the blandishments of the man from over the seas is a representation of the power of compulsory heterosexuality. What is interesting is that Stein characterizes heterosexuality as an alien force: the man from over the seas, as his name suggests, embodies the mystery and otherness of the foreigner. This depiction of masculine heterosexuality as other leads me, finally, to consider a further dimension to the representation of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, which is its dramatisation of lesbianism. I have so

far discussed Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel as a plural individual; another way of reading this figure (or, rather, pair of figures) is as a couple, an exclusively female dyad whose partners play out parodic gender roles in relation less to the men in the play than to each other. In this sense the play contains a covertly autobiographical dimension: Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel's double-voiced oscillation between singularity and plurality complements the authorial impersonation of Toklas, where, as Sidonie Smith puts it, 'Stein sheds her own body and enters the narrative body of "Alice", thus confusing one body and another, the object and the subject of discourse, the relationship of speaker to words', a textual strategy which is also an erotic 'commingling of subjects'.¹¹³ Like Toklas, whom Stein's ventriloquizes as saying that 'I like a view but I like to sit with my back to it'¹¹⁴, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel 'sits with her back to the sun' (SO&P, p. 224, p. 230); the sun which, Smith reminds us, is 'that symbol Stein invoked as a sign of maleness'.¹¹⁵ And yet, in the play's sombre conclusion, Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel is unable to sustain the pluralistic integrity of her/their self/selves in the face of a consuming masculine heterosexuality. The play ends with the erasure of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, with Faustus's cries of 'leave me alone let me be alone' as he 'sinks into

the darkness' and with the pathetic pleas of the little boy and little girl, 'please Mr. Viper listen to me' (p. 235).

Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights was not performed in Stein's lifetime, the original planned opera production being abandoned at the onset of the Second World War. Since her death, however, it has been one of Stein's more frequently performed plays, acquiring what David Savran describes as 'an immaculate pedigree in the American theatrical avant-garde'.¹¹⁶ It was first staged in New York in 1951, as the first production of Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theatre; according to Beck, the play 'was like a manifesto and would always stand at the head of our work saying take the cue from this.'¹¹⁷ The most recent production of the play was directed by Robert Wilson at the Hebbel Theater in Berlin in 1992, which visited the Edinburgh Festival in 1993. As a postmodernist appropriation of Stein's modernist text, this is worth a brief consideration here for the extent to which the production developed the implications of the original in new and unexpected ways. Given his track record, Wilson could well be seen as an ideal director of Stein's work. Elinor Fuchs points out:

Wilson creates landscape plays not only as spectacles set in nature, but in the double sense

that Gertrude Stein unfolds. The Wilson stage is typically an entire world, encompassing humans, animals, buildings, trains, space ships, as well as the many phenomena of the natural world. His theater, whether set in nature or not, requires from the audience the 'landscape-response' appropriate to a diffused perceptual field, a response enforced by the slow-moving gradualism of his staging.¹¹⁹

The landscape of Wilson's Doctor Faustus, however, was an entirely, and emphatically, artificial one: a bare stage sparsely furnished with suspended lightbulbs, affording what Cordelia Oliver described as a 'brilliant use of light and space, the creation of sharp, Lotte Reiniger-like silhouettes against striking planes of chromatic luminosity.'¹²⁰ Wilson's spectacular deployment of stage technology marked the difference between himself and Stein, as Savran notes: 'While Stein, like so many of her modernist confederates, practices a dexterous and albeit deeply conflicted critique of technology, the postmodernist Wilson...seems untroubled by the complete electrification of the world.'¹²⁰ Wilson also pursued a post-Brechtian 'radical separation of the elements' wherein 'words, music and setting...become independent of one another.'¹²¹ Brechtian echoes were also heard in the score, which incorporated pastiches of the music of Weill and Eisler, and in the verbal delivery of Wilson's German cast. As Cordelia Oliver observed, the company 'speaking the formally abstracted English text

in carefully correct foreigners' English accents, did create an operatic ambience, even when not actually singing.¹²²

The use of the 'foreign' cast recalls Thomson's casting in his production of Four Saints: again, there is a disparity between the performer and the text which perhaps reflects the latter's capacity to effect an estrangement of language itself. The performers' bodies were equally de-naturalised as movement, gesture and facial expressions were separated out, synchronised, frozen and slowed down; often these would be in opposition or counterpoint to the text. The production was characterised by an intense self-consciousness of its own theatricality. As Wilson points out, 'the stage is unlike any other space':

It is a plastic space in which one can create a new language. And once this language becomes discernable, we can destroy the codes. Destroy the language. And with these deconstructed parts, we can find a new language.¹²³

Wilson's deconstruction of language of the stage incorporated a repudiation of any traces of naturalistic character. With the cast dressed in schematic and anonymous T-shirts and trousers, and with the emphasis upon strongly patterned movement, gesture and stylised verbal delivery, there was no sense of

interiorised subjectivity. As one of Wilson's cast commented, 'he never says what you have to feel, or what you have to think.'¹²⁴ Extending Stein's pluralisation of Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, Wilson, as Savran noted, 'multiplies pluralities':

choosing three actors to play Marguerite Ida and Helena Annabel, three to play the title role, and two to play Mephisto (one in red, one in black). By (re)producing a flock of protagonists, acting and interacting variously and at odds with each other, Wilson is able to enact the syntactic undecidability of the Stein text, in which a given word or phrase may occupy several different grammatical positions simultaneously.¹²⁵

With devices such as the cross-casting of the country woman as a male actor in drag, the production emphasized the parodic, performative nature of gender and sexual identity. And yet, as Savran concludes, this was ultimately a dark, pessimistic reading of Stein's text, 'an elegy for a culture (whether pre-war or post-AIDS) that no longer believes in the heroic mythology of the past, in the power of rationalism, or in the promise of enlightenment.'¹²⁶ Nonetheless, however apocalyptic its message, Wilson's production offers a refutation not only of the view that Stein's plays are unsuited to the theatre, but also of Jane Palatini Bowers's contention that theatrical production will inevitably compromise them with naturalistic characterisation. By addressing Stein's modernist text

in postmodern terms, Wilson's Doctor Faustus points to a new performance language for her work.

2.5. FEMINISM AND AUTOBIOGRAPHY: THE MOTHER OF US ALL
(1946)

Stein's interrogation of gender identity in Doctor Faustus raises the question of the relation of her work to feminism. While Doctor Faustus, in its coded exploration of sexuality, is recognisably closer to the feminist concerns of its era in terms of content than previous plays, the experimentation and linguistic game-playing of her drama has been seen to anticipate, in formal terms, the more recent concerns of feminist post-structuralism. As we have seen, the early plays in particular are amenable to reading in these terms.

I would stress, however, that this disruptive feminist potential emerges not because of Stein's best efforts but rather in spite of them. One of the characteristics of Stein's work is the contradiction between its capacity for subversion and her own conservatism; this was particularly evident in her attitude to feminism. After a brief undergraduate flirtation with feminism, Stein separated herself from

her gender, and thereafter professed indifference to the practicalities of feminist politics. In Stein's view, as Sidonie Smith summarises, 'maleness was identified with intellect, power, knowledge, creativity, boldness; and femaleness with such stereotypical traits as filth, stupidity, lethargy, wiliness.'¹²⁷ Stein's conception of her own genius accepted that this was an exclusively masculine trait, which led her into assuming the role of an 'honorary man', both personally and artistically. Denying her identity as a woman, Stein also adopted a contradictory attitude towards her own sexuality. According to Catherine Stimpson, 'despite her sexual preferences, Stein never ceased to believe in bourgeois heterosexuality: its decencies, norms, and families...she equated sexuality with heterosexuality.' The contradiction between Stein's assumption of the imperatives of patriarchal ideology and her attempt to construct a lesbian identity was, inevitably, a source of conflict: 'necessarily, such an ideology tore at her ambitions and sexual desires. She was at odds with her own compulsions for work and love.'¹²⁸

It is within this framework of conflicts and contradictions that I wish now to turn to the last of Stein's plays, which was also her last completed work, The Mother of Us All. Written in 1946 as a libretto

for Virgil Thomson, The Mother of Us All directly addresses feminist concerns; a dramatic biography of the nineteenth-century American suffragist Susan B. Anthony, it is one of the few plays in Stein's oeuvre whose content, rather than form, seems to support Helene Keyssar's claim that 'Stein's operas and scores for the theatre...were among the first overtly feminist dramas.'¹²⁹ Stein's dramatisation of the biography of a feminist heroine, which in certain respects sticks reasonably closely to historical fact in its narration of Susan B. Anthony's struggle to attain the vote for women, is a feminist drama, in that it rewrites the history of the nineteenth century from the woman's point of view. It also offers a satirical representation of patriarchy, which depicts 'founding fathers' of American history such as Daniel Webster, Ulysses S. Grant and John Adams as comic buffoons. As Susan B. complains, 'Men...are so conservative, so selfish, so boresome and said Susan B. they are so ugly, and said Susan B. they are gullible, anybody can convince them...'¹³⁰ These traits are amply demonstrated in the male characters in the play. Daniel Webster is pomposity personified, a corrupt defender of vested interests, and Susan B.'s infuriatingly complacent antagonist, who insists on addressing her as a male 'honorable member':

Daniel Webster. The honorable member complained
that I had slept on his speech.
Susan B. The right to sleep is given to no
woman.
Daniel Webster. I did sleep on the gentleman's
speech; and slept soundly.
(SQ&P, p. 166)

Men's inflated sense of their own importance is
subjected to burlesque in the 'Chorus of the V.I.P.'s':

Andrew G., Thaddeus and Daniel
Webster come in together

We are the chorus of the V.I.P.
Very important persons to every
one who can hear and see, we are
the chorus of the V.I.P.
Susan B. Yes, so they are. I am important
but not that way, not that way.

The Three
V.I.P.'s We you see V.I.P. very important
to any one who can hear or you can
see, just we three, of course lots
of others but just we three, just
we three, just we three we are the
chorus of V.I.P. Very important
persons to any one who can hear or
see.
(p. 178)

Elsewhere, Andrew Jackson advocates drunkenness in
order to be 'a bigger man than a big man', a sentiment
which is supported by the Chorus of all the Men: 'we
feel that way too' (p. 175). These are the male types
that offer stubborn opposition to Susan B.'s attempts
at reform. The play's women, meanwhile, are seen
mainly in conditions of domestic servitude, 'darn and

wash and patch' (p. 163), being wooed, getting married. Yet while the men are clearly the butt of Stein's satire, the play is not exactly supportive of the struggle for female suffrage either. Stein remains at best ambivalent about Susan B.'s project; when it finally becomes clear that the vote will be won, Stein uses her heroine to voice her own doubts about the worth of the victory:

Anne.	And you will win.
Susan B.	Win what, win what.
Anne.	Win the vote for women.
Susan B.	Yes some day some day the women will vote and by that time.
Anne.	By that time oh wonderful time.
Susan B.	By that time it will do them no good because having the vote they will become like men...

(p. 193)

In the final scene, which takes place after Susan B.'s death, the remaining characters gather around 'the statue of Susan B. Anthony and her comrades in the suffrage fight' and Anne announces the achievement of the vote for women. Susan B.'s voice is heard from behind the statue, initially restating her convictions but lapsing into increasingly lengthy silences. It becomes evident that for Susan B., or rather for Stein, the winning of the vote may be meaningless - or even a retrograde step:

The Chorus. The vote we vote we note the vote.

They all bow and smile to the
statue.

Suddenly Susan B.'s voice is
heard.

Susan B. We cannot retrace our steps, going
forwards may be the same as going
backwards.

(p. 201)

The equivocal ending reflects Stein's detachment from the feminist cause, and the play concludes on an elegaic note which is personal, not political : 'My long life, my long life' (p. 201).

The apparently feminist content of The Mother of Us All is ambiguous. Ambiguity is also reflected in the play's mixture of forms and styles. In certain respects, the theatrical vocabulary seems straightforward to the point of conservatism. In marked contrast to Stein's earlier modernist dramas, it is strongly nostalgic, possessing what Hoffman describes as 'the period flavor of a Brady daguerrotype or a Currier and Ives lithograph.'¹³¹ This spirit which was reflected in Virgil Thomson's score, 'an evocation of nineteenth century America, with its gospel hymns and cocky marches, its sentimental ballads, waltzes, darn-fool ditties and intoned sermons.'¹³² The play itself seems to draw upon a range of nineteenth-century theatrical models: in its static,

pictorial quality it is strongly reminiscent of Victorian melodrama, where 'at certain key points in a play the entire cast would freeze, assuming the stance and composition of a living picture'; and of the Victorian habit of presenting plays (particularly those of Shakespeare) as if they were 'composed like a series of painted narratives'.¹³³ Stein's musical satire also recalls the comic operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan, transposed to an American context. In its nostalgic tone, The Mother of Us All shows Stein going forwards by going backwards: as John Brinnin suggests, the warmth of the evocation of the nineteenth century 'glowed with her pleasure, and even love, for all that she had spent a lifetime escaping.'¹³⁴

At the same time, Stein introduced elements which ruptured the integrity of this series of tableaux-vivants, a strategy which supports Anita Plath Helle's comment that the play is 'Stein's "revenge" against history'.¹³⁵ The form that this 'revenge' takes is an assertion both of the autonomy of the artistic imagination over historical fact, and of the primacy of the present over the past. This assertion is effected through the play's metadramatic deployment of anachronisms. Stein manipulates chronology to suit her purpose, in that Susan B. Anthony and Daniel Webster were not contemporaries in historical fact: as

Jane Palatini Bowers notes, 'Webster died twenty years before Anthony tested the Fifteenth Amendment in the courts.'¹³⁶ More significant, however, is the play's juxtaposition of historical figures and Stein's own acquaintances, including Virgil T., Donald Gallup, Constance Fletcher, and Stein herself, who appears in the first scene as 'G.S.' The effect is reminiscent of the medieval or Elizabethan drama, where, as Graham Holderness describes it, 'a chivalric medieval prince could meet with sixteenth-century soldiers led by a figure from immemorial carnival' in a montage of 'past and present time, near and remote space, subjective consciousness and exterior world.'¹³⁷ In Stein's case, the anachronisms shift The Mother of Us All from the genre of history play into her own private, autobiographical theatre. As Hoffman concludes, 'Stein's point in this opera has little to do with history, American or otherwise, except in the way history can be made to buttress her assessment of herself.'¹³⁸

A particularly intriguing presence is that of Stein's close friend, the novelist Constance Fletcher, who in the play is relentlessly pursued by the hopeless romantic John Adams: 'All this time I have been lost in my thoughts in my thoughts of thee beautiful thee, Constance Fletcher, do you see...' (SO&P, p. 186).

Constance Fletcher might well have been an interesting case for Stein, who met the (as James Mellow describes her) 'once-beautiful but now aged and obese author' in 1911.¹³⁹ In Toklas, Stein records that she 'particularly liked' Fletcher, whom she describes as 'attractive and impressive' and 'particularly fond of ghosts.'¹⁴⁰ As the pseudonymous author of Kismet, friend of Oscar Wilde and Henry James, and jilted fiancee of Byron's grandson, Lord Lovelace, Constance Fletcher was a glamorous as well as an eccentric figure who, according to John Brinnin, had acquired a 'legendary reputation':

After a successful career as a playwright in London she was gradually drawn back to Venice and into the shadows left by her deceased mother. There, with elaborate daily rituals, she and her sentimental stepfather maintained the memory of her strong-willed mother, strewing the staircase where she once walked with rose petals.¹⁴¹

As a person 'living perpetually in her troubled past'¹⁴¹, the real-life Constance Fletcher was well placed in the anachronistic, sepia-tinted nineteenth century of The Mother of Us All: as she says to John Adams, 'I am blind and therefore I dream' (SQ&P, p. 187). In this respect, and more significantly, in her obsessive efforts to reclaim the memory of her dead mother, Fletcher appears to have been the antithesis of

Stein, who was, as Hobhouse notes, 'capable of forgetting what she wished not to know.'¹⁴³

This suggests to me a hitherto unexplored autobiographical dimension of the play. The parallels between Stein and her version of Susan B. have been widely noted, to the extent that the latter is seen as a partial surrogate for the former: both women refused motherhood and marriage, both had long-term lesbian relationships, and both were driven by their own cause, in Anthony's case, female suffrage, in Stein's, her own art. As Hoffman summarizes, Stein 'uses the characters, events, and ideas of her opera to act out her own evaluation at the end of her life of what her career has meant.'¹⁴⁴ What I find intriguing is that Stein casts this evaluation in terms of motherhood; which is, in the context of Stein's work as a whole, a new and unexpected emphasis. As Bridgman observes, 'mothers are often absent from Gertrude Stein's writing. When they do appear, they tend to be pale, ineffectual creatures incapable of controlling their robust and temperamental children.'¹⁴⁵ This absence, I suggest, is not simply one of omission, but one of repression and denial: mothers, and Stein's own mother in particular, are quite simply written out of the record. In The Making of Americans, for example, the mother is dismissed as 'never important to her children

excepting to begin them.'¹⁴⁶ Similarly, in Everybody's Autobiography, the death of Stein's mother is treated with chilling flippancy: 'When my mother died she had been ill a long time and had not been able to move around and so when she died we had already had the habit of doing without her.'¹⁴⁷ This is, as Mellow observes, a 'curiously unfeeling' response to childhood trauma¹⁴⁸; it is an attempt to erase from the autobiographical text all traces of pain, grief and loss - an attempt which is perhaps symptomatic of a pathological refusal to mourn.

But Stein's attitude can be seen not only as representative of the hostility towards mothers and motherhood which had characterised certain strands of modernism, but also as a response to the changing patterns of work and maternity during the 1940s, as increasing numbers of women entered the labour market. For many, these changes were a source of anxiety and regret, generating, as E. Anne Kaplan points out, a proliferation of stigmatised and monstrous representations of mothers in the popular culture of immediate postwar period: 'the need for North America to reconstitute itself after the deep disruptions of the war lead to a stifling of critical positions... In such a period, representations more than ever embody unconscious fears and desires produced through

repressed economic/political/racial and gender conflicts.'¹⁴⁹ In Stein's case, motherhood is represented at best ambivalently, and at worst with outright contempt. Having turned the life and death of the mother into a joke, Stein then relegated maternity to the margins of her work. Obviously, motherhood was incompatible with Stein's conception of genius; along with heterosexual intercourse, pregnancy and birth are regarded by her with disdain. This is seen in The Mother of Us All, when Susan B. voices Stein's 'disgust at heterosexual coupling'¹⁵⁰: 'if there are men and women, it is rather horrible, and if it is rather horrible, then there are children...' (SQ&P, p. 198). Susan B. also repudiates motherhood because its potential for self-sacrifice compares poorly with the self-interest of the male:

Susan B. Ah, women have not any sense of danger, after all a hen screams pitifully when she sees an eagle but she is only afraid for her children, men are afraid for themselves, that is the real difference between men and women.

(p. 192)

Stein's critical invocation of the mother figure in this play supplies another reason to question the reading of the play as a celebratory identification with a feminist forbearer. If Susan B. is to be

identified as 'the mother of us all', this is not simply an act of homage; it indicates ambivalence, irony, or even anger. This has, I suggest, an autobiographical significance, which is foregrounded in the play's opening scene. As a choric accompaniment to the introduction of Daniel Webster, , the figure of G.S. joins all the characters, apart from Susan B., in informing us that 'My father's name was Daniel' (p. 160), adding, moreover, a thumbnail sketch of Gertude's own father, Daniel Stein:

G.S. My father's name was Daniel he had
 a black beard he was not tall not
 at all, he had a black beard his
 name was Daniel.

(p. 161)

In this scene, identity is forged through the name of the father: unlike Susan B., who insists upon her own name, G.S. appears to consent to this act of naming. As well as encouraging us to identify Daniel Webster with Daniel Stein, once again, the mother is specifically and, it would appear, willingly, excluded from Stein's definition of her own identity. Despite its title, the mother is figured in this play in terms of negation, absence and loss: as in the final scene, where, like Amelia Stein, the mother of us all dwindles to an ineffectual, wraithlike voice which ultimately falls silent. Perhaps this accounts for the

unprecedentedly elegaic and nostalgic tone of the play: was Stein's 'memory book' (SO&P, p. xvi) of nineteenth century rural America, Stein's only sentimental autobiographical act, an idealized vision of a vanished childhood world which is irradiated by the presence of a mother-figure who is soon to vanish irrevocably? Was Stein, in her last work, returning to work through the unresolved trauma of her adolescent maternal deprivation?

The play asserts that 'we cannot retrace our steps' (p. 201), and this rather poignant and melancholy reflection, in the light of my reading, suggests that Stein revisited her maternal history in this play but was unable to recover any authoritative meaning from it. Motherhood, I would conclude, is a site of absence, conflict and denial in Stein's plays, and is bound up with the questions of identity and authorship which she acts out in her drama. In my discussion of Four Saints, I suggested that one way of looking at her anxiety of authorship, and the God-versus-Mammon debate, was to consider the relationship between author and text as a quasi-maternal one: Stein plays the role of mother in relation to her drama. This then makes the mischeviousness and linguistic game-playing of much of her drama all the more significant: her early plays, in particular, are

fundamentally (and in a positive sense) childish. The culmination of Stein's drama in The Mother of Us All, where she finally looks back through Susan B. Anthony to the mother she cannot 'retrace', bears striking similarities to the strategies of Woolf and of Plath, whose respective theatres of identity also play out the anxieties, desires and conflicts of maternity.

Stein might have liked, egotistically, to be regarded as the 'mother of us all' and did play this role in her Paris salon where she nurtured the intellects and creativity of her artistic entourage. She remains however, on the outside of literary and theatrical history, while her drama, in particular, is poised ambiguously between modernism and postmodernism. The fact that Stein has now been made sense of by feminist critics, post-structuralist theorists and postmodern performance bears out this argument. This position on a borderland between genres, periods and theoretical positions is also something her drama shares with that of Woolf and Plath. This site of otherness, which I would call an orphaned positionality, makes the drama perplexing, peculiar, subversive - but fun.

CHAPTER 3

BETWEEN THE SCENES:

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S FRESHWATER.

3.1. CONTEXTS: THEATRICALITY AND MARGINALITY

Virginia Woolf's only extant play, Freshwater, is subtitled 'A Comedy'. As a text which does not conform to the standard image of Woolf as a serious novelist, it has been neglected by critics and exists only as a footnote in the majority of critical and biographical accounts; the most sustained commentary I have discovered is, ironically, in Nina Auerbach's biography of Ellen Terry.¹ Nevertheless, Freshwater is an illuminating piece which provides evidence of a neglected side of Woolf's divided authorial persona. She uses comedy for the purpose it has traditionally served: as a means to present the subversive in an apparently frivolous form. In the comedy Woolf interrogates the norms of sexuality and gender, while - I will argue - dramatizing a repressed dimension of her 'self'.

Unlike Stein, Woolf was an avid theatregoer, as well as being involved in the regular play-readings of the Bloomsbury coterie. She had a passion for dressing-up and fancy dress: in one celebrated incident, she disguised herself as a representative from the Abyssinian court, and succeeded in gaining access to the flagship of the British Navy.² For Woolf, such impromptu performances may have been a form of mild

transgression in the guise of frivolity, but her interest in theatre was neither superficial nor incidental. She was conscious of the performance element in her writing, and made extensive use of dramatic terminology when discussing her technique as a novelist. References to scenes, masks, costumes, props and audiences are recurrent; dramatic metaphors are used not only to convey Woolf's sense of the arrangement of experience into theatrical scenes, but also the instability and ephemerality of character identity itself. She was conscious of using writing as a means to construct fictional identities for herself: 'each one accumulates a little of the fictitious V.W. whom I carry like a mask about the world'.³ In 'A Sketch of the Past' (1939) she described her pleasure in writing as deriving largely from the creation of 'wholeness':

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together.⁴

Although Woolf was acutely conscious of the ontological instability of the self, she nonetheless found it imperative to construct a self for her self through writing. By representing discontinuous subjectivity as a series of roles, writing could function as a means of

creating wholeness. This is, however, a 'theatrical' rather than an 'organic' wholeness, with its workings visible.

Woolf's preoccupation with the theatricality of experience was, as I argued in Chapter One, characteristically modernist. In Woolf's work we encounter one of the paradoxes of literary modernism: whereas theatrical metaphors and dramatic form are central both to its philosophical concerns and its formal techniques, the drama itself has been treated as a marginal or peripheral force. This is particularly true of modernist women's writing. In Woolf's case, she seems repeatedly drawn to writing drama, only to fight shy of it. Her diaries make occasional references to aborted plays, and several of her later novels were originally conceived in quasi-dramatic form.⁵ The common division of Woolf's work into two modes of writing, fiction and non-fiction, corresponds to a split between her performance as a serious novelist, meticulously revising draft after draft, and her other mode of self-dramatization in the form of diaries, letters, essays and other miscellaneous pieces. She trivialised the latter - pieces such as Orlando (1928) and Flush (1933) - as her 'fun'. Woolf developed a practice of working on two projects simultaneously, one of which would provide a form of light relief from the

other. Freshwater falls into the category of Woolf's 'jokes' and thus departed from her 'conventional style'.⁶

Woolf's description of Freshwater as a 'joke' is both apt and ironic. Her remark implies that the play is trivial and inconsequential, but, as Freud made clear, jokes are often more revealing of the operations of the unconscious than the joker might wish or care to admit. In Freshwater, as I shall argue, the repressed surfaces in a bizarre, surreal, comic form. As Elizabeth Wright notes:

Jokes and the unconscious go together. For the uncanny works like a joke, and the joke partakes of the uncanny: both participate in the double movement of the return of the repressed and the return of repression. On the one hand, both can appear to be a reassurance that desires will be satisfied; on the other, both can be an unexpected denial of what was hoped for.⁷

Further, I suggest that Freshwater's status as a play afforded Woolf a degree of 'dramatic' licence unavailable in her more serious prose fiction and non-fiction. Just as the apparent safety in concealment provided by a mask often allows the performer to act out desires which are otherwise repressed or concealed, the double distancing of writing for performance

enabled Woolf to play with unresolved conflicts of gender and sexuality within a fantasy framework.

As a text which occupied Woolf intermittently for most of the 1920s, Freshwater in some respects mirrors the dominant dramatic forms of the time, in particular the society comedies which formed the staple diet of the mainstream theatre during the period. Light-hearted romantic intrigue and verbal wit were the basis of these essentially escapist entertainments; the commercially-driven English stage was one 'whose spotlights were focused on the country-house drawing rooms and hotel bedrooms of a theatre that equated society with the moneyed classes.'¹⁰ Throughout the 1920s, dramatists such as Somerset Maugham, Ben Travers and, pre-eminently, Noel Coward continued to exploit the comic form which had been perfected by Oscar Wilde at the end of the nineteenth-century: wit and sophistication within a framework of brilliant contrivance. The two versions of Freshwater, as I shall demonstrate, appear to adopt this familiar pattern: the first is a one-act farce, the second a three-act comedy in the form established in the Victorian theatre. There is, it seems, a sharp contrast here between Woolf's use of conventional dramatic forms and Stein's radical textual experiments. However innovatory she may have been with regard to the

novel, Woolf appears to have been relatively conservative in her approach to drama. Nonetheless, as I shall demonstrate, the conventional comic form masks a content which, in terms of its exploration of gender identity and sexuality, is potentially subversive. The comparisons with Wilde and Coward are extremely pertinent here, for in the work of both writers, dandyism, banter and contrivance are double-edged. They constitute a discourse of camp which in turn encodes both a critique of gender and a representation of homosexuality. Nicholas de Jongh points out:

Oscar Wilde's verbal camping enabled him to subject the world to the discipline of his transforming skills, to hold authentic emotion at an arm's length, to exalt style (though not at content's expense), to outlaw spontaneity. And in plays of the period camp speech, camp design, camp costume became in their mannered, consciously wrought extravagances a mode of dissociation from the conventional and mundane.⁹

Similarly, in the plays of Coward, 'that terse, artificial lingo...was a form of period camp; and this jargon, with its sophisticated use of innuendo and suppression of feeling, conveyed more than it expressed.'¹⁰ As I shall demonstrate, something very similar is at work in Freshwater.

The play's conditions of production, however, were in some ways at odds with the showy public facade

afforded by the theatre of its day. The only performance of Freshwater was a private one, at Vanessa Bell's party in January 1935, before an audience of family and friends. In this respect, then, it can be seen as an instance of salon theatre: a mode of performance which, Sue-Ellen Case points out, was an aristocratic alternative to the male-dominated mainstream theatre. In a tradition of intimate female theatricals which stretches from the work of Rahel Varnhagen in Berlin in the 1790s to that of Natalie Barney's in Paris in the first half of the twentieth century, the salon was a space for dialogue 'built on mutuality and intersubjectivity, eliminating any sense of formal distance or representation'''; it was, pre-eminently, a theatrical practice controlled by, and addressed to, women. The salon changes the relations between audience, performers and characters and facilitates a mode of theatre which is more intimate, personal and often autobiographical. On one level, Freshwater draws attention to itself as a performance through non-naturalistic devices which expose the artifice of conventional forms of representation. Yet on another level this can be seen as a profoundly personal mode of theatre. For Woolf, the play is a repository for her fantasies, desires and obsessions.

The complex evolution of the play is worthy of brief consideration not only in that it reveals a shifting focus of interest, but also because it demonstrates her difficulties in negotiating the dramatic mode. Although Woolf downplayed it, Freshwater appears to have shadowed her for a considerable part of her professional writing life. The first reference to Freshwater is in the 1919 diary.¹² The play surfaces again in the 1923 diaries when Woolf abandons plans for a performance.¹³ Twelve years later, Freshwater appears again: it was produced in its revised form at Angelica Bell's party in January 1935.¹⁴ Even by virtue of its chronology, Freshwater is significant, straddling the early and late periods of Woolf's writing career.¹⁵ In Woolf's diaries, Freshwater appears to be a ghostly presence, as the characters in the play intermittently return to haunt her.

'A woman writing thinks back through her mothers', Woolf famously wrote in A Room of One's Own.¹⁶ This is particularly appropriate to the conception of Freshwater. The play appears to have been stimulated by Woolf's interest in her great aunt Julia Margaret Cameron, whose photography provided Woolf with a representation of her maternal history in the form of pictures of her mother and her mother's family.

Freshwater was conceived in 1919, when Woolf was reading a biography of George Frederik Watts by his second wife, Mary Fraser Watts. Woolf records that this includes a description of the departure of Mrs Cameron and her husband to Ceylon:

I am going to shut Mrs Watts upon George Watts, and open the Antigone of Sophocles. One second - I must note for future use, the superb possibilities of Freshwater for a comedy. Old Cameron dressed in a blue dressing gown and not going beyond his garden for twelve years, suddenly borrows his son's coat and walks down to the sea. Then they decide to proceed to Ceylon, taking their coffins with them and the last sight of Aunt Julia is on board ship, presenting porters with large photos of Sir Henry Taylor & the Madonna in default of a small change'⁷

Woolf's starting point, then, is the eccentricity of the Camerons. There is no mention, at this stage, of Ellen Terry, Watts's first wife and an important character in both surviving scripts of Freshwater.¹⁸ Woolf's comedy based on the Camerons, first saw the light of day four years later, as a script in 1923. Although Freshwater is not mentioned again directly in her diary until July 1923, Woolf's letters to Vita Sackville-West earlier in the year provide a clue to her renewed interest in the Cameron sketch. 'I hope you will come and look at my great aunt's photos of Tennyson and other people some time', Woolf wrote in January and in March she invited Vita to Vanessa Bell's

house: 'She would have the Cameron photos and would very much like to see you.'¹⁹ This was the period of Woolf's early acquaintance with Vita and the importance of the Cameron photos is evident in her eagerness to share them with Vita. In July 1923 Woolf was working simultaneously on the Freshwater script and the novel that was to become Mrs Dalloway. She comments on the spontaneity of her playwriting in contrast to her other work:

I wish I could write The Hours as freely & vigorously as I scribble Freshwater, a comedy. Its a strange thing how arduous I find my novels; and yet Freshwater is only spirited fun; & The Hours has some serious merit. I should like though to get speed and life into it. I got tempted a week ago into comedy writing, & have scribbled daily, & trust it will be done tomorrow.²⁰

Woolf's experience of script-writing then, is comparable to her diary writing, where she was similarly able to write freely 'as the mood comes'.²¹ However, the play proved to be more problematic than Woolf anticipated. She continued to work on Freshwater during August and September and by the beginning of October had completed a draft which she sent to Vanessa Bell. In a letter to Desmond MacCarthy, who had agreed to stage-manage Freshwater for a Christmas performance, Woolf refers to the play as a 'skit upon our great aunts' and also states that 'there are six parts.'²²

Neither of the published scripts fit this description; both have seven parts, and Julia Cameron is the only 'great aunt' to appear in the play. Moreover, the focus of interest, in both versions, has shifted to the character of Ellen Terry. A diary entry of July 1923 refers to Tennyson, Watts and Terry, all of whom appear as characters in the surviving versions of Freshwater. This has an added significance in Woolf's effort to 'record conversation', reproducing a dialogue between herself and Augustus and Francis Birrell:

V. Tennyson is a great poet.
A.B. Certainly he's a poet, not a great poet.
Hallam was a donkey...Tennyson was a very direct creature-didn't like second marriages. didn't like Lionel's dying at sea- no sod to visit - very old fashioned, conventional views.
(Told the story of Ellen Terry running round the bedroom naked, & Watts going to Harcourt & saying 'It frightened me.')

This exchange may have acted as a stimulus for Woolf's characterization of Tennyson, Watts and Terry, indicating that Woolf's reference to the 'great aunts' is metaphorical, a jibe at her Victorian predecessors. In the summer of 1923, Woolf was reading Harold Nicholson's biography of Tennyson; in a letter to Vita (who had sent the biography at Woolf's request), she describes her hostile response to the book: 'I threw it on the floor in disgust.'²⁴ By the middle of October

1923, Woolf had lost confidence in her script and wrote to Vanessa to suggest delaying the production:

On thinking over the play, I rather doubt its worth going on with. It seemed to me, when I read it last night, that its so much of a burlesque, and really rather too thin and flat to be worth getting people together at infinite trouble to act. I could write something much better, if I gave up a little more time to it: and I foresee that the whole affair will be much more of an undertaking than I thought.²⁵

On the evidence of Woolf's diaries, it seems possible that she was again thinking of the play during 1926. In June, Woolf had written to Vanessa about 'getting a book of Aunt Julia's photographs' and requested her letters: 'I'm now writing about her, and it would be a great advantage to have some of her actual words, which I imagine were extremely profuse, to quote.'²⁶ Woolf subsequently wrote an introduction to a collection of Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs which was published in 1926 and which included several pictures of Julia Stephen.²⁷ Uncannily, in May 1926 Woolf was herself photographed wearing a dress her mother had worn for Julia Cameron's portraits. In describing this photograph Lyndall Gordon observes that Woolf was 'haunted by a being who half possessed her.'²⁸ Finally, during 1926 Woolf was re-reading her 1923 diary which contained references to the aborted Freshwater project.

Woolf's knowledge of Ellen Terry appears to have been acquired during the 1930s when she read Terry's letters to Shaw and her memoirs, which were published in 1931 and 1932 respectively.²⁹ Woolf was clearly fascinated by Terry. In addition to Freshwater, she wrote an essay on the actress, and she is a character in the unpublished story 'A Scene from the Past'.³⁰ So Terry was one stimulus for the revision of Freshwater; the other seems to have been Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West, and a complicated network of lesbian entanglements involving the novelist, biographer and playwright Christopher St John, Ellen Terry's daughter, Edy Craig, Gwen St Aubin and Ethel Smythe. Woolf's first encounter with St John and Craig was in 1933, when she visited Ellen Terry's house at Small Hythe with Vita. St John was Edy Craig's lover, and was also sexually involved with Vita Sackville-West, much to Woolf's chagrin. Woolf describes St John as a 'braying hysterical ass'³¹ and a 'mule-faced harridan'³², and also refers to Edy Craig as 'a donkey'³³; it seems to me that a great deal of this vitriol fuelled the revision of Freshwater. In particular, I will argue below that the character John Craig in the 1935 Freshwater (who is referred to only as 'Craig' in the first version) is an elision of Christopher St John and Edy Craig.

3.2. WAYS OF LOOKING: THE 1923 FRESHWATER

Structurally, the first version of Freshwater is extremely simple. The 1923 script is a one-act play which observes the naturalistic unities of time, place and action. It is set in the drawing-room at Dimbola, the Camerons' house at Freshwater, on the Isle of Wight. The play opens with the imminent departure of Mr and Mrs Cameron, who are leaving for India, complete with their coffins. As the play develops, it transpires that the Camerons have made several aborted attempts on previous occasions to embark on their journey. The play is linear in structure, with the action progressing by means of the introduction of a succession of characters. Thematically, the play is mainly preoccupied with representation: with the exception of Ellen Terry, all the characters obsessively practice their art throughout. Tennyson recites Maud, Mrs Cameron is constantly in pursuit of sitters for her photography, Watts is in pursuit of his wife for his painting, and Mr Cameron spends much of the play asleep, occasionally waking up to produce philosophical aphorisms.

Terry is pivotal to the play, as she provides the key to the development of such plot as there is. In an

aside to the audience she tells of her initial encounter with Craig, who has dropped a note inviting her to meet him at midday. After Terry has left the scene to meet her mysterious friend, Mrs Cameron spots a potential Sir Galahad in the garden, and returns with Terry dressed as a young man. Craig arrives, and announces to Watts's consternation that he and Ellen will be living in Gordon Square. They leave for Bloomsbury, with Mrs Cameron's camera as a wedding gift, while Mr and Mrs Cameron exit for India. Watts and Tennyson are left in a state of disarray, and the play closes (in an ending which parallels both Shakespearean comedy and Gilbert and Sullivan's The Pirates of Penzance) with the arrival of Queen Victoria, wheeled on to restore order in time-honoured fashion.

On the surface, Freshwater is a comedy of manners in which Woolf sends up the artistic conventions, morality and pretensions of her Victorian predecessors. The major characters in the play are artists, while their various representations of femininity in painting, poetry and photography are foregrounded and parodied through various framing devices. The male characters are all caricatures. The flamboyant first entrance of G. F. Watts, complete with palette, in search of his wife who has been modelling for him but

Summary

has escaped 'without [his] noticing it', establishes his role as a comic buffoon who inhabits an introspective fantasy world, completely divorced from and incapable of engaging in social relationships. His opening speech typifies his language throughout the play, as he rarely engages in dialogue but instead performs long declamatory monologues: 'Praise be to the Almighty Architect! The toe of Mammon is now, speaking under Providence, in drawing.' (p. 63) The entrance of Watts also establishes the play's concern with gender representation, as well as Woolf's modernist satire against Victorianism. Woolf parodies Watts's allegorical representations of femininity:

For by my treatment of the drapery I wish to express two distinct and utterly contradictory ideas. In the first place it should convey to the onlooker the idea that Modesty is always veiled; in the second, that Modesty is absolutely naked...I am wrapping her form in a fine white substance, which has the appearance of a veil but, if you examine it closely, is seen to consist of innumerable stars. (EW, p. 64)

Here is femininity encoded as category and sign within a traditionally patriarchal frame of reference.

Although we are aware that Ellen Terry is Watts's model, she is not a subject but an object in his art and is referred to only in the third person. The fact that Terry is offstage at this juncture is important: Watts verbally constructs an imagined ideal to

Sum

transcribe into visual art, thereby parodying the Victorian view of art as an instrument of ideology and servant of morality. Watts is hoisted on his own petard as he discovers the full implications of his symbolism, and comically anticipates Terry's elopement:

[crying out in agony]

Horror! Horror! I have been cruelly misled - utterly deceived. [He reads aloud] 'The Milky way among the Ancient Egyptians was the universal token of fertility. It symbolised the spawn of fish...It typified the fertility of the marriage bed, and its blessings were called down upon brides at the altar.'...I who have always lived for the utmost for the Highest have made modesty symbolise the fertility of fish!

(p. 65)

The irony is compounded when Terry finally returns dressed in trousers and 'in the arms of a youth' thereby shattering Watts's image of his wife as a personification of 'purity, modesty, chastity' (p. 72). Watts is cuckolded, while Terry emerges as a comic heroine whose escape from him is a triumph over and a rejection of the conservative ideals he embodies.

Woolf casts Tennyson in an equally stereotypical role. Like Watts, he is introspective and absorbed in his work. He inhabits a textual reality and only occasionally engages in social intercourse. For much of the play Tennyson is preoccupied with his recitation of Maud, which is constantly being interrupted by the

play's action. Woolf comically subverts Maud, fusing Tennyson's lyrics with her fabricated version of Terry's biography, gleaned from the Memoirs:

ELLEN

...
Come into the garden, Nell
I'm here at the gate alone
Tuesday, Midday, Craig.
(p. 60)

Tennyson is perpetually alert to the poetic potentialities in his own speech and that of others, but only in order to confirm his self-satisfaction. In a dialogue with Watts, he reveals a high-minded and pedantic attention to detail that renders him ridiculous:

WATTS

...I shall call it Mammon trampling upon Maternity or the Prosperity of the British Empire being endangered by the addiction of the Working Classes to the consumption of Spirituous Liquors -

LORD T. [shrieking and clasping his head]
Oh, oh, oh - twelve s'es in ten lines - twelves s'es in ten lines! The prosssperity of the Britisssh - the ssspawn of the Horse Marines - Oh, oh, oh, I feel faint!
(p. 67)

The appalled response to Watts's transgression of Tennyson's self-defined rules of alliteration draws attention to the form rather than the content of the

utterance. The language of Freshwater is frequently self-reflexive in this manner, drawing attention to its own construction, its contrivances and pretensions. This self-reflexive dimension (which is developed in the later version) also permeates the various artistic discourses deployed throughout the play, as characters competitively appropriate each other's art within the terms of their own artform. Thus Mrs Cameron composes a portrait of Tennyson reading Maud, shifting the focus of attention from a verbal recitation to her own mode of visual art.

Mrs Cameron's eccentricities and domineering personality are comically presented as she bullies her subjects into fixed poses. Her photographic art parallels with Watts's portraits as allegorical artefact. Her first words establish a frame for the scene:

MRS. C.

What a picture! What a composition! Truth sipping at the fount of inspiration! The soul taking flight from the body! Upward, girl, look upward! [MARY and MR. C. assume a pose] Let your head fall on your breast, Charles. The soul has left its mortal tenement.

(p. 56)

The representation of Mrs Cameron in Freshwater is consistent with the picture constructed by subsequent

Cameron

biographers of the photographer (Woolf's main source of information about Mrs Cameron would have been her aunt's letters). As Helmut Gernsheim notes: 'Mrs. Cameron was imperious, even despotic at times in the treatment of her sitters.'³⁴ Her use of servants and strangers off the street whom she clothed in appropriate attire for her symbolic portraits has also been recorded by her biographers.³⁵ In Freshwater, Woolf alludes to Julia Cameron's illustrations for Tennyson's Idylls of the King when Mrs Cameron searches for an appropriate Sir Galahad, while at the end of the play the appearance of the mythically costumed servants complete the picture of absurdity:

[The servants come trooping in, COOK dressed as Guenevere; JAMES as Cupid. They form a tableau round LORD TENNYSON at the window]

MRS. C. [to the audience]

'Alfred, Lord Tennyson reading Maud to Julia Margaret Cameron for the last time.'

(pp. 68-69)

Woolf's attitude towards the character of Mrs. Cameron seems ambivalent. Although she is used in the play to expose traditional stereotypes of femininity, it is not clear how far Mrs Cameron herself is implicated in this satire. At the end of Freshwater Mrs. Cameron, unlike her shocked male counterparts, applauds Ellen Terry's trousers, which she finds 'becoming'. Her final

gesture is to give her camera to Terry, with the advice to 'see that it is always slightly out of focus' (p. 73). This comment aligns Terry's sartorial (and implicitly sexual) deviance with an artistic practice which blurs the accuracy and precision of realist mimesis.

Woolf's interest in her great aunt is surpassed by her fascination with Ellen Terry, who in this play seems to act as an alter ego for Woolf's own transgressive impulses. From her first entrance, Terry provides a critical commentary on the manners and pretensions of the society which entraps her. Her costume epitomizes the romantic ideal she represents in the eyes of Watts and Tennyson: 'The door opens and ELLEN TERRY comes in, dressed in white veils which are wrapped about her arms, head, etc.' (p. 59) She immediately breaks the naturalistic frame through a direct address to the audience, as she comments on the scene she has entered:

ELLEN [looking from one to the other]

O how usual it all is. Nothing ever changes in this house. Somebody's always asleep. Lord Tennyson is always reading Maud. The cook is always being photographed. The Camerons are always starting for India. I'm always sitting for Signor. I'm Modesty today - Modesty crouching at the feet of Mammon.

(p. 59)

The picture Terry describes is a still-life: a moment of frozen or arrested time where 'nothing ever changes'. When she re-enters towards the end of the play, 'dressed as a young man' (p. 70), however, her costume is an emphatic statement of rebellion. The cross-dressing is also a stock device of theatrical comedy, and the consternation she causes is the high point of the play:

MRS. C

I have found him at last. Sir Galahad!
[Everybody stares. Watts, Tennyson and Mr. Cameron rise to their feet]

LORD T.

Nell!

MR. C.

Lydia!

WATTS

Ellen! Oh, Modesty, Modesty. [He sinks down covering his face with his hand]

MRS. C.

Why; it's Ellen Terry dressed up as a man. How becoming trousers are to be sure! I have never, never, seen anything so exquisite as Ellen in the arms of a youth among the raspberry canes.

WATTS [starting up]

In the arms of a youth! In trousers in the arms of a youth! My wife in trousers in the arms of a youth! Unmaidenly! Unchaste! Impure! Out of my sight! Out of my life!

(p. 70)

It is at this climactic point in the play that Woolf abandons any semblance of biographical fidelity and

invents her own fantasy version of Terry's story. The cross-dressing may be a reference to Terry's transvestism as a child actress, or to her celebrated portrayal of Rosalind in Shakespeare's As You Like It; her display in Freshwater is also in keeping with her antics as Watts's wife.²⁶ However, Woolf's dramatization of Terry's escape from Watts is a blend of fantasy and parody. Woolf exploits the conventions of romantic comedy, using the stock motifs of disguise and role reversal as the tragic victim is released as a comic heroine.

Although the other characters in Freshwater have historical counterparts, the character of Craig is Woolf's invention. Woolf alludes here to Terry's elopement with Edward Godwin after her separation from Watts. Craig is the surname of Terry's two children by Godwin; this surname was conceived by Terry as a stage name for her children. Craig is a curious anomaly as he is the only male character to excite sexual interest of a positive kind. Male sexuality within the play is generally the focus of disgust or derision, particularly through the eyes of Ellen Terry. She clearly finds Watts abhorrent, and her distaste is expressed through food images:

Signor can't eat anything except the gristle of beef minced very fine and passed through the

kitchen chopper twice. He drinks a glass of hot water at nine and goes to bed in woollen socks at nine thirty sharp. Instead of kissing me he gives me a white rose every morning.

(p. 63)

The relationship between sexuality, food and creativity will be discussed further as they are developed in the revised version of the play. We assume from Terry's comments that her marriage is unconsummated (as it was reported to be).

Unlike Watts, Tennyson celebrates his physicality and sexuality. His savouring of his body is presented as rather revolting:

If I weren't the most stoical man in the world, the very skin on my wrists would rise and blossom in purple and red at the innumerable bites of the poisoned bugs and pismires of the press! [He shoots out his hand and looks at it.] That's a wonderful hand now. The skin is like a crumpled rose leaf. Young woman [beckoning to ELLEN], have you ever seen a poet's skin? - a great poet's skin? Ah, you should see me in my bath! I have thighs like alabaster.

(p. 61)

Tennyson's attempts to transform his own body into a work of poetic art are counterpointed by Mrs Cameron's objectification of the male body through the lens of her camera: her female gaze de-sexualizes her sitters as she focusses on particular parts of the anatomy for their aesthetic rather than sexual appeal. For Mrs

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Cameron, male and female bodies are functional objects in the service of her art. When Tennyson sits down to read Maud, she immediately frames his action metatheatrically by incorporating him into her picture:

'Inspiration -or the poet's dream.' Look at the outline of the nose against the ivy! Look at the hair tumbling like Atlantic billows on a stormy night! And the eyes-look up, Alfred, look up.
(p. 68)

Her eulogy is interrupted, however, by her realization that Tennyson's legs are out of place: 'The legs are a trifle too short, but legs, thank God, can always be covered. [She covers his legs with an embroidered table cloth] (p.68)

Mrs Cameron's husband, described as 'a very old man with long white hair and a beard' (p. 55), represents male sexuality in its decrepitude. He appears to be a useful fixture in his wife's photos but is otherwise redundant and impotent. Mr Cameron is a minor character in Freshwater with very little dialogue. He occasionally spouts aphorisms, but spends much of the play asleep, dreaming vaguely erotic fantasies:

MR.C. [dreamily]

I slept, and had a vision... I saw girls with red lips kissing young men without shame. I saw innumerable pictures of innumerable apples. Girls

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played games. Great men were no longer respected. Purity had fled from the hearth. The double bed had shrunk to a single. Yet as I wandered, lost, bewildered, utterly confounded through the halls of Alfred Tennyson's home. I felt my youth return... [Trembling and stretching his arms out] there was a damsel - an exquisite but not altogether ethereal nymph. Her name was Lydia. She was a dancer. She came from Muscovy... She snatched me by the waist and whirled me through the currant bushes.

(p. 63)

Through the representation of Watts, Tennyson and Mr Cameron, then, masculinity is presented cumulatively as decrepit, lecherous and undesirable. Already in this version there is a subtle disavowal of heterosexuality which is, as I shall argue below, developed further in the later version.

Hardly surprisingly, Terry seeks to escape from this environment. What I find striking is the extent to which the mechanism employed - the cross-dressing - is purely a fantasy device (albeit in keeping with the conventions of romantic comedy). There is no logical reason in the play's own terms why Terry should cross-dress, but this very illogicality suggests to me that it springs from a deeper, unconscious source. In romantic comedy, confusions of identity traditionally operate between cross-dressed characters (for example, Rosalind and Orlando in As You Like It, and Viola, Olivia and Sebastian in Twelfth Night); the cross-

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dressing in Freshwater, however, may well indicate erotic contradictions within the characters - in particular, within the character of Terry herself. By bringing her heroine on stage in trousers, Woolf flirts with ideas of gender-bending, androgyny and sexual ambiguity. Indeed, the effect of Terry's cross-dressing can be seen as directly analogous to that created by the transvestite heroines of Shakespearean comedy. Catherine Belsey suggests that the adoption of male costume has the potential to unsettle sexual difference itself:

...the male disguise of these female heroines allows for plenty of dramatic ironies and double meanings, and thus offers the audience the pleasures of a knowingness which depends on a knowledge of sexual difference. But it can also be read as undermining that knowledge from time to time, calling it into question by indicating that it is possible, at least in fiction, to speak from a position which is not that of a full, unified, gendered subject. In other words, the play can be read as posing at certain critical moments the simple, but in comedy unexpected, question, 'Who is speaking?'³⁷

In a text where gender representation is a central preoccupation, a similar question is posed at the end of Freshwater: in this sense, the transvestite stage figure of Terry occupies a similar fantasy zone of indeterminate gender as Woolf's hero/ine Orlando, 'we have no choice left but to confess - he was a woman'.³⁸

However, just as the cross-dressing is not clearly motivated in dramatic terms, neither is it developed, and its subversive potential is quickly contained. The play ends rather abruptly. Ellen Terry is whisked offstage by her lover and Queen Victoria is wheeled in to restore order. The arrival of the Victorian matriarch is an intervention which is as bizarre and arbitrary as Terry's trousers. Watts falls at her feet, proclaiming 'the utmost for the highest', discovering at last a woman he can idealize safely. More ominously, Lord Tennyson turns to the audience and, in shift of mood which echoes the close of Love's Labour's Lost, grimly informs it that 'the comedy is over' (p.74). For Woolf also, the comedy of Freshwater was apparently over. She had tried to produce a light-hearted comedy as a joke, which turned out to have unforeseen depths. What was the pleasure for Woolf in staging the cross-dressing? As I shall argue in the next section, it hints at bisexual or lesbian undercurrents that were elaborated in the subsequent version of the play. The joke was more revealing than Woolf had intended, resulting in a play which begins to act out Woolf's own sexual conflicts. it is not suprising that the project was abandoned. As Woolf recalls of the hypothetical woman writer in 'Professions for Women':

The imagination had dashed itself against something hard...To speak without figure she had thought of

something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say...She could write no more.³⁹

3.3. PUTTING THE GHOST TO REST: THE 1935 FRESHWATER

In the second version of Freshwater, which was performed in 1935, Woolf develops the story of Ellen Terry's elopement, creating a second act which focusses on her relationship with Craig. The middle act involves completely new material, while much of the first version of Freshwater is included in the first and last acts. The characters are unchanged, although Ellen Terry's role is more dominant. In the earlier version, Terry is part of an ensemble of characters and only at the end is she at the centre of the stage. In the revised version, Terry is the subject of the play.

Lynd Terry is on stage at the beginning of the play as part of a set piece which visually demonstrates gender stereotypes. Mrs. Cameron (rather than Mary, as in the first version) is washing Mr Cameron's head. Ellen Terry is presented as the silent, passive object of the male gaze, sitting 'on the model's throne posing to WATTS for Modesty at the feet of Mammon.' (p. 7) In the first version of the play, the characters were

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introduced through separate entrances, whereas here their roles are established by the opening tableau. Mrs Cameron stands, and Terry sits, obediently conforming to the image Watts is constructing of subordinate femininity. Woolf's treatment of the stereotyped characters of Mrs Cameron, Mr Cameron and Watts is consistent with the first version of Freshwater. By substituting Mrs Cameron for Mary in the opening scene, Woolf exploits the comic potential of the relationship between Mrs Cameron and her husband who appears equally eccentric, and clearly dominated by his authoritarian wife. Ellen Terry initially serves as a feminine version of Mr Cameron in an ironic reversal of gender roles between the two couples. Watts, like Mrs Cameron, manipulates his model to create 'a wife who shaped herself into submission'.⁴⁰ He treats Terry, like Mr Cameron, as a child, but despite his coercive efforts her body revolts against the confines of art:

WATTS

...Don't move Ellen. Keep yourself perfectly still. I am struggling with the great toe of Mammon. I have been struggling for six months...Keep perfectly still.

...

ELLEN [stretching her arms]

Oh, Signor, can't I get down? I am so stiff.

WATTS

Stiff, Ellen? Why, you've only kept that pose for four hours this morning.

ELLEN

Only four hours! It seems like centuries...

Sum

WATTS

You have given four hours to the service of art, Ellen, and you are already tired. I have given seventy-seven years to the service of art and I am not tired yet.

ELLEN

O Lor'!

WATTS

If you must use that vulgar expression, Ellen, please sound the final d.

(pp. 8-11)

Like the recalcitrant Eliza Doolittle of Shaw's Pygmalion, Terry resists the roles prescribed for her in petty acts of defiance. It foreshadows the more emphatic rebellion that is to occur later in the play.

Woolf's characterization of Tennyson is also largely unchanged in the revised Freshwater. Like Watts, he serves as a foil to Ellen Terry. Within a few moments of his entrance he is sprinting through Maud as if his life depended on it:

TENN.

...And how am I going to read Maud to you when you're in India? Still - what's the time? Twelve fifteen? I've read it in less. Let's begin.

I hate the dreadful hollow behind the little wood,
Its lips in the field above are dabbled with
blood-red heath...

(pp. 8-10)

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Introducing this extract earlier than in the shorter version of Freshwater, Woolf reproduces Mrs Cameron's morbid fantasy of the ants devouring Maud:

MRS. C.

We can't start for India without our coffins...Think, Alfred. When we lie dead under the Southern Cross my head will be pillowed upon your immortal poem In Memoriam. Maud will lie upon my heart..And then what is this-what infamy do I perceive? An ant, Alfred, a white ant. They are advancing in hordes from the jungle. Alfred, they are devouring Maud!

(p. 9)

The linking of femininity, death and orality sets the revised version's slightly morbid tone, though this grimness is mitigated, as always, by macabre humour. The revised script is dominated by references to death and decay; it also has a pronounced Ophelia motif in the reports of Terry's supposed death by drowning in Act Three.

Terry's complaints of stiffness, and her refusal to pose, disrupt the artistic activities of the other characters, and initiates the action of the play. The initial impetus, then, is the revolt of the body against art: much of the first act concerns various attempts to return the body to art's prescriptive confines. Having escaped from Watts's field of vision, Terry moves straight into that of Mrs Cameron. The

photographer is clearly implicated in Woolf's satire in the second version of Freshwater, as a character who, like Watts and Tennyson, is absorbed in constructing allegorical representations. In the first version of Freshwater, Terry and Mrs Cameron are not actually on stage together until the end of the play when Terry makes her entrance in trousers.⁴¹ In the revised version, however, Mrs Cameron includes Terry in her picture-making activity, casting her in the role of muse to the male poet:

[ELLEN sits on TENNYSON'S knee.]

MRS. C.

Another picture! A better picture! Poetry in the person of Alfred Tennyson adoring the Muse.

ELLEN

But I'm Modesty, Mrs. Cameron; Signor said so. I'm Modesty crouching at the feet of Mammon, at least I was ten minutes ago.

(p. 11)

Having begun to pose for Mrs. Cameron, Terry repeats her earlier gesture of breaking out of the frame:

[A whistle sounds in the garden.]

ELLEN

I come! I come! [She jumps down and rushes out of the room.]

MRS. C.

She's spoilt my picture!

TENN

My picture too.

(p. 15)

This time, Terry moves out of the stage picture altogether, in a move which is critical to the play's development. She has been summoned, it transpires, by John Craig. It is at this point also that there is a decisive shift away from the Victorian satire of the first version, towards a more autobiographical mode. While it retains the elements of Victorian fantasia, the second version not only elaborates upon the erotic ambiguities that informed (and, as I have argued, doomed) the first version, but also offers a theatrical equivalent of a roman-a-clef for its Bloomsbury audience.

Interrupting the perennial debate between Tennyson and Watts about the relationship between art and fact, Mr and Mrs Cameron catch sight of John Craig offstage:

MR. C.

I thought I saw something which many people would call a fact pass the window just now. A fact in trousers; a fact in side whiskers; a handsome fact, as facts go. A young man, in fact.

MRS. C.

A young man! Just what I want... [She goes to the window and calls out:] Young man! Young man! I want you to come and sit to me for Sir Isumbras at the Ford. [She exits. A donkey brays. She comes back into the room.] That's not a man. That's a donkey. Still, to the true artist, one fact is much the same as another. A fact is a fact; art is art; a

donkey's a donkey. [She looks out of the window.]
Stand still, donkey; think, Ass, you are carrying
St. Christopher upon your back. Look up, Ass. Cast
your eyes to heaven...There! I say to the Ass look
up. And the Ass looks down. The donkey is eating
thistles on the lawn.
(pp. 15-16.)

Mr Cameron emphasizes both the masculinity of Craig,
and his 'facticity'. This is ironic on two counts: not
only is John Craig a purely fictitious character in an
otherwise 'factitious' drama; but also, as I shall
argue, was probably played by a woman in the Bloomsbury
production. Further, Mrs Cameron's scornful invective
contains a bitter semi-private joke for Woolf and her
audience. The reference to St. Christopher and the Ass
is more than an inversion of Christian imagery; it can
also be seen as an expression of Woolf's antipathy
towards Christopher St. John during the period in which
the play was being revised. Indeed, the relationship
between St. John and Vita Sackville-West can be seen to
have a direct bearing on Woolf's development of
Freshwater, particularly in the creation of Act Two.

Woolf was introduced to Christopher St. John and
Edy Craig by Vita in 1933 when she visited Ellen
Terry's house at Small Hythe.⁴² Although Woolf was to
deny in a letter of 1934 that she had read anything by
St. John, she had read Terry's letters to George
Bernard Shaw and Terry's memoirs, both of which St. John

edited. St. John, it appears, developed a sexual relationship with Vita and began to play a problematic role in Woolf's network of female friendships which included Ethel Smythe (for whom St. John also became biographer) and Gwen St. Aubyn. Mrs Cameron's jokes about donkeys closely echo Woolf's own invective. Woolf refers to St. John in her letters as a 'braying hysterical ass'⁴³, while she also makes a disparaging reference to Edy Craig: 'Mrs [Miss] Craig gives me distinct pain. And what a donkey - think of taking my fun deadly serious.'⁴⁴ The relationship between Vita and St. John appears to have developed in the early part of 1934. In January, Woolf wrote to Ethel Smythe (who was also sexually involved with Vita) 'she [Christopher] haunts Vita'⁴⁵, and in a letter to Vita referred angrily to 'that mule faced harridan of yours...Christopher St. John'⁴⁶

In this context, Woolf's extended dramatization of Terry's elopement with Craig is a densely coded representation of the problematic network of lesbian relations within which she and Vita were entangled. The character of John Craig acquires further significance if one studies the cast lists for the production. Although the list in Woolf's handwriting indicates that Julian Bell was intended for the role,

Vanessa Bell's list casts Ann Stephen as Craig. According to Ruotolo, 'no one...recalls a woman playing a man's role in the 1935 performance'⁴⁷ There are hints in the text, however, that the part was conceived to be played by a woman, thereby developing the cross-dressing motif arbitrarily introduced at the end of the earlier version. The significance of this would, of course, be most apparent in performance. If John Craig were played by a woman, a series of playful innuendoes become clear, contributing to the comedy. Nell and John, for example, interrogate not only each other's identity but also, implicitly, their gender, in a self-reflexive manner which would be particularly appropriate in a transvestite production:

NELL

Are you the young man who jumped over the lane on a red horse?

JOHN

I am. Are you the young woman who was picking primroses in the lane?

NELL

I am.

(p. 21)

When Craig kisses Nell she exclaims 'I rather like it. Of course, it must be wrong'. (p. 25) If this involved two women kissing on stage, it is not only Nell's implied sexual innocence which causes her to feel kissing is 'wrong', it could also be seen as the

staging of a lesbian encounter. Dramatic license and the agreement to pretend permits, in this instance, the staging of sexual transgression. The discrepancy between the two cast lists may indicate that Woolf could not reconcile the roles of author and director and was reluctant to risk the exposure that might result from performance. On the page, the cross-dressing remains a private titillation; in performance, she would have no control over the audience's response and interpretation.

Act Two of the revised Freshwater closes with the appearance of the distinctly Carrollian figure of a hungry porpoise, who acts as an observer to the tryst between John and Nell. The porpoise is itself of uncertain gender, acting as a correlative to the cross dressing. 'I suppose it was a female porpoise John?' Nell asks, feeding her wedding ring to the starving creature so that it becomes 'married to Mr Watts', provoking from John the riposte that 'That don't matter a damn to Mr. Watts' (pp. 29-30). In Act Three, the porpoise's gender identity is again at issue, as, in an interesting slippage, Nell explains to Watts the loss of her wedding ring: 'I'm very sorry...But he looked so very hungry, signor,...She looked so very hungry.' (p. 36) If the porpoise is played by a woman, the comedy

of gender confusion is compounded. And, needless to say, Porpoise was Woolf's pet name for Vita.⁴³

This is not to suggest a direct correspondence between the characters in the play and Woolf's contemporaries; Woolf deliberately and (for the researcher) teasingly uses what she elsewhere refers to as 'scraps, orts and fragments'⁴⁴ in her characterization. John Craig, for example, is also a Lieutenant in the Navy, which may be an allusion to Tennyson's personal history. According to Harold Nicholson's biography of Tennyson (which Woolf had read) the poet never forgave his sister Emily for marrying a 'Lieutenant Jesse of the Royal Navy' after Hallam's death.⁵⁰ The reference to St. John and the Ass is equally complex in its associations. Apart from the snide evocation of Christopher St. John, there may also be a reference to a painting by Watts of Woolf's great aunt Mary 'on a donkey', portraying Una from Spenser's 'Una and the Red Cross Knight.' In a 1921 diary entry, Woolf recalls her response to this painting, which was displayed in Herbert Fisher's home:

I confess it seemed to me, sitting opposite to Leonard in that brown ugly room with its autotypes of Dutch pictures & Aunt Mary on a donkey, that Leonard was an authority & Herbert a thin-shredded thread paper of a man, whose brain has been harrowed in to sandy streaks like his hair...asking me colloquially whether I remembered Aunt Mary on the donkey, which I did. 'The donkey is too small',

I said 'And the horse has no ears,' he added.
'Watts has come down in the world', I said, feeling
astonishingly young & juicy beside him.⁵¹

Watts and his painting are, for Woolf, associated with the sterility of Fisher's conservative generation: 'modern art he didn't care for.'⁵² It is interesting that Woolf sexualizes the notion of artistic progression here. In Freshwater, similarly, art and sexuality are interrelated. Both Tennyson and Watts are sexually inept. In both versions of Freshwater, Tennyson is presented as a comically lecherous old man, inviting Ellen as a 'beautiful wench' to sit on his knee, and boasting of his 'poet's skin' and 'thighs like alabaster'. Watts, by way of contrast, is revolted by sex. Divorced from physical experience, his marriage to art renders him impotent.

At the centre of the play, however, is the fluctuating sexuality of Ellen Terry. A protean figure who is, as we have seen, subject to appropriation and re-definition within the artistic discourses of the other characters, Terry is a discontinuous character, occupying a series of personas. Her multiple roles in the play are accompanied by a range of names, as Woolf changes the name of her character from Ellen in Act One to Nell in Acts Two and Three. The dialogue of

Freshwater continually draws attention to the practice of naming:

JOHN

My name's Craig. Lieutenant John Craig of Her Majesty's Navy.

NELL

And my name is Mrs. George Frederick Watts.

JOHN

But haven't you got another?

NELL

Oh plenty! Sometimes I'm Modesty. Sometimes I'm Poetry. Sometimes I'm Chastity. Sometimes, generally before breakfast, I'm merely Nell.

(p. 23-24)

Terry's character is also constantly changing as Woolf dramatizes a metamorphosis from child to woman and Terry's awakening to sexuality. Terry is initially rebellious and impetuous, refusing her role as wife and muse; in Act Two she becomes a subject in process as she struggles to locate herself within an alternative 'scene' of representation.

At the opening of Act Two, Terry is a naive girl who, having been cloistered, is now hungry for experience. Her extensive use of food images is an indication that she has been emotionally, intellectually (and perhaps physically) starved. When Craig kisses her she exclaims:

It makes me think such dreadful thoughts...you see, it makes me think of beef steaks; beer; standing under an umbrella in the rain; waiting to go to into a theatre...hot chestnuts...all the things I've always dreamt about.
(pp. 25-26)

Indeed, when Ellen feeds her wedding ring to the starving porpoise, it could be seen as a gesture by her newly (and ambiguously) 'liberated' self towards her previous self as Watts's physically fragile child-wife. In her dialogue with Craig a strong association of food with sexuality is evident. As ever in Woolf's writing, food is bound up in an interplay between desire and denial. Terry's rhapsody is reminiscent of a key passage in A Room of One's Own, where Woolf describes in sensual and implicitly sexual detail the delicacies served up at an Oxbridge men's college:

Meanwhile the wine glasses had flushed yellow and flushed crimson; had been emptied; had been filled. And thus by degrees was lit, half-way down the spine, which is the seat of the soul, not that hard little electric light which we call brilliance, as it pops in and out upon our lips, but the more profound, subtle and subterranean glow which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse. No need to hurry. No need to sparkle. No need to be anybody but oneself.⁵³

Woolf is conscious of her alienation from this scene, as an outsider permitted temporary access to a world of elitist, masculine, intellectual privilege. She conveys this through images of excess, savouring the

L. Woolf

sensuality of the feast and its forbidden physical and intellectual fruits. She then envisions a pre-war luncheon party which interestingly leads to an elegaic reverie on creativity, love and, appropriately enough, Tennyson's poetry:

There has fallen a splendid tear
From the passion-flower at the gate.
She is coming, my dove, my dear -

sang in my blood...What poets, I cried aloud...In a sort of jealousy, I suppose, for our own age...the very reason why that poetry excites one to such abandonment, such rapture, is that it celebrates some feeling that one used to have (at luncheon parties before the war, perhaps), so that one responds easily, familiarly, without troubling to check the feeling, or to compare it with any that one has now.⁵⁴

The luncheon which inspired this poetic celebration is set against a contrasting scene of eating as Woolf describes a rather plain and paltry dinner at Fernham, a women's college, and concludes:

The human frame being what it is, heart, body and brain all mixed together...a good dinner is of great importance to good talk. One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well. the lamp in the spine does not light on beef and prunes.⁵⁵

The equation of eating, creativity and sexuality is, however, problematised by Woolf, as Patricia Moran observes:

Food in Woolf...comes to assume a double significance: on the one hand it signifies sexual trespass; on the other hand, it bears witness to the woman writer's femininity...Food, then, provides the site through which Woolf explores the impossibilities and paradoxes of female textuality.⁵⁶

Moran's analysis is particularly relevant to Freshwater. Woolf evidently associates Terry's sexual innocence in Act One with male oppression; she is expected by Watts to conform to his model of chaste, pure femininity and obedient servitude. As such, her physical and intellectual needs are unsatisfied. In Act Two, Terry's awakening to sexuality is expressed through her gustatory fantasy. Later, though, her newly awakened appetite comes to be associated with death and an 'Ophelia' motif - which is realized in her presumed drowning at the beginning of Act Three. Woolf does not, however, ultimately condemn Terry, for her heroine is literally and metaphorically 'rescued' from death.

Woolf's fascination with Terry in Freshwater and in subsequent writings on the actress is interesting in view of the anorexic symptomology evident in Terry's memoirs, which Woolf read in 1932. Throughout her memoirs, Terry draws attention to her physical fragility, celebrates the Victorian cult of thinness and later regards her increased weight and age with

revulsion.: 'I was very thin' Terry writes and advises 'but Portia and all the ideal young heroines of Shakespeare ought to be thin. Fat is fatal to romance.'⁵⁷ The 'ideal young heroines' (Portia, Rosalind, Viola) to which Terry refers are also, of course, cross-dressers. Fat would also appear to be fatal to this particular mode of androgyny, which Shari Benstock describes as 'the pre-Raphaelite form of the androgyne, a form as yet unmarked by signs of the maturation process'.⁵⁸ Woolf's notes on Terry's memoirs highlight references to her thinness, and there is a strange empathy in her speculations upon what she sees as Terry's split identity: 'The two sketches are incompatible, and yet they are both of the same woman. She hates the stage; and yet she adores it. She worships the children; yet she forsakes them'⁵⁹ Woolf loved writing, but was tormented by the struggle of textual (re)production. It is also apparent that although Woolf was in one sense 'married' to her career, her childlessness was a source of anxiety and regret. Woolf often sought to rationalize such feelings, particularly with regard to her sister's children: 'I don't like the physicalness of having children of one's own...I can dramatise myself as parent, it is true. And perhaps I have killed the feeling instinctively; as perhaps nature does.'⁶⁰

Significantly, the 1935 version of Freshwater was conceived as a form of gift for her niece, Angelica Bell. As I noted in Chapter One, this fact, and the additional consideration that Angelica herself played Terry, situates the text within a network of displaced maternal relations. As Angelica records in her autobiography, Woolf both identified with her niece on a childlike level ('She was convinced that I inhabited a world of fantasy special to myself, and she longed to enter it. In this world she was Witcherina and I, Pixerina...'⁶¹), and cast herself as a mother by proxy, making herself responsible for Angelica's dress allowance, '£15 a quarter, quite enough for clothes and minor pleasures.'⁶² As a text which weaves together the mother-daughter dynamic between Mrs Cameron and Ellen Terry, Woolf's evaluation of her own maternal history and her own efforts at surrogate motherhood, Freshwater can be seen to inhabit similar realms of displaced and vicarious gratification, infantile fantasy and role-play.⁶³ In the production of Freshwater, tellingly, Woolf acted as prompter - a liminal role somewhere between puppeteer and voyeur - thus both retreating from and controlling the text in performance. Woolf's notes on Terry interpret her return to the stage as a triumph over her maternal instincts: she suggests that the voice which made Ellen 'suddenly forgetful of little Edy and little Ted' was

'genius; it was instinct'⁶⁴ In Freshwater Woolf conflates Godwin with Charles Reade; the man who fathered Terry's children is thus replaced by the man who is reputed to have enticed her back to the stage and caused her separation from Godwin.⁶⁵

The representation of John Craig is ambivalent, for although he serves as a foil to Terry, exposing her naivete, his behaviour is a further representation of patriarchal authority. He assumes a superior status, countering Nell's dissociated chattering with his matter-of-fact rationality:

NELL

Mrs. Cameron is the photographer; and Mr. Cameron is the philosopher; and Mr. Tennyson is the poet; and Signor is the artist. And beauty is truth; truth beauty; that is all we know and all we ought to ask. Be good, sweet maid, and let who will be clever. Oh, and the utmost for the highest, I was forgetting that.

JOHN

It's worse than shooting the sun with a sextant. Is this the Isle of Wight? Or is it the Isle of Dogs - the Isle where the mad dogs go?...Look here, Nell. Let's talk sense for a minute. Have you ever been in love?

(pp. 22-25)

Terry is represented as a woman without an identity and language of her own. Her various names (Ellen, Nell, Mrs George Frederik Watts, Modesty, Chastity and The Muse) and her dependence on borrowed phrases, as she

comically parrots Watts's aphorisms, suggest that her female self - or rather her succession of selves - is simply constructed by others. In her relationship with Craig, manipulation and control on his (her?) part are evident, while she, puppet-like, conforms to his demands:

Now look here, Nell. I've got something to say to you-something very sensible. I'm not the sort of man who makes his mind up in a hurry. I took a good look at you as I jumped over that lane. And I said to myself as I landed in the turnip field, that's the girl for me...Look here. [he takes out a watch.] Let's be married at half past two.

NELL

Married? Where shall we live?

JOHN

In Bloomsbury

...

NELL

But what shall we live on?

JOHN

Well, bread and butter. Sausages and kippers.

NELL

...Sausages and kippers. John, this is Heaven!

JOHN

That's fixed then. Two thirty sharp.

(pp. 20-27)

The heaven Nell escapes to is another patriarchal domain; the implication is that Terry is exchanging one kind of purgatory for another. In the revision of Freshwater, Terry has changed from triumphant

transvestite to a more vulnerable, misguided and idealistic victim of the manipulations of others. This characterisation bears a direct similarity to Woolf's representation of Vita in a 1935 diary entry: 'some muddle I don't fathom altogether, but suspect Gwen and St. John between have muddled poor old V's not very well founded head.'⁶⁶ I read this as a reference to the protracted disputes and jealousies between Woolf, Vita, St. John, Gwen St. Aubyn and Ethel Smythe. Moreover, an earlier diary entry, describes Vita in terms which echo the 'fallen woman' connotations of Terry's return in Act Three:

Vita...has grown opulent and bold and red-tomato coloured and paints her fingers and lips which need no paint - the influence of Gwen [St. Aubyn]; underneath much the same; only without the porpoise radiance, and the pearls lost lustre.⁶⁷

Vita, in this account, has metamorphosed into a ghastly theatrical figure, her naturalness, painted and powdered, concealed and corrupted by artifice. In Act Three; Terry responds to Watts's accusation that she was 'sitting on the Needles with [her] arms round a man,' with her flustered explanation that 'she [the porpoise] looked so very hungry' (p. 36). When Craig enters 'to fetch Ellen by appointment', Watts denounces her as 'painted', 'powdered' and 'unveiled' (p. 40). Nell's compassion for the starving porpoise, which, she

explains, John has often eaten 'on desert islands', 'fried in oil...for breakfast' (p. 36) is interpreted by Watts as an image of greedy, decadent, self-gratification: 'Go to your lover, girl; live on porpoises fried in oil on desert islands; but leave me - to my art' (p. 36). Once again, sexuality is linked to food and desire, while the focus on the porpoise as a creature which consumes and is consumed, invites decoding as a reference to Woolf's relations with Vita and the dynamics of the lesbian partnerships in which they were both involved.

These questions of identity, sexuality and creativity are also bound up with images of death. The image of Ophelia, which haunts the revised version of Freshwater, epitomises Terry's changing identities, as one self dies and is replaced by another. When Terry's death is announced the Ophelia theme becomes predominant. For Tennyson the death is a subject for poetry, while his celebration of her tragedy, 'wearing the white flower of a blameless life', reiterates familiar Victorian sentimentalities about women and death. The play also alludes to Watts's paintings of Terry as Ophelia, particularly 'Found Drowned'.⁶⁸ Watts and Tennyson contrive artistic tributes to the dead Ellen - who then makes her entrance to a series of one-liners:

TENN.

Ahem. I have written the first six lines. Listen.
Ode on the death of Ellen Terry, a beautiful young
woman who was found drowned.

[Enter ELLEN. Everybody turns round in
astonishment.]

MR C.

But you're in Heaven!

TENN.

Found drowned.

MRS C.

Brandy's no use!

NELL

Is this a madhouse?

MR C.

Are you a fact?

NELL

I'm Ellen Terry.

(p. 35)

Woolf again blends fact with fantasy. Terry writes in her memoirs that during her period of exile, she was confirmed as dead by her father who identified the body of a drowned girl as Terry's:

Then a dreadful thing happened. A body was found in the river - the dead body of a young woman, very fair and slight and tall. Every one thought it was my body.

I had gone away without a word. No one knew where I was. My own father identified the corpse, and Floss and Marion, at their boarding-school, were put into mourning. The mother went. She kept her head under the shock of the likeness, and bethought her of a 'strawberry mark on my left arm'. (Really it was on my left knee.) That settled it, for there was no such mark to be found upon the poor corpse. It was just at this moment that the news came to me in my country retreat that I had been found dead, and I flew up to London to give ocular

proof to my poor distracted parents that I was
alive.69

Interestingly, Terry's account of the macabre farce of her presumed death hinges upon parental misrecognition, manifested in a misreading of the body. In Woolf's dramatisation of the incident, the comedy of misrecognition is transferred to the scene of Terry's reappearance: the question now is whether she (rather than John Craig) is a 'fact'.

This leads us to the most striking difference between the first and second versions of Freshwater. In the final revised script, Terry's final escape with Craig from Freshwater to the supposedly more liberated scene at WC1 omits the cross-dressing, rendering the comedy of the last act more timid than the earlier Freshwater. The manuscript of the 1935 version contains the following deleted passage at Terry's entrance:

MRS C [who is looking out of the window] Ahem!
I think that's a fact in the raspberry canes.

TENN [dropping his book in a rage]
Oh Heaven heaven! Facts are the death of poetry!

[Enter Craig]

MR C Are you a fact young man?

JOHN My name's Craig. Lieutenant John Craig at your service. Sorry to interrupt. Afraid I've come at an inconvenient hour. But I've called to fetch Ellen. By appointment. Ah - here she is!

[Enter Ellen in trousers]

NELL Oh John!

JOHN Hallo Nell. Ready to start?

WATTS Miserable girl - if girl I can still call you. I could forgive you much. I had indeed forgiven you all. I was about to take you back onto the model's throne. but now that I see you as you are -

[he points at her trousers]
unveiled!

TENN Hang it all Watts; we know what the veil meant!

WATTS Facts! Damn facts! 70

(Alongside Craig's entrance, Woolf scribbles a marginal note, 'there is the fact!'). This sequence, as in the first version of Freshwater, exploits the visual comedy of Terry's transvestism, which, if Craig were played by Ann Stephen, would be compounded by the spectacle of two female performers in drag presenting themselves as lovers. However, the passage appears in the published script as follows:

MR.C. [who is looking out of the window]
Ahem! I think that's a fact in the raspberry canes.

TENN.
Facts? Damn facts. Facts are the death of poetry.

MR.C.
Damn facts...All the same, that was a fact in the raspberry canes. [Enter CRAIG.] Are you a fact, young man?

CRAIG
My name's Craig. John Craig of the Royal Navy. Sorry to interrupt. Afraid I've come at an

inconvenient hour. I've called to fetch Ellen by appointment.

MRS. C.
Ellen?

CRAIG
Yes. Chastity, Patience, the Muse, what d'you call her.
Ah here she is.

ELLEN
John!

TENN
Queen Rose of the rosebud garden of girls!

WATTS
Ellen, Ellen, painted, powdered. Miserable girl. I could have forgiven you much. I had forgiven you all. But now that I see you as you are - painted, powdered - unveiled -

TENN.
Remember Watts; the ancient Egyptians said that the veil had something to do with -

WATTS
Don't bother about the ancient Egyptians now, Alfred. Now that I see you as you are, painted, powdered, I cannot do it. Vanish with your lover. Eat porpoises on desert islands.
(p. 40)

Presumably, Ellen remains on stage in whatever costume she was wearing at the beginning of the scene. Woolf does not specify her costume in the stage directions, but as it invites no comment from Watts or Tennyson, one assumes that her bathing dress in Act Two has been replaced by attire more appropriate to the situation. Watts's references to Ellen as 'painted, powdered and unveiled' assume a different significance without the costume change to trousers. Moreover, Watts's

consternation and denunciations on Craig's entrance lose their impact as Watts had already discovered Terry's liaison with Craig, and forgiven her, earlier in the scene. His anger here is prompted by Craig's return to collect Ellen, which implies she intends to leave her husband. The impact of his 'fallen woman' invective is diluted without the cross-dressing stage business.

Why, at the climax of the play, does Woolf appear to abandon a device which is critical to the theatrical effect? As I noted in Chapter One, cross-dressing was for a number of female modernists a subversive gesture, a parody and interrogation of heterosexual norms - one which was, moreover, directly linked with the staging of lesbian identities. In the earlier version of Freshwater, as I have shown, Terry's adoption of trousers teasingly raises these issues, only to drop them. In this version, the lesbian implications of Act Two are even more thoroughly contained by a conventional comic closure. The end of the second version of Freshwater depends upon verbal rather than visual humour, as Woolf falls back upon self-conscious parody of the contrivances and artificialities of poetic language:

MR. AND MRS. C., JOHN AND ELLEN [all together]

The coffins are on the fly. It's time to say good-bye.

MRS C.

We are going to the land of the sun.

MR C.

We are going to the land of the moon

JOHN.

We're going to W.C.1.

NELL

Thank God we're going soon.

MRS.C.

Good-bye,good-bye, the coffins are on the fly.

MR.C Farewell to Dimbola; Freshwater, farewell.

JOHN

I say, Nell, I want a rhyme to fly.

NELL

Heavens John, I can only think of fly.

(p. 42)

Such laboured punning retreats not only from the subversive implications of Terry's former transvestism, but also from the public register of theatre and performance to the safer realm of 'literariness'.

On the surface, then, Freshwater works as a modernist comedy of manners in which Woolf uses the conventions of romantic comedy against the pretensions of high Victorianism. At a deeper level, however, the play is concerned with sexuality and with the social construction of gender. It is also a complexly autobiographical text, in which the central, protean

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figure of Ellen Terry is the subject of shifting, provisional and multiple identifications: the 'real-life' Ellen Terry, Woolf herself, Vita, Angelica Bell. To these ends, Woolf concocts a palimpsestic blend of drama, biography, fiction, fantasy and, perhaps most importantly, autobiography. As such, it is an instance of that body of autobiographical texts in Woolf's work which is, evidently, at odds with the conventional forms of life writing. Liz Stanley concludes:

Howsoever 'autobiography' is defined, it is clear that claims can be made for the existence of an autobiographical corpus in Woolf's writing existing largely outside of the conventional forms that autobiography takes and haunting much of her 'other' writing. Her claims as a biographer are more definite, more focussed, but perhaps more revolutionary.⁷¹

Stanley cites Orlando, Flush and Roger Fry as examples, and I would add Freshwater to this list. Woolf herself trivialised Freshwater and certainly made no attempt to publish the script. In my view it is not only the unveiling of Ellen Terry which Woolf abandons in the final act, it is the unveiling of her 'self'. Freshwater remains between the scenes of Woolf's writing, yet Woolf's occupation of this position on the borderline of, and mediating between, biography, autobiography and fantasy, constitutes a radical intervention in both gender and genre. Woolf does

indeed cast into fresh water, but the rod is then
withdrawn. The imagination had dashed itself against
something hard.

CHAPTER 4

TALKING HEADS:

SYLVIA PLATH'S VERSE DRAMAS

4.1. HISTORICAL AND LITERARY CONTEXTS

The previous two chapters have considered the dramatic writings of two writers who are located culturally and historically within the established period of 'high' modernism. In their different ways, Stein and Woolf experimented with the forms and techniques of drama within the parameters of the modernism of their period. Stein's plays, as we have seen, interrogated dramatic representation and referentiality at a fundamental level, refusing (in the early plays, at least) to yield significance. Later work showed Stein negotiating existing dramatic models and theatrical forms without surrendering to the claims of realism. Woolf, conversely, twists the realist mode of romantic comedy in Freshwater to her own ends, producing a text which is both cryptic and self-referential.

In the work of both writers, I have argued, it is not just the nature of the gendered self but the very meaning of these terms that is subject to question. In this respect, as I argued in Chapter One, it is more useful to examine the work of these writers not as exclusively modernist but rather within the framework of a dialogue between a variety of modernisms and postmodernisms. As I shall argue, this has particular implications for the work of Sylvia Plath, whose own

work was self-consciously defined in relation to the emerging paradigm of literary modernism itself. Before moving onto what I see as the specific concerns of Plath's dramatic writings - the construction of female subjectivity in language, in relation to pregnancy and motherhood - I aim first to outline Plath's literary and philosophical links with modernism.

In terms of literary history, Plath's work needs to be seen alongside the emergence of the concept of modernism itself. As Alan Sinfield points out, the literary-critical category of modernism was under construction during the period that Plath was first writing, the mid-1950s:

Defining of the concept began, to all intents and purposes, in the 1950's. The term "Modernism" was not generally available, as we now use it, until about 1960...It was as a US construct - often recognized explicitly as such - that Modernism was recentred in Britain from the end of the 1950's.'

Plath's literary and academic career developed against the background of the invention and reinvention of modernism in the United States and then in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s. She studied English literature as an undergraduate at Smith College in the United States from 1950 to 1955, and as a postgraduate at Cambridge between 1955 and 1957. She returned briefly to Smith

as a teacher from 1957 to 1958 and then worked full-time as a writer in Boston from 1958 to 1959 before moving to England in 1960 where she lived and worked until her suicide in 1963. As both an academic and a writer, Plath was aware of the critical debates around Leavisism, New Criticism and modernism, and between the Movement and the avant-garde: these are important factors in the construction of Plath's literary identity. As Sinfield observes: 'Modernism and Postmodernism are not just there in the world, they are concepts which construct us, even as we or our forbears have constructed them.'² Plath's dramatic writing, I will argue, is situated between modernism, as it was constituted in the 1950s, and what would subsequently become known as postmodernism. Through its interrogation of unitary subjectivity, and its exploration of the cultural significations bestowed on the female body, her dramatic writing engages in similar questions to those addressed by Stein and Woolf.

Several characteristics of Plath's writing, and of her conception of the role of the writer, can be identified as typically modernist. There is, in particular, her self-conscious experimentation with language and form, and her conception of the writer as an alienated, autonomous and unique individual whose

work is the expression of a transcendent selfhood. In a 1958 journal entry, she develops a metaphor for her writing which directly and self-consciously echoes the classically male modernist notions of transcendence and impersonality:

I had a vision...of the title of my book of poems, commemorated above. It came to me suddenly with great clarity that The Earthenware Head was the right title, the only title. It is derived, organically, from the title and subject of my poem 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', and takes on for me the compelling mystic aura of a sacred object, a terrible and holy token of identity sucking unto itself magnetwise the farflung words which link and fuse to make up my own queer and grotesque world out of earth, clay, matter; the head shapes its poems and prophecies, as the earth-flesh wears in time, the head swells ponderous with gathered wisdoms.☯

The earthenware head is an image of detached, autonomous subjectivity. The head is traditionally associated with vision, inspiration and interpretation; as the site of the mind it is also, arguably, the scene of writing. What is apparent in Plath's earthenware head, then, is her adoption of humanist and patriarchal notions of the unitary subject as disembodied. Judith Butler notes that 'men have traditionally been associated with the disembodied or transcendent feature of human existence and women with the bodily and immanent feature of human existence.'⁴ It is interesting that Plath's journal entry proceeds to

identify Ted Hughes with the earthenware head: 'I discover, with my crazy eye for anagrams, that the initials spell T-E-H, which is simply "to Edward Hughes," or Ted, which is, of course my dedication.'⁵⁵ The image of the head, then, is an appropriation of a traditionally masculine perspective, 'the disembodied transcendence of consciousness' to use Butler's terms.⁵⁶ Plath's engagement with the mind/body dualism has further implications in terms of Butler's analysis. Butler takes up Simone De Beauvoir's dialectic of Self and Other:

Women are 'Other' according to Beauvoir in so far as they are defined by a masculine perspective that seeks to safeguard its own disembodied status through identifying women generally with the bodily sphere. Masculine disembodiment is only possible on the condition that women occupy their bodies as their essential and enslaving identities...From this belief that the body is Other, it is not a far leap to the conclusion that others are their bodies, while the masculine 'I' is a noncorporeal soul. The body rendered as Other - the body repressed or denied and, then, projected - re-emerges for this 'I' as the view of others as essentially body.⁷

By inhabiting the earthenware head as a writer, Plath seeks to escape from the gender limitations of embodiment, whereby 'anatomy is destiny'. In other words, she defines her literary identity in traditionally masculine terms. The mind/body dialectic, as we shall see, is critical to Plath's

experiments within the dramatic form, which for her served as an appropriate medium for the articulation of disembodied voices. In 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board', Plath explores the relations between language and subjectivity, while in her later radio play Three Women, she examines the dispersal of subjectivity in pregnancy. This last emphasis marks the difference between Plath and her modernist forebears. As E. Ann Kaplan has noted, 'the revolutionary modernist discovery of subjectivity (with Freud and his theory of the unconscious)...ironically, did not lead to discussion of the mother's subjectivity; rather it produced the mother as the one through whom the "I," the child, become[s] a subject.'²⁰ Plath's work shifts the ground to the mother's subjectivity itself.

As is well known, the postwar period was one in which gender anxiety proliferated. Women were exhorted through an ideology of domesticity to take primary responsibility for the care of the family and home. Yet they were also encouraged to seek employment outside the household as part of the postwar industrial boom. This work was often part-time and the woman's wages were seen as a supplement to the male breadwinner's income, while her work was often menial and considered subordinate to male labour. Women were subject to a double-bind: urged to create the ideal

home and compelled to contribute to the funding to sustain it. As Sinfield points out:

We are looking at an inflection in the historic exploitation of female labour - comparable with exploitation of the working class and the subjects of imperialism...The heavy ideological work around domesticity indicates, as usual, that they are telling us contradictory stories: the enticements to women to earn money and consume conflict with the demand to stay in a homely role.⁹

Women in Britain and the US in the 1950s may have enjoyed equal access to education, but surveys revealed that many did not intend pursuing careers after marriage. 'Women in college', Sinfield comments, 'said they regarded career achievement as masculine, unfeminine and hence unattractive and that their role was to establish a home for husband and children.'¹⁰ Situated in the midst of all this, Plath confronted conflicting ideologies as a woman and writer. Her journal contains numerous entries which indicate that her internalisation of these contradictions caused conflicts as she struggled to reconcile her roles as a daughter, wife and mother with her declared vocation as an author. In a Journal entry of 1956 she wrote:

I'd love to cook and make a house, and surge force into a man's dreams, and write, if he could talk and walk and work and passionately want to do his career. I can't bear to think of this potential for loving and living going brown and sere in me. Yet the choice is so important...What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination...It is

that synthesizing spirit, that 'shaping' force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire.''

Here the ideology of domesticity and Plath's conception of authorship conflict: she 'fears' they are incompatible and worries that a 'choice' may be necessary. Plath envisions her writing as ultimately transcendent, divorced from material reality and hence threatened by the ideology of domesticity which she both embraces and resists. In this respect Plath's writing echoes the gender conflicts and confusions of the postwar period. It is these conflicts of self and other, mind and body, masculine and feminine that are the subject of her two verse dramas.

4.2. POETIC DIALOGUE AND VERSE DRAMA

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion of Plath's dramatic texts, we need to address the poetic contexts and traditions in which they are situated. In particular, I want to consider the implications of the dialogic mode of poetry, and the vogue for verse drama in the 1950s, as issues of genre are pertinent to the texts' specific exploration of language and subjectivity. Firstly, is it legitimate or useful to

describe 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board' as a play? Printed as an appendix in Plath's Collected Poems, it is subtitled 'A Verse Dialogue'.¹² Hughes describes it as 'a poem "for two voices", never produced or published' (p. 17), 'a piece which Plath 'never showed' (p. 276). It is worth pausing over Hughes's comments here, for they contain some intriguing ambiguities. Firstly, it is unclear what Hughes's quotation marks around 'for two voices' are intended to signify: is this his definition of the poem, or Plath's? Do they indicate that the 'two voices' are to be understood literally or metaphorically - is this a piece designed for reading, or for performance? Secondly, his assertion that the poem was 'never produced', and 'never showed' is ambiguous. Does Hughes mean that it was never shown to him, or never shown, i.e., staged, publically?

Plath herself referred to it first as 'a short verse dialogue'¹³ and later as 'a long lumbering dialogue verse poem.'¹⁴ These shifting definitions are, I suggest, significant in that they position the text in an interestingly ambivalent relation to both the dramatic and the poetic mediums. A 'verse dialogue for two voices' is not the same thing as a 'play for two characters'. Subsequent commentators have similarly differed over what to call the text: for

Jacqueline Rose, it is a 'verse play'¹⁵; for Anne Stevenson it is a 'long poem'¹⁶; while for Paul Alexander it is 'a long poem consisting of dialogue.'¹⁷ According to one biographer, even Plath herself was somewhat flummoxed by the text, and it was this that led her to discard it:

...when Plath read the final draft, she realized that she had produced a poem so odd - nearly six hundred lines of rhymed dialogue between its two characters, Sibyl and Leroy - that no magazine would print it. She did not even bother to mail it out.¹⁸

There is a slightly occult tinge to this account which suggests an uncanny parallel between the production of the poem and its subject-matter: Plath produces the text almost against her understanding and will, as if by demonic possession. While I am sceptical about this interpretation, the oddness of the text, which for Plath, apparently, rendered it unprintable, nonetheless seems to me to be part of its peculiar effect. If it is regarded as a poem, then it can be seen in relation to a tradition of dialogic poetry that itself has a significant, and potentially radical, bearing upon the construction of subjectivity within poetic discourse.

Anthony Easthope argues in his study of the development of English verse, Poetry as Discourse that

the dominant tradition from the seventeenth century onwards, has been geared towards creating the illusion of the speaking subject, 'producing, according to the specificities of poetry, a position for the supposedly unified "individual" as "point of departure" for discourse rather than its effect.'¹⁹ A key characteristic of this dominant tradition and ideology is its monologic form: as Easthope demonstrates, the line of continuity from the Shakespearean sonnet through to Romantic poetry is the construction of a unified and coherent speaking voice with which the reader can identify, the voice, that is, of the 'transcendental ego'.²⁰ Identifying this voice with the 'bourgeois' era, Easthope looks to the period preceding the mid-seventeenth century and, significantly, the modernist period (which marks the bourgeois epoch 'in its terminal crisis'²¹) for a challenge to tradition. The feudal ballad, argues Easthope, is 'poetic discourse which offers a relative position for the ego, a position produced in acknowledged relationship to a field of forces, social, subjective, linguistic'²². Modernist poetry, similarly, 'can be seen as denying a position for the transcendental ego. By insisting on itself as production it asserts the subject as made, constituted, relative rather than absolute.'²³

The dialogic mode of poetry, which is found within both periods, also challenges and destabilises this illusory coherence: in Catherine Belsey's terms, it is an 'interrogative' form rather than a 'closed' one. In an analysis of the dialogic form in Renaissance poetry, Belsey makes a comment upon Marvell's 'Dialogue between Soul and Body' that seems directly relevant to Plath's text:

Marvell often uses the dialogue form in his poems to set up the terms of a debate which is not completed in the text. In 'A Dialogue between Soul and Body', for instance, it is the Body which, startlingly, has the last word, but there is no sense that the debate is over as the poem ends, and it is the expectation of closure generated by classic realism, I suggest, which has led to the critical conjecture, on purely formal grounds, that the poem is incomplete... In Marvell's poem the discourses of soul and body are isolated from each other in a formal debate. There is no logical victory for either side, and no intervention by the 'author' to resolve the debate.²⁴

The dialogue poem, which refuses the resolution and closure of the conventionally monologic poetic form, challenges the expectations of genre because it cannot be contained within the naturalised multi-voiced, character-based form of drama. In the case of 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board' we have a text which is both poetry and drama - and neither: this doubleness and ambiguity produces an unsettling plurality. The fact that Hughes relegates it to the notes in the

Collected Poems is perhaps further evidence of its generic indeterminacy. As I shall argue below, this experimentation with form is directly relevant to the content of the poem.

Three Women has equally been subject to competing and equivocal generic definitions. In the Collected Poems, it is designated 'A Poem for Three Voices', and in the notes Hughes refers to it as a 'piece...written for radio' (p. 292); in a letter to her mother, Plath describes it as 'a long poem (about 378 lines!) for three voices.'²⁵ Both seemed to agree that the provenance of the text was poetic rather than dramatic: when it was first published in Winter Trees (its title placed in quotation marks rather than, as elsewhere, italicised, emphasizing that it is a poem, not a playtext), Hughes emphasizes its transitional status, suggesting that it was 'a bridge between The Colossus and Ariel', in that 'it was written to be read aloud.'²⁶ Not performed, but recited: this is poetry, not theatre. Elsewhere, however, Hughes indicates a different perspective, urging that it 'has to be heard, as naive speech, rather than read as a literary artefact.'²⁷ As with 'Dialogue', commentators have defined the text differently.²⁸ In contrast to that text, Three Women contains a stage direction which establishes the setting, 'A Maternity Ward and round

about' (p. 176), but it seems a purely notional one, a general indicator of locale and mood rather than the kind of informative and prescriptive delineation of scene and space that we might expect from a 'proper' playtext. Whereas the reference to 'a maternity ward' might suggest a precisely-realised single setting for the 'action', the rider 'and round about' disperses this scenic and spatial unity, indicating that the real scene of the drama is a more intangible one: a collective psychic landscape, perhaps. It is also the case that the speakers of the poem (in its final version) are voices, not characters. The verbal text dispenses with the familiar theatrical mechanisms of monologue, dialogue, aside and soliloquy to move between speech and thought and internal and external utterance. As I argue below in the section on Three Women, these techniques are characteristic of the scenic and verbal fluidity of radio drama; but as with 'Dialogue', they rupture the unity and coherence of both poetic and dramatic discourse as part of the text's exploration of language and subjectivity.

In the pages that follow, if I refer to these texts as verse dramas, it is with all these complexities in mind. Another way of defining both texts is to place them more definitely within the dramatic mode, specifically within the established

medium of verse drama. As I noted in Chapter One, the vogue for verse drama in the early to mid-1950s, which had in turn a significant impact on radio drama, provided a link with the modernism of the pre-war period, particularly in the plays of T. S. Eliot, Christopher Fry, Dylan Thomas and Louis MacNiece. The proponents of verse drama offered a formal reaction against the prevailing realism of the English theatre of the time. Its rationale was, as Robert Hewison puts it, 'that a theatre of ritual using the heightened speech of verse enabled the dramatist to deal with the universals of God and Man by transcending the petty naturalism that made the discussion of such subjects look absurd.'²⁷ As I also pointed out in Chapter One, the concerns and techniques of verse drama were typically modernist, in that it was attempting to find a stage language capable of synthesizing speech, thought and imagination in order to dramatise the movements of consciousness rather than of external reality.

In practice, verse drama rarely lived up to the exalted claims being made for it. In the case of Christopher Fry, author of, most notably, The Lady's Not for Burning (1948), stage success was dependent upon what Hewison describes as 'richer and richer verse evenly distributed among characters in flimsier and

flimsier dramatic situations.'³⁰ According to Raymond Williams, the use of verse was merely decorative:

In his plays for the West End theatre, Fry added a variation of style to a kind of drama which was already popular. This was the comedy of manners in its weakened modern sense, in the descent from Wilde and Shaw...the form had become one of incidental wit, of fashionable conversation, and, typically, of costume...Fry took this form, and added the play of verse to it.³¹

If Fry's verse plays seemed trivial, Eliot's own drama was increasingly compromised by the realist forms it ostensibly opposed. Murder in the Cathedral, written at the high modernist moment of 1931, had challenged naturalistic expectations, dramatising the consciousness of the protagonist through its emblematic Tempters drawn from the medieval Moralities, and with its direct addresses to the audience and its Chorus of the Women of Canterbury. Later plays, like The Confidential Clerk (1953) and The Elder Statesman (1958), placed realistic characters speaking verse within naturalistic settings, to the point that, as Hewison concludes, 'there seemed little to be gained from writing in verse at all.'³² Moreover, as far as Eliot was concerned, verse drama was driven by an essentially conservative cultural politics. Writing in 1951, he claimed that such a drama would fulfill the function of art, 'to give us some perception of an

order in life, by imposing an order on it' and thence bringing its audience 'to a condition of serenity, stillness and reconciliation.'³³ Such verse drama was, above all, a self-consciously elitist form.

Perhaps closer to Plath's form of verse drama is Dylan Thomas's Under Milk Wood (1952), which Plath heard performed by the author at Amherst during his 1953 lecture tour of United States. In contrast to the theatre-based work of Fry and Eliot, Thomas's 'play for voices' operates in the ambiguous space between poetic dialogue and drama also occupied by Plath's works. While Thomas's picture of Welsh working-class village existence also provides a sharp contrast with the aristocratic ethos of English verse dramatists. Under Milk Wood points in the direction of Three Women in its fluidly environmental use of scenic space, in its interweaving of characters and choric voices, in its movement between action, dream, memory and imagination, and in its combination of interior monologue, speech and narrative. Nevertheless, the plurality of discourses in Thomas's text still operates within a controlling, authoritative perspective which ultimately provides a sense of closure: it is, quite literally, the voice of the author himself. I find it telling that Thomas opted to perform the play by himself, as a solo stint. Effectively, it ensured that he controlled

and co-ordinated his own impersonations of the diverse voices in the play within the master-discourse of the authorial voice. Thus Thomas dramatised a psychic and social landscape that was actively unified in the speech and consciousness of the poet himself. As Williams concludes, the effect of closure produced by the play is fundamentally conservative and pessimistic:

The people, in the end, hardly talk to each other; each is locked in a world of dream or a convention of public behaviour...the impossibility of significant relationship is directly related to the miscellany of self-enclosed voices, parodied and enacted in a single internal voice; and the impossibility of action - of struggle and change in the world - is at once taken for granted and ratified. Only the voice and its variations are left, to the despairing poet.³⁴

It is also, it hardly needs stressing, a play written from a firmly male perspective, which centres upon the unproblematic subjectivities of its male characters, and which reinforces the crudest of gender stereotypes in the shape of the sexually-voracious Polly Garter, and the castrating figure of Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard.

Seen against this background, the mediation of the poetic and the dramatic in Plath's two texts can be seen as a radical intervention in a conservative theatrical form: as I aim to demonstrate below, Plath's dialogic exploration of language and gender identity

contrasts sharply with Eliot's attempts to reconstruct a sense of order and unity in his verse drama. It is, moreover, a specifically gendered intervention in which form and content are inextricably linked. In 'Dialogue', the linkage operates in terms of the debate between masculine and feminine accounts of language and poetry, and thus of masculine and feminine subject-positions within language. In Three Women, it is seen in the exploration of the relations between patriarchal language and the maternal body. Offering plurality and openness rather than closure and resolution of contradictions, both verse dramas are situated on the margins of both the poetic and the theatrical mediums, and operate critically upon both.

4.3. THE MEDIUM OF VERSE: 'DIALOGUE OVER A OUIJA BOARD' (1957)

In a letter to her mother dated August 6, 1957, Plath referred to her latest project as:

a short verse dialogue which is supposed to sound just like conversation but is written in strict 7-line stanzas, rhyming ababcbc. It frees me from my writer's cramp and is at last a good subject - a dialogue over a Ouija board which is both dramatic and philosophical. ³⁵

She also regarded this move towards drama as a potentially important development for her as a writer:

I really think I would like to write a verse play, now. If I practice enough on getting color into speech, I can write in quite elaborate rhymed and alliterative forms without sounding like self-conscious poetry, but rather like conversation.³⁶

As I noted in the previous section, the resulting dialogue was never submitted for publication by Plath; and Ted Hughes (in his capacity as editor of the Collected Poems) is fairly dismissive of the piece, relegating it to an appendix to the poem 'Ouija', where, according to Hughes, 'it is relevant.' (CP, p. 17) The text is only loosely dated by Hughes as having been written 'some time in 1957-8' (CP, p. 276) With the exception of an analysis by Timothy Materer, which discusses the text in biographical terms, as Plath's rejection of Christianity³⁷, 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board' has been largely ignored by Plath's critics, which may be partly because of its marginal position in the Collected Poems. Yet for my purposes it merits attention as Plath's first experiment with dramatic dialogue, and which uses the form to explore the relations between language, identity and subjectivity.

In his comment on the origin of the text, Hughes points to its biographical context:

SP occasionally amused herself, with one or two others, by holding her finger on an upturned glass, in a ring of letters laid out on a smooth table, and questioning the 'spirits'... 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board'... used the actual 'spirit' text of one of the ouija sessions. The spirit named here was the one regularly applied to. His news could be accurate. (The first time he was guided through Littlewood's football coupon, he predicted all thirteen of the draws made on the following Saturday - but anticipated them, throughout, by just one match. The first dividend at that time, in 1956, was £75,000. The spirit's later attempts were progressively less accurate and very soon no better than anyone else's.) Usually his communications were gloomy and macabre, though not without wit. (CP, p. 276)

Hughes seems concerned here to make light of the ouija sessions, noting only the trivial ends to which the spirit's predictions were put; but he is also careful not to implicate himself directly in this activity, referring to the anonymous 'one or two others' as Plath's companions in the ritual. Yet his intimate knowledge suggests that he was a participant. Anne Stevenson observes:

During the Hughes's year together in Cambridge, Sylvia had begun to take an interest in astrology and the supernatural. For her twenty-fourth birthday Ted had given Sylvia a pack of tarot cards. She already regarded herself as 'psychic' and a dreamer of presentiments. Occasionally the two played with a home-made Ouija board - a wine glass upturned on a table with cut-out letters set in a circle around it. 36

At a literal level, 'Dialogue' can be read as an exploration of what was in the 1950s a fashionable,

mildly transgressive recreational activity for the bohemian class to which Plath and Hughes belonged. A range of attitudes to the Ouija ritual are rehearsed in the text. At the opening of 'Dialogue' Sybil is sceptical about the activity Leroy has proposed:

SIBYL:

Go get the glass, then. But I know tonight will be
In every respect like every other night:
While we're sitting, face to face across the
[coffee -
Table, trying our luck...

...Yet the clock
Has never failed to see our fabling sheared
Down to a circle of letters: twenty-six
In all. Plus Yes. Plus No. And this bare board.
(CP, p. 276)

Although Sybil implies that the Ouija board game is repetitive and futile, she does not challenge spiritualism per se. Sybil adopts the traditional medium's perspective here, conceiving of the spirit world as autonomous. As R. Laurence Moore observes in his study of spiritualism and American culture, 'everything in the spiritualist tradition went toward asserting the powerlessness of mediums over their spirit controls.'²³ Leroy, however, represents a different perspective. He views the activity as a game and does not engage with its more serious implications. He is concerned simply to enjoy the moment; he sees the Ouija board ritual merely as an entertainment

appropriate for the evening. He counters Sybil's negativism by drawing attention to their cosy circumstances:

That's how you always talk before we start.
But I've brought the brandy and built the fire
[up...
(p. 277)

Leroy considers setting the scene by creating an appropriate mood and atmosphere to be as important as the activity itself. The questions he asks concern money, work, love and the afterlife. For Leroy the Ouija board is a form of fortune telling: like Plath and her companions (according to Hughes), he and Sybil have previously used it unsuccessfully to predict the pools. Their behaviour, a combination of seriousness and playfulness, represents one facet of the occult revival of the late 1950s. As Moore observes, this combination subsequently fed into what would become the 1960s counter-culture:

In that decade [the 1960's] an amazing range of people found it possible to explore witchcraft (black and white), telepathy, Zen, astrology and alchemy (all while smoking dope) with no sense of having opened an oddly mixed bag of things.⁴⁰

This movement, Moore notes, was allied to 'middle-class social values' yet 'the participants in a fringe

activity did see themselves as freed from certain of the attitudinal norms of everyday society.⁴¹ Leroy's brandy drinking and attention to scenic detail is unashamedly bourgeois; in the spirit of an evening of light-hearted indulgence, dabbling with the Ouija board is seen as a harmless form of transgression.

But the phenomenon also had a gendered dimension. As Alex Owen notes in her study of Victorian spiritualism:

Within the seance, and in the name of spirit possession, women openly and flagrantly transgressed gender norms. Female mediums, with the approval of those present, assumed a male role and sometimes also a trance persona...The Victorian seance room became a battleground across which the tensions implicit in the acquisition of gendered subjectivity and the assumption of spiritual power were played out.⁴²

The occult revival of the late 1950s can also be seen to have provided a site of otherness for women, beyond the confinements of the domestic sphere. Niamh Baker compares the oppressive gender ideologies of postwar Britain with those of the Victorians: 'The postwar British woman was more robust than her Victorian grandmother, but she was still the Angel in the house...an angel who wished to return to her proper sphere, the home.'⁴³ Read in these terms, then, 'Dialogue' examines the appeal of dabbling in the

occult as a kind of game, enacting a ritual which is re-played as a form of theatre.

I shall return to the issue of gender in 'Dialogue' below'. Here I would note that game-playing is central to the conception of 'Dialogue' in more ways than one. Plath loved riddles, and the critic often finds him or herself enmeshed in her conundrums, or involved in the task of 'decoding' her writing. As Steven Gould Axelrod observes:

Her wish to tell the truth (as a dream may tell the truth of the unconscious) attached itself to her need to camouflage (as a dream tells the truth in disguise)...Her paradoxical drives to light and veil parallel Dickinson's. The two poets shared a struggle for voice that involved duplicity as a tactic, perhaps because both endured a painful personal history of intimacy withheld or breached, privacy invaded, and the right to speak placed in question. By composing cryptograms, they established an apparent connection to others and achieved the standing of public utterance, while at the same time preserving their privacy and avoiding the reprisal that direct communication would have invited.⁴⁴

'Dialogue' is in some respects an extended cryptogram, as Plath's need for duplicity is transposed into dramatic game-playing: drama provided a form in which the desire to 'tell the truth' and simultaneously to 'camouflage' through disguise could be realised. The concept of 'truth' however, has a bearing on the dialogue's autobiographical implications: this is a

text which contains a thinly-veiled dramatisation of the relationship between Plath and Hughes, particularly as writers.

The circumstances in which Plath wrote the dialogue are also important in this respect. Hughes's vague dating can be clarified if we refer to Plath's journal, where she talks about the progression of her verse drama in an entry dated 9 August, 1957:

a Friday, uncomfortably near the uprooting of roots, a clear blue-white morning about 9:30, and me coldly and gingerly writing about 14 lines on my long lumbering dialogue verse poem with two people arguing over a Ouija board.⁴⁵

During this period Plath and Hughes were having a seven week 'writing vacation' on Cape Cod. Hughes was enjoying considerable literary success: The Hawk in the Rain had been selected by the Poetry Book Society as its Autumn choice and his poems also appeared in numerous periodicals. Plath comments on this in the same journal entry that she discusses 'Dialogue': 'Ted's success, which I must cope with this fall with my job, loving it, and him to have it, but feeling so wishfully that I could make both of us feel better by having it with him.'⁴⁶ On August 8th, Plath had received a rejection slip for a book of her poetry and was berating herself for not working hard enough: 'I

haven't written a poem for six months until this long exercise in freer speech and extended subject, and haven't written a story since October except for one...which was rejected'.⁴⁷ Given this context, the argumentative form of 'Dialogue' becomes significant, as the text dramatizes the tensions and conflicts between the two writers, each competing for supremacy. Pan becomes a muse that each fights to appropriate. In my view, however, the text is more complex than this, and a strictly biographical reading is reductive. 'Dialogue' explores the role of the author and stages the debates between the masculine and feminine in language.

As I interpret it, the Ouija board is an intermediary between the conscious and unconscious. This device is self-reflexive, as the characters ultimately acknowledge that they are manipulating the spirit to represent themselves: 'Pan's a mere puppet of our two intuitions.' (CP, p. 279) Leroy's and Sybil's respective 'intuitions' are, I suggest, representations of difference between masculine and feminine subjectivities. Indeed the dialogue as it develops between Leroy and Sybil presents two theories of language and it is this, rather than their characterization, which I see as the subject of the drama. As I will demonstrate, Leroy is the kind of

writer Roland Barthes identifies as the ecrivant, 'a "transitive" man' who 'posits a goal (to give evidence, to explain, to instruct), of which language is merely a means; for him language supports a praxis, it does not constitute one.'⁴⁹ Sybil, on the other hand, is the ecrivain, the author who 'conceives of literature as an end, the world restores it to him as a means: and it is in this perpetual inconclusiveness that the author rediscovers the world'.⁴⁹ Or, as Susan Sellers summarizes, the difference is between the writer 'who believes they have something to say and uses language to say this as unequivocally as possible' and the writer 'who explores the potential of language to generate (multiple) meanings'.⁵⁰ Barthes denounced the former's adherence to singular and intrinsic meaning which he saw as a means of perpetrating the dominant ideology and as an assertion of power. This is Leroy's role in the dialogue, and is shown in his attempts to impose his interpretation of Pan's language over Sybil's more open and exploratory responses to the Ouija board text. The text that Leroy produces is lisible, or 'readable', as the meaning is clearly spelt out and 'the role of the reader is reduced to passively following the words on the page.'⁵¹ Sybil, however, produces a scriptable or 'writable' text, 'since the participation of its reader is actively sought to co-produce meanings.'⁵²

Throughout the dialogue, Leroy and Sybil are engaged in a gendered power struggle, conducted on the grounds of language. They play clearly defined roles in Plath's drama: Leroy, 'the King', masters the scene; while Sybil recalls the propheticess of classical mythology. The dialogue begins with Sybil's reluctant assent, 'Go get the glass, then' (p. 276), implying that Leroy has initiated the activity and then directs the proceedings. When Sybil observes that 'nothing happens', Leroy responds by pointing to the first movements of the glass, which effectively start the game. He then invites Sybil's participation: 'Are/ You to ask who's home or I?' (p. 277). When the spirit Pan identifies itself, Sybil is suspicious: 'you don't push/Even a little?' (p. 277) For Sybil, belief in the activity is important, as is trust between the two participants. Leroy, however, appears to want Sybil to believe that the spirit is autonomous, while maintaining control over the proceedings. He invites Sybil to establish an agenda: 'Shall we go on/ Asking about money?' and when she responds negatively he urges 'Well what, then?' (p. 278), coaxing her to initiate a line of questioning. Any initiative Sybil takes creates an illusion of autonomy as Leroy constructs Sybil as his subject through his control of the game. The Ouija board becomes a battleground as Sybil and Leroy each try to appropriate Pan, and the power over

language that the spirit represents. Indeed, the Ouija board is a metaphor for the subject's position in language. The two participants think they are controlling language but it is controlling them.

Despite Sybil's initial suspicions, it is not clear how far Leroy is controlling and manipulating the glass. What is evident is that he loses control because Sybil brings her own interpretation to the sequence of letters spelt out. When the glass spells out 'plumage', Sybil begins to respond to the possibility of the spirit's autonomy:

He spells. I-N. He'll lift
The glass yet as he glides. P-L-U-
M-A-G-E. In plumage. I'd never have thought
To say that. That must be his: his word.
(p. 278)

At this point Sybil has taken over the reading of the letters. Leroy claims 'He's left for Yes, dragging our fingers after' and Sybil then begins to direct the action with her question 'How is he, then?' which leads to the 'In plumage' response. Leroy's comment here that the fingers are being dragged after the glass depicts the actual bodies of the participants in the game become subject to language. The loss of control is compounded by Sybil's appropriation of Pan as she eagerly reads 'In plumage'. Although Sybil is clearly

convinced that these words have emerged from a spiritual source, the interpreter of the text is placed in a less certain position. We don't know whether to read this episode literally or metaphorically: does the text present Pan genuinely as an emissary of the spirit world seeking to cultivate the 'willing suspension of disbelief' in its audience or are we supposed to be aware of either Leroy or Sybil (or both) consciously or unconsciously making the glass move? Thus the dialogue offers itself as a self-reflexive mirror of the reader's relationship to a text and to this text in particular. We are engaged in a process of decoding and interpretation of the language, just as the characters are. Inevitably, the reader is placed in the position of trying to gain hermeneutic power over the text, in an uncanny parallel with the contest between Leroy and Sybil.

As soon as Sybil does take over the reading of the Ouija board text, Leroy becomes increasingly irritated. Initially he is condescending:

You see,
You're melting now, because you think he's hit
An original note. If he'd said, however, merely:
Dead, you'd swear him a victim of our own vain
Ventriloquy. But wings neither you nor I
Would traffic in.
(p. 278)

Sybil begins to control the dialogue: 'Let him finish what he began/ Plumage of what, Pan? P....He starts again' (pp. 278-79). As the glass moves, she races to put the letters together, enjoying a game with language as she endeavours to decipher the unusual combinations and syntax:

O-F-R. He'll
Jog off in jabberwocky now and lose us,

Lapsing into Russian or Serbo-Croat.
A-W-W. He's gone off: what English
Word wears two W's? O-R. Or what?
M-S. Manuscript? He stops. I wish
Those letters separated into sense
instead of brewing us such a balderdash
Of half-hints.
(p. 279)

Despite her frustration, Sybil responds to the patterns of letters as a riddle to be solved. Leroy, however, becomes exasperated and corrects her, appropriating and codifying the letters of the Ouija board text:

You persist in spelling half-hints
Out of a wholeness. Worms, not wings is what
Pan said. A plumage of raw worms.
(p. 279)

Thus Leroy and Sybil represent two approaches to language. Leroy's objective is to define through the letters spelt out on the board, while Sybil experiments with different combinations of letters, playing

language games as she tries to form new words with a Steinian enjoyment of word play and association. The invocation of Lewis Carroll ('jog off in jabberwocky') is apt. In Through the Looking-Glass, the nonsense poem 'Jabberwocky' features in the debate about the philosophy of language between Alice and Humpty Dumpty, who tells her that 'when I use a word...it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less'; and that, moreover, he can 'explain all the the poems that ever were invented - and a good many that haven't been invented yet'.⁵³ Whereas Alice's response to nonsense is sensuous ('It seems very pretty...but it's rather hard to understand!⁵⁴), Humpty Dumpty's is authoritative and interpretative, directed towards definition, the fixing of meaning, arresting the play of the signifier. Plath's text, where Sybil plays Alice to Leroy's Humpty Dumpty, echoes Carroll's interest in the iterability not only of nonsense but of language itself ('"the question is...whether you can make words mean so many different things'); but also his concern with questions of linguistic ownership and authority: '"The question is...which is to be master - that's all"⁵⁵.

I see the dialectic between the ecrivant (Leroy) and the ecrivain (Sybil) as a rehearsal of the differences between the masculine and feminine subject

Throughout the text the difference between Leroy's language and Sybil's is evident. Leroy's images are often violent; In his frustration with Pan he claims: 'He's lazy. Like any young/ Boy, he needs a beating now and then/ To quicken his sluggard's blood.' (p. 281) Leroy's responses to Sybil are also aggressive. In a striking picture of brutality towards the end of the dialogue he says of his experience:

I felt drawn
Deeper within the dark, as I pitched further
Into myself and into my conviction
A rigor seized me: I saw cracks appear
Dilating to craters in this living room,
And you, shackled ashen across the rift, a specter
Of the one I loved.
(p. 285)

Jacqueline Rose cites this passage as an example of 'the violence that Plath situates quite explicitly inside this male invocation of poetry.' In her brief comment on 'Dialogue', Rose suggests that it can be read in the context of Plath's relationship with Hughes. Rose considers how the myth of the female muse and the conflicting demands of the ideology of domesticity were 'lived out' by Plath 'for herself as well as in relation to Hughes.' According to Rose's interpretation, the woman 'rejects the spirit who seems to direct the glass...for the man, the reality of this spirit is less important than the fact of the poetic

vision which it embodies and can inspire.'^{ss} As I will show, however, the positions of Sybil and Leroy are rather more mobile and fluid than this.

Leroy and Sybil exchange taunts in an explicitly gendered fashion. Leroy mocks Sybil's interest in spiritualism as naive and simplistic and considers her need to believe in the reality of Pan as sentimental and gullible:

Oh you're

Going to get Gabriel's thumb into the pie
If you must butcher Mother Goose to do it.
You don't really care which, or what
Minor imps pipe up, so long as each
May testify to drive your doubting out

...With sense sealed watertight
So, you'll scoff, and yet you'd drop to kneel
If that elderberry bush beside the gate
Belched into blaze and, though red-hot, kept whole
And hale its green latticework of leaves.
(p. 280)

The allusions here to nursery rhymes connect with Leroy's earlier accusation that Sybil avoids 'real dangers' but doesn't 'mind hearing about the ones/ in hell, since hell's a fairytale.' (p. 278) This is prompted by Sybil's preference for questioning Pan about the afterlife rather than about work and love, which were prioritised in Leroy's agenda. As well as invoking a strain of misogynistic violence in the

reference to 'butcher[ing] Mother Goose' Leroy sneers at the superficiality of Sybil's unbelief in his allusion to the Biblical fable of the burning bush. Sybil is thus charged with the traditional attributes of a 'feminine' intellect: simple, irrational, fickle and occasionally vicious. Sybil counters this by constructing Leroy as an embodiment of masculine arrogance and linear thinking:

You'd kneel, too,
If a bush borrowed tongues and spoke to you. You'd
kneel
Until it finished, and then look furtively
For loudspeaker wires running like a logical
Argument to the house next door. Or if
Your Sherlock Holmesing stared to a blank wall
You'd presume your inner voice god-plumed enough
To people the boughs with talking birds.
(p. 280)

These two speeches polarise masculine and feminine attributes. Sybil satirizes Leroy's 'logic' in her picture of his detective-like hunt for rational explanations. Both Leroy and Sybil draw upon gender stereotypes in their respective accusations, yet the accusations rebound against the speakers: the Ouija board provides a space where distinctions between masculine and feminine subject-positions become confused. Leroy's rationalism is in conflict with his desire to believe in Pan. After Sybil breaks the glass Leroy admits:

Those glass bits in the grate strike me chill
As if I'd half-believed in him, and he,
Being not you, nor I, nor us at all,
Must have been wholly someone else.
(p. 285)

Sybil is similarly divided, as her scepticism concerning Leroy's manipulation of the glass is countered by her faith in aspects of spiritualism:

If he's a go-between
Our world and theirs we'd best play safe and groom
Our questions in humble habit to gain grace
And chance of a true answer.
(p. 281)

When Pan spells 'In Godhead' Sybil is triumphant:

There, see!
I knew he'd got it mixed before: visions
Aren't vouchsafed to antique virgins only.
It takes patience... Who knows what belief
Might work on this glass medium.
(p. 282)

For Sybil (herself the 'antique virgin' of mythology) the Ouija board may be a space of empowerment. Neither of the participants ultimately dominates and their arguments are fought out fairly equally with the dialogue evenly distributed between the characters. Although Leroy can be seen to assert control at the opening, Sybil authors a catastrophic finale for the game when, in a physical gesture which shatters language itself, she smashes the glass:

LEROY: You broke him then.
SYBIL: I broke
The image of you, transfixed by roots, wax-pale,
Under a stone.
LEROY: Those two dreamed deaths took
Us in: a third undid them.
SYBIL: And we grew one
As the glass flew to its fragments.
(p. 285)

Both Leroy and Sybil appear to enjoy a considerable command of language and their witty invectives are self-conscious performances of their respective linguistic repertoires. It is language, however, which ultimately constructs and controls Leroy and Sybil as subjects. Both are writers for whom words are tools, yet both are also 'written', entangled in the gendered vocabularies they perpetuate. If anyone has the upper hand in this drama, it neither Leroy nor Sybil, but Pan. The spirit medium brings Leroy and Sybil to blows in his refusal to be controlled by either of them.

If 'Dialogue' allegorises a power struggle between Hughes and Plath (which may account for the fact that it was 'never shown' to him or to anyone else), Hughes's notes on its supposed biographical source are inadvertently revealing. In his note to the text, Hughes comments that Plath's play 'used the actual "spirit" text of one of the ouija sessions' and that 'the spirit named was the one regularly applied to.'

(CP, p. 276) The term 'applied to' imbues Pan with a form of authority. There is an uncanny parallel here between Leroy's appropriation of Pan and Hughes's mediation of the text. By insisting upon the documentary accuracy of the dialogue Hughes not only imposes a literal and straightforward reading upon the drama, but also effectively disempowers Plath as author, suggesting that she has merely transcribed the spirit's words. But it seems unlikely that Plath would have a record of a Ouija board session other than her memory. Although she may have used a few of the terms scripted during an actual game, the dialogue can only be an imaginative reconstruction (unless Hughes is hinting at some form of demonic possession). By producing 'Dialogue', Plath was able to write Pan in her own terms; the literary form gives her an opportunity to manipulate the spirit, which has previously been beyond her control. Yet whatever her pleasure in constructing and controlling Pan, she can only do this in a dramatic (rather than a real) context.

As a drama about language, 'Dialogue' hoists itself on its own petard. In the previous section I argued that part of the interest of Plath's dramatic texts lies in their generic indeterminacy, that is, their mediation between the forms of poetic dialogue

and verse drama. It needs to be said, though, that 'Dialogue' is less challenging in this respect than Three Women. While the attempt to incorporate a theatrical form has subversive implications for 'Dialogue' as a literary text, it holds rather less promise as a text for performance. It seems to me that there would be little to be gained from staging it. The drama is based upon words, not action, and is dominated by the concern to display linguistic dexterity within a naturalistic format. Leroy and Sybil are vehicles through which Plath can demonstrate her rhetorical skills. The play abounds in clever puns, witticisms and parodies. Sybil's mockery of Leroy's animal imagery ('plumage of raw worms' and so on) can be read as a taunting reference to Hughes's style:

Oh, he'll go clever

Like all the others and swear that he's a puma
In Tibet, or a llama in Zanzibar...
(p. 281)

The dialogue, however, is so obsessively and self-consciously concerned with word-play that its theatrical potential is limited. Plath writes in her journal that it is 'quite conversational sounding in spite of the elaborate seven line pentameter stanzas, rhyming abcbbc...' 57 As she suggested in her letter to her mother, Plath may have wanted the dialogue to

sound 'conversational', but its convoluted language and stilted construction render it static and contrived. Plath felt the play 'gets me out of that incredible sense of constriction which I have on trying to find subjects for small bad poems, and feeling always that they should be perfect, which gives me that slick, shiny, artificial look.'⁶⁹ Having looked to the dramatic medium for something supposedly more natural, spontaneous and real, as a way of releasing her from the introspective perfectionism she felt when writing poetry, she remains troubled by the artifice of what she was doing.

The conflicts fought out in Plath's play are unresolved, creating textual ambiguities and contradictions. Both speakers seem unable to maintain their positions. The boundaries between them are constantly being negotiated and crossed, as if one self is possessed by its other; something which could be seen as akin to demonic possession. The binary oppositions which initially divided masculine and feminine subjectivities ('Leroy' and 'Sybil') are not reinforced but collapse. Both speakers rehearse rationality and scepticism, faith and intuition, with Pan as muse. Thus although it is possible to read 'Dialogue' as a dramatisation of the fraught relations between Plath and Hughes as competing writers, the text uses the

dramatic medium to escape from the conventional parameters of autobiography as well as from the formal restrictions of poetry. In other words, the text stages the conflicting relations between Plath's artistic identities as she seeks to reconcile the demands of formal control and linguistic skill with the desire to release herself from the tyranny of language and give voice to the repressed.

Underpinning all this, I believe, is an experience which challenged any notion of unitary subjectivity. At the time of the composition of 'Dialogue', Plath feared that she was pregnant. As she saw it, this represented a threat to her autonomy as a writer. Her description of the experience is in the same journal entry as the first reference to 'Dialogue'. Although Plath claims 'I couldn't write a word about it, although I did it in my head', she produced 'Dialogue' immediately afterwards: a text in which we see a couple divided by Pan, 'A sort of psychic bastard/Sprung to being on our wedding night/Nine months too soon for comfort.' (p. 280) In a possibly unconscious parallel, Plath writes in her journal of 'the idea of 20 years of misery and a child being unloved, as it inadvertently, through our fault, killed our spiritual and psychic selves.'⁵⁹ Having until then idealised creativity in terms of maternal metaphors⁶⁰, the prospect of

pregnancy raised in Plath the fear that actual motherhood might well thwart creativity. Plath's conception of Pan is interesting in this context. Like Marvell's 'Dialogue Between Soul and Body' mentioned earlier, 'Dialogue' reads as a staging of the unresolved conflict between the mind and body, with Pan, the threatening muse - also a foetus - at its centre. Leroy's paternal simile is thus particularly significant:

Do we have to battle
Like rival parents over a precocious
Child to see which one of us can call
Pan's prowess our own creation, and not the other's
Work at all.
(p. 284)

When Sybil smashes the glass shortly afterwards, in a symbolic self-administered abortion, she destroys the divisive third party and the two speakers achieve a modicum of union. Yet this is achieved by the destruction of Pan, in a dramatic and violent gesture. Plath feared that pregnancy would 'end me, probably Ted, and our possible impregnable togetherness'.²⁰ Her choice of words is revealing. She clearly wanted to be 'impregnable' in her union with Ted, yet ironically it is his impregnation of her which she fears would divide them. Pregnancy, as Sidonie Smith observes, constitutes a fundamental challenge to female subjectivity:

There is no isolable core of selfhood there for a woman, for in the act of heterosexual intercourse, the female body is penetrated by the body of the other and in the experience of pregnancy, that other that is part of the subject takes up greater and greater space inside until it is suddenly expelled. Inside is outside; outside inside. The cultural notion of autonomous individuality is totally confused. 42

In this context, Plath's use of the dramatic form to explore self-division in 'Dialogue' is significant; she selects a genre which is dialogic to produce a writing of and about the body, and of the challenge pregnancy represents to unitary subjectivity. 'Dialogue' is a text which explores the production of split subjectivity in both content and form. I have suggested that, in part, Leroy and Sybil are projections of Plath's divided identity. It is in the weird and unusual doubling of foetus and muse that Pan represents the birth and death of language for Plath, while the Ouija Board is a site in which the struggle to control language is simultaneously a struggle to claim and maintain a unified identity. The dialogue desperately and furiously negotiates the conflicts between mind and body, self and other. The only resolution appears to be a compromised return to the symbolic order of language and culture which Leroy represents. At the end of the play the characters shut out the chaotic elements unleashed by the ritual to restore the impression of order and unity:

SYBIL:

The room returns

To normal. Let's close the curtains...

Some pythoness

In her prophetic fit heard what we heard

...

Breathing the god's word, or the devil's word,

Or her own word, ambushed in an equivocal

Thicket of words.

LEROY:

The curtain's drawn on that.

...

The chairs won't vanish or become

Castles when we glance aside.

(p. 286)

The verbal pyrotechnics that have dominated the action are now associated with the unconscious and the imagination, as threatening forces which need to be repressed and controlled. Language is linked to nature negatively as the 'beast' that occupies the labyrinth. For Sybil the beast is gendered - a Pythoness whose words are alien; note also that the pythoness's body is possessed (made pregnant?) by the god. Leroy insists upon reason as the means to restore order, and the final lines of the play are spoken in unison as both characters, having banished the chaos of the unconscious, return to a semblance of unified identity: 'When lights go out/ May two real people breathe in a real room.' (p. 286) The restoration of order and control involves the death of Pan and the rejection of the spiritual realm he inhabits. Yet the oneness at the end of the drama is precarious, even illusory.

Both speakers are aware that a 'monster' still exists and the return of the repressed remains an ominous threat, darkening the tone of the dialogue's ending.

For Plath, the monster was to continue to be associated with pregnancy, motherhood and the alien 'other' which threatened not only her creativity but her very identity. In this respect, 'Dialogue' can be seen as a rehearsal for Three Women, Plath's only other verse drama, which was written after her experience of two births and a miscarriage. The ambivalences and contradictions concerning pregnancy which I see as the textual unconscious of 'Dialogue' are also intrinsic to Three Women. At the time of writing 'Dialogue', pregnancy and motherhood was an unknown territory for Plath, and represented both fear and desire. During the writing of 'Dialogue' the fear of pregnancy had been prevalent and is explicitly articulated as 'horror' in Plath's journal; in 'Dialogue', Pan is the threatening 'other' who produces division and threatens anarchy and chaos. The two characters struggle to control this spirit, acknowledging its relation to their unconscious and imagination: 'Pan's fine for sounding syllables we haven't yet/ Surfaced in ourselves.' (p. 283) Pan represents forces beyond the characters' control, and the images of the grotesque and monstrous which end the poem convey the horror and

fear of the 'other' invading the illusory autonomy of the 'self'. By 1962, the time of writing Three Women, however, the structures of security supporting Plath's precarious stability of identity had collapsed. Her marriage to Hughes had ended in separation, leaving her struggling to combine her writing career with the domestic demands of being a single parent. The female roles she negotiated as a mother, wife and daughter had all proved to be problematic and are central to her exploration of dispersed subjectivity in Three Women. Plath had become what Sidonie Smith refers to as 'an encumbered self':

...identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny. Affiliated physically, socially, psychologically in relationships to others...The unified self disperses, radiating outward until its fragments dissipate altogether into social and communal masks. 63

In Three Women Plath uses the dramatic form to explore the dispersal of the 'unified self' through the experience of pregnancy and childbirth. This, then, is the subject of the next section.

4.4. LISTEN WITH MOTHER: THREE WOMEN (1962)

The first thing to note about Three Women is that it was a piece written for radio, a factor influencing both its poetic and its dramatic form. According to Douglas Cleverdon, who produced the play for the BBC Third Programme, Three Women was 'the first and only poetic work that Sylvia Plath wrote specifically for broadcasting'⁵⁴; Ted Hughes confirms that it was produced 'with great effect' on 19 August 1962 (CP, p. 292). Actually Plath, like Hughes, had been involved in radio broadcasting before writing Three Women, appearing on the Third Programme to read and discuss her poems. During the postwar period, BBC radio was a significant element in the cultural production of poetry in Britain, with a bearing upon Plath's work. In the 1950s, notes Stuart Laing, radio developed 'specialist and subcultural functions', which included 'that of helping to construct and reinforce the "literary" world'⁵⁵; poetry readings, which had been a regular component of broadcasting since its beginnings, were augmented by literary magazine programmes such as New Soundings, First Reading and New Poetry. As Laing observes, this development seemed a positive one, in that in this medium 'poetry could be presented in a way (orally) arguably more suitable to its nature than the

printed page.'⁶⁶ As I noted earlier, the writing of Three Women marked a transition for Plath, in that, according to Hughes, it was at this point that 'she began to compose her poems to be read aloud.'⁶⁷ Her involvement in radio broadcasting both encouraged and sustained this attention to the oral dimension of her poetry. But the practice of using the author as reader also tended to foster identifications between the poet and the poem, equating the voice of one with that of the other. In Plath's case, this invited autobiographical interpretations of her readings, a tendency which can be seen in Paul Alexander's account of a recording made by Plath in July 1963:

As she read these poems - written about a world where children hate parents, where parents are unsure of their own parenthood, where marriages break up - the emotion of the moment, and the strain of the subjects of the poems themselves, came through only once. When Plath reached the second and third stanzas of 'Daddy', which contained the lines about the father's death, her voice weakened, quivering as she spoke the words. Then, after an almost imperceptible pause, she continued.⁶⁸

The poet's reading of her own work is thus the authoritative and authentic performance of both self and text: here, it seems that the intensity of the identification is such that it threatens to disrupt the integrity of the reading itself. If Three Women is placed in the context of this kind of broadcast poetry,

then the fact that it was written for, and delivered by, three voices other than that of the author herself differentiates it as a poem from the confessional mode of her other work. Although I shall argue below that there is a significant autobiographical element to the text, its conditions of production mean that it is refracted through the voices of its performers rather than identified with the 'voice' of its author.

Three Women was produced against the background of the development of radio drama in the period. As Laing observes:

Since the twenties, radio drama had provided an additional medium and market. In the immediate post-war period writers such as Stevie Smith, Laurie Lee, Angus Wilson, Henry Reed and David Gascoigne all wrote plays specifically for radio. Verse drama was extensively promoted, including plays by MacNiece and, most notably, Dylan Thomas's Under Milk Wood (1954). Pinter and Arden both found radio a valuable base for their early work; from the late fifties Beckett began to write plays specifically for the Third Programme.⁶⁹

To this list Robert Hewison adds John Mortimer, Robert Bolt, Giles Cooper, Alun Owen, N. F. Simpson, Stan Barstow, Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall, all of whom 'had their first work produced on the radio.'⁷⁰ By the time of Three Women, however, radio drama was, in terms of its perceived cultural significance, being rapidly eclipsed by television drama (to the extent

that the period is described as that of 'the cultural demise of radio'⁷¹). Nonetheless, the medium remained an important platform not only for the work of new writers but also for a degree of formal experimentation that was rarely seen in the predominantly naturalistic medium of television.

In particular, radio has provided a platform for the first work of a number of women playwrights since the 1960s, notably that of Caryl Churchill (beginning in November 1962 with The Ants), Pam Gems and Sarah Daniels. As Churchill observes, certain features of the medium make it attractive^{to} the female playwright: 'There wasn't anywhere near the number of fringe and lunchtime theatres, and the radio was an accessible way of having your plays done... If your play was seventeen minutes long, they wouldn't ask you to make it thirteen.'⁷²

A further consideration here is the gender balance of the audience for radio drama; returning to the domestic sphere in increasing numbers during the postwar period, women formed what was perhaps its most important audience, especially for its daytime programming. If this might be seen to exercise an influence upon the content of radio drama, its conditions of reception (i.e. in the domestic space)

also associate it with a predominantly female audience. Accompanying this is the prevailing sense that radio is a peculiarly intimate medium, not only in terms of its one-to-one address to the solitary home listener (or family group), but also in the nature of the drama that is most suited to it. As Frances Gray puts it, 'the stage of radio is darkness and silence, the darkness of the listener's skull', and so:

The willingness of the audience to participate in a creative act is largely owing to...[radio's] intimacy...Without visual distractions the smallest subtleties of the voice become apparent...As soon as we hear a word in a radio play, we are close to the experience it signifies; in fact the sound is literally inside us.⁷³

There is a paradox here, of course, in that the intimacy and proximity of radio speech are illusory qualities: the voices of the speakers that are internalised by the listener are mediated and (re)produced by the medium itself. Even so, radio gives the impression of being ideally suited to a drama which is concerned with the staging of the psyche rather than the external world. Directly connected with this, as the vogue for verse drama on the radio during the 1950s demonstrated, radio is also a medium which is able to move beyond the limits of realism. For Caryl Churchill, 'you can do almost anything in a radio play, whereas you're tied to the possibilities of the set and

the stage in the theatre.'⁷⁴ Angela Carter points out the link between the imaginative possibilities of the medium and the typical subject-matter of radio drama:

Because of the absence of the visual image, radio drama need not necessarily be confined to the representation of things as they are. Since radio drama...starts off from a necessary degree of stylisation, it has always attracted and continues to attract the avant-garde...There is also radio's capacity to render the inner voice, the subjective interpretation of the world...It is, par excellence, the medium for the depiction of madness; for the exploration of the private worlds of the old, the alienated, the lonely.'⁷⁵

The old, the alienated and the lonely are also a significant proportion of radio drama's audiences.

All of these factors impinge directly upon Three Women. Commenting upon Louis MacNeice's radio drama Christopher Columbus, Frances Gray identifies a further aspect of the medium also directly relevant to Plath's text: 'confident that he can take the listener directly into the mind of a complex man, MacNeice uses the device of splitting into different voices, a device only radio can exploit without difficulties of staging.'⁷⁶ Similarly, in her assessment of Angela Carter's Vampirella, Gray emphasises elements which are central to the effect of Three Women:

Only on radio can...non-being be given a body without some kind of filmic illusion falsifying its

nature; Only on radio can the conflict between the everyday world and the dream world be expressed so effectively as to form the theme of an entire play and to make the games Carter plays with existence not only possible, but central.⁷⁷

As I shall demonstrate, Plath plays similar games through the medium of radio, mediating between realism and fantasy. Moreover, the characteristic discourse of radio drama contributes, in this text, to a distinctively female dramatic mode. As Josette Feral has argued, Three Women 'exemplifies a certain kind of feminine writing':

a certain kind of woman-speech or simply speech, in which (according to Luce Irigaray) thoughts come together and separate, speech comes to a standstill and goes on, hesitates, backtracks and then starts off again, asks questions without expecting an answer or gives answers without asking questions, and sometimes interrupts itself for no reason, only to continue further on, different and always the same.⁷⁸

Elaine Aston adds that 'the narrative is not fixed or singular' but 'plural and woven out of the women's speaking of themselves, of their experiences which "touch" each other, overlap, move away, return.'⁷⁹ These interlinking testimonies, and the experiences they narrate, are the subject of my discussion.

If radio has the potential to inscribe its significations within the body of the listener, then it

seems a particularly appropriate dramatic medium for the subject-matter of Three Women, evoking as it does the experience of childbirth from a multiplicity of perspectives. However, the initial impact of the play is effected through another characteristic of the medium: its erasure of the visible bodies of speakers and performers even as it insists upon the immediacy and tangibility of the speaking voice. Here, the three characters are literally 'talking heads' as the medium of radio removes the women's bodies and pregnancies from sight.

This strategy needs to be read in context. Three Women presents the woman's testimony of her own experience of pregnancy in opposition to developments in antenatal care and medical practice at the time of writing. These developments accelerated the transformation of the pregnant body into an object of scrutiny and surveillance. In the background of Three Women are the radical changes to American and British maternity care in the 1950s. During this period, childbirth became increasingly medicalized and institutionalized, as obstetric innovations contributed to a trend away from community-based and into hospital-based care. As a result, doctors rather than midwives began to take control over childbirth as the hospital rather than the home became the dominant site for

birth. The mother, moreover, like the midwife, was threatened with displacement as antenatal technology became increasingly sophisticated. Ann Oakley records that doctors were able to 'dispense with mothers as intermediaries, as necessary informants on foetal status and life style'.²⁰ Women became the 'objects of mechanical surveillance rather than the recipients of antenatal care.'²¹ Thus, as Oakley concludes, 'the mother vanishes and the focus is on the child/fetus.'²² Paradoxically, by rendering invisible the pregnant body which is the subject of a medical scrutiny that erases the identity of the mother, Three Women seeks to recover the voice of the mother herself. This voice occupies an ambiguous space between embodiment and disembodiment.

Plath herself resisted the antenatal control over pregnancy which she associated with the United States: 'The whole American nightmare of hospitals, Doctor's bills, cuts and stitches, anaesthesia, etc., seems a nightmare well left behind.'²³ In Britain, too, Plath would have been in a minority in her choice of home birth and community midwife care for both of her pregnancies.²⁴ As I aim to demonstrate, this resistance to the medicalization of childbirth is dramatised in Three Women, where she describes the hospital births of her three subjects. Although the

three voices draw on Plath's own varied experiences of childbirth and miscarriage, echoing her autobiographical accounts, the hospital setting is also a distancing device. The three characters are not simply Plath personae and the dialogue is a collective maternal discourse which is specific to English culture of the early 1960s. Motherhood, however, is not constructed as a unified identity: the splitting into three voices dramatizes division and difference. The three voices rehearse different attitudes towards, and experiences of, childbirth, whilst they are also all plausibly the 'same' woman at different ages. Importantly, the three women in the piece are not identified as named characters but as voices. They do not engage in dialogue: the speeches are monologic in style, each woman enclosed in her own mental space, recounting a birth. In dividing the dialogue between three characters, Plath is able to explore the implications and limitations of different maternal subjectivities; one can observe divisions between and within the three women as motherhood divides the body and self within itself.

The speeches of each of the three voices represent three differing responses to pregnancy. The First Voice is initially predominantly positive, but mainly conscious of her changing physical identity, awaiting

the inevitable transformations in her bodily state. She sees herself as being subject to, rather than in control of, nature and emphasizes her passivity and inactivity:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient...

I do not have to think, or even rehearse.
What happens in me will happen without attention.
(CP, p. 176)

Nature itself (herself?) is anthropomorphized as an external observer, detachedly watching the passive body of the mother-to-be:

...the suns and stars
Regarding me with attention.
The moon's concern is more personal:
She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse.
(p. 176)

Her statement 'I am ready' at the end of her first speech indicates her passive acquiescence in a predetermined role. The First Voice feels disconnected from her own body, as if she no longer owns or controls it. In lines which echo the effect of disembodiment produced by the radio medium, she describes her body as if she stood outside it: 'I talk to myself, myself only, set apart -/ Swabbed and lurid with disinfectants, sacrificial. (CP, p.179) The clinical

references here suggest that the woman's pregnant body has been subject to medical intervention; throughout the play, the First Voice emphasizes that she is subjected to forces beyond her control: 'I am used. I am drummed into use.' (p.180) After the birth she conjures up the anonymous medical staff, performing the final stage of her birth: 'They are stitching me up with silk, as if I were a material'. (p. 181) Thus we are made conscious of the presence of the un-named and invisible others who, represented almost as part of the landscape of the play, control the speaker's own absent body.

Although each of the voices is a representative everywoman, an autobiographical element is evident. The First Voice's description directly echoes Plath's letter to her mother describing the birth of her son:

Who is he, this blue, furious boy,
Shiny and strange, as if he has hurled from a star?
(p. 181)

Then at 5 minutes to 12... this great bluish,
glistening boy shot out onto the bed in a tidal
wave of water. ²⁵

Whereas Plath's letters are celebratory, clearly written for her mother, the tone of Three Women is ambivalent. Towards the end of the play, for example, the First Voice describes her responses to her child as

she looks through the hospital window at the rows of cots. Although there is a degree of awe and wonder in her voice as she surveys 'these miraculous ones, / These pure, small images' (p. 183), a sense of detachment persists as she automatically responds to her baby's demands:

Here is my son...

He is turning to me like a little, blind, bright
[plant.

One cry. It is the hook I hang on.

And I am a river of milk.

I am a warm hill.

(p. 183)

The reference to a hill connotes physical largeness, drawing attention to the woman's changed physical state, but it also suggests a sense of imposed continuity with nature, which involves a dissipation of personal identity itself. This extract is also representative of the shifts of register which characterise the verbal text: moving between personalised utterance and a kind of choric commentary, the 'I' of the text is dispersed across a non-linear succession of shifting and contradictory metaphors. Even as the verbal text circulates around the invisible maternal body, the body itself exceeds and evades linguistic and poetic definition. The repetitive approximations of metaphor dramatise the relation of

the female subject to her body in terms of the dialectic of embodiment and disembodiment that is central to the play.

Similar effects are apparent in the First Voice's description of labour:

Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug
Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal.
And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach
Face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible
element. (p. 179)

This passage emphasizes the woman's sense of her body as a functional object, subject to the combined forces of nature and humanity in the shape of the faceless representatives of the medical profession. In her last speeches, the First Voice questions the durability of the maternal role she feels forced to inhabit. Her sense of alienation is particularly apparent:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off...
How long can I be a wall around my green property?
How long can my hands
Be a bandage to his hurt, and my words
Bright birds in the sky, consoling?
(p. 185)

Ultimately the First Voice seems to have resigned herself to her maternal role: she is passive and accepting of - rather than resisting - the changes she

has experienced. 'I shall meditate upon normality./I shall meditate upon my little son.' (p. 186). She appears to have involuntarily submitted to external forces which overcome her will.

The Second Voice articulates similar concerns about changes to her physical and psychic condition, but unlike the First Voice she is not passive, seeing herself instead as being actively responsible for her situation. Whereas the First Voice is eventually reconciled to her maternal function as an involuntary, inevitable process, the Second Voice has a stronger sense of her own autonomy. The Second Voice reflects upon her experience of a miscarriage and articulates her feelings of emptiness in contrast to the fullness the First Voice describes, albeit ambivalently: 'I saw death in the bare trees, a deprivation...I am found wanting.' (p. 177) The speeches of the Second Voice abound in self-recrimination. The woman feels guilty and responsible: 'Is this the one sin then, this old dead love of death?' (p. 177) The Second Voice implies that pregnancy has been difficult by emphasizing the effort she has made to shape herself into the maternal role: 'I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.' (p. 178) The self-defeating effort of trying to be natural seems to interrogate the notion of naturalness itself. While the First Voice is conscious

of her intimate relationship with nature and associates herself with the cosmos and with wildlife, the speeches of the Second Voice abound in mechanical images. The men in the office are 'like cardboard...Bulldozers, guillotines' (p. 177). The Second Voice describes herself in dehumanised terms as an automaton:

I sat at my desk in my stockings, my high heels,
...
The letters proceed from these black keys, and
these black keys proceed
From my alphabetical fingers...
...
These are my feet, these mechanical echoes.
Tap, tap, tap, steel pegs.
(p. 177)

Femininity here is artificial, fetishised in stockings and high heels; it is also physically subject to a mechanised (man-made) language. Like the First Voice, the Second Voice is deprived of autonomy but unlike the First Voice kicks against her condition. As the play develops, the Second Voice is constantly shifting from self-recrimination to anger at the figure of Mother Nature, who is conceived as a witch-like, vampire figure:

It is she that drags the blood-black sea around
Month after month, with its voices of failure.
I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string.
I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too,
create corpses.
(p. 182)

Internalising patriarchal definitions of women, the Second Voice sees herself both as a victim and as a murderess. Her miscarriage is described in terms of violation and loss. The desire she gives voice to is intensified through the 'deprivation' she has suffered; 'I am found wanting' she laments. Yet, as with the First Voice, there is a sense of resolution for the Second Voice at the end of the play. Whether this traditional tableau is meant as something of a compromise is open to question:

I am at home in the lamplight...

I am mending a silk slip: my husband is reading.
How beautifully the light includes these things.
(p. 186)

Throughout the play we are aware of dualities within the voices as the speakers waver between conscious and unconscious, and articulate 'good' and 'bad' selves. For the First Voice, the 'good' self is maternal and nurturing, accepted. The Second Voice, however, associates goodness with another conventional female role which is deferential, virginal and vampirised, 'bled white as wax'. (p. 184) The scene of domesticity presented by the Second Voice at the end of the play depicts the 'good' self, self-consciously rehearsing an apparently stable subject-position: 'I am a wife'. We are aware, nevertheless, of the splitting

which occurs with the subject's enunciation: the assertion 'I find myself again' is a performance as well as a statement. It suggests a return to a state of ontological security, but we are left to question the identity of this 'I' as the Second Voice, like the First, comes to inhabit such an obviously manufactured social role.

Throughout the dialogue, motherly virtue is associated with passivity and conformity to traditional roles. Any deviation is deemed unnatural and evil; badness is associated with deformity and infertility. The speeches of the Third Voice, in particular, abound in images of corruption and defecation. She begins by articulating the ambivalence that comes with conception:

I remember the minute when I knew for sure.
The willows were chilling,
The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine -
It had a consequential look like everything else,
And all I could see was dangers: doves and words,
Stars and showers of gold - conceptions,
[conceptions!

(p. 178)

There is alienation here, as in the other voices, but the Third Voice is resistant to and fearful of the changes to her identity: 'I wasn't ready' she states, in opposition to the First Voice, and emphasizes that

she didn't mean to get pregnant. Like the First Voice she is resigned to inevitable changes, but these trigger acute anxiety. Nature takes the form of a male swan with 'a black meaning' while 'the white clouds rearing/ Aside were dragging me in four directions.' Again, the woman's lack of autonomy is stressed:

I thought I could deny the consequence -
But it was too late for that. It was too late, and
Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was
[the face
[ready.
(p. 178)

When the Third Voice next speaks, her tone has changed. Her initial uneasiness has now become resentment at the physical change she is experiencing:

I am a mountain, among mountainy women.
The doctors move among us as if our bigness
Frightened the mind...

They hug their flatness like a kind of health.
And what if they found themselves surprised, as I
[did?
They would go mad with it...

I am not ready for anything to happen
I should have murdered this, that murders me.
(p. 179-80)

The terms used are violent, the speaker's tone embittered. After the birth of her daughter, she describes the child as:

My red, terrible girl...

She is crying and she is furious.
Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats.
(p. 182)

The Third Voice reveals her ambivalence about motherhood. She resents the child's dependency and expectations, yet feels compelled to administer to her needs: 'it is by these hooks she climbs to my notice.'
(p. 182) When the Third Voice describes herself as a mother leaving the hospital, her language is one of mourning. The flowers in her room celebrating a birth are transformed into funeral tributes. Her voice is sad and meditative:

She is a small island, asleep and peaceful,
And I am a white ship hooting: Goodbye, goodbye.
The day is blazing. It is very mournful.
The flowers in this room are red and tropical.
They have lived behind glass all their lives...

Now they face a winter of white sheets, white
[faces.
There is very little to go into my suitcase.

There are the clothes of a fat woman I do not know.
There is my comb and brush. There is an emptiness.
(p. 184)

This has been interpreted as the Third Voice's feelings about leaving her daughter behind for adoption.²⁶ The Third Voice's repeated concern 'I am not ready' is compatible with this reading. In her final speeches the Third Voice returns to a vision of a younger self:

Today the colleges are drunk with spring:
My black gown is a little funeral...

The books I carry wedge into my side.
I had an old wound once, but it is healing.
I had a dream of an island, red with cries.
It was a dream, and did not mean a thing.
(p. 185)

However, the Third Voice could also be describing her ambivalent responses to the changes that motherhood involves. She is mourning the death of her previous self when she leaves the hospital and her vision of a younger self at college could be seen as part of this meditation. Her final speech admits that although she is 'young as ever' she feels emptiness and absence:

It is so beautiful to have no attachments!
I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?
Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?
(p. 186)

Throughout the play, then, the three voices describe motherhood in terms of trauma and crisis. Their tones are angry and sorrowful, and their images are often violent. All three women are acutely conscious of the physical change in their body states, while they also give voice to their conflicting feelings of desire for fulfillment, the need for autonomy and the sense of disempowerment, disembodiment, emptiness and loss. The dialogue is not a straightforward celebration of pregnancy or

childbirth. It voices the conflicts and ambivalence which, for Plath, constitutes maternal discourse.

Again, the form of the play is crucial. By calling the three speakers 'voices', Plath indicates that they serve as representative figures. The three speakers are clearly differentiated in terms of their personal histories, as they describe their respective experiences of birth, miscarriage and, arguably, adoption. However, the fact that they are not named persons but voices makes the dramatic framework non-naturalistic. In the original BBC production and in the BBC script, however, some critical anomalies can be observed. Douglas Cleverdon has explained that two of the performers had to be replaced at short notice, which proved to have significant consequences.⁷

Jaqueline Rose has noted:

In this instance, chance decided an issue of poetic language which later revealed its unmistakable ideological dimension. Thus, when the BBC published the script in 1968, the voices were distinguished as 'Secretary', 'Girl' and 'Wife' - a blatantly normative interpretation since the label 'wife' is given to the woman who keeps her baby, whereas in fact only the woman who miscarries has, and goes home to, a husband in the text. ⁸⁸

Various critics have endeavoured to impose 'normative' interpretations on the poem. According to Anne Stevenson:

First Voice is that of a fulfilled mother...She returns with her baby to a house very like Court Green in Devon...Second Voice is clearly Sylvia-Electra, the beekeeper's daughter of her Boston period...the setting is obviously London...Third Voice, that of Sylvia's neurotic student self...begins by referring to herself in a setting that is clearly Cambridge.⁸³

Like other critics, Stevenson assumes also that the Third Voice is describing her experience of giving up a baby for adoption, even though this is evidently not in keeping with her otherwise strongly biographical reading of Three Women. Such interpretations are reductive; they enclose Plath's anonymous voices within the straitjacket of conventional singular character identity and ignore the play's exploration of divided subjectivity. As in 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board', Plath teasingly draws upon autobiographical material, while interrogating the boundaries between life and art.

In a journal entry written before she became pregnant, Plath speculates on the subject of maternity and identity: 'A woman has nine months of becoming something other than herself, of separating from this otherness, of feeding it and being a source of milk and honey to it. To be deprived of this is a death indeed.'⁸⁴ Here, the division between self and other is celebrated. In Three Women, however, written after

Plath's three experiences of childbirth, there is considerable ambivalence, focussed on the place of the maternity ward, which is associated with sterility and dehumanisation. To the Second Voice, after her miscarriage, the hospital environment is one of emptiness, sickness and death:

How white these sheets are. The faces have no
features.
They are bald and impossible, like the faces of my
[children,
Those little sick ones that elude my arms.
(p. 178)

None of the three women are in the hospital ward when they first speak and their subsequent descriptions of their respective experiences are more negative than their initial statements. The First Voice, having claimed 'I am ready' in her second speech, becomes extremely apprehensive about her loss of autonomy once she enters the hospital: 'I talk to myself, myself only, set apart-/ Swabbed and lurid with disinfectants, sacrificial.' (p. 179) The Third Voice is the most overtly condemnatory, equating the medical profession with masculinity:

The doctors move among us as if our bigness
Frightened the mind. They smile like fools.
They are to blame for what I am, and they know it.
...
I have seen the white clean chamber with its
[instruments.

inmates who are confiding in the listener, and whose stream-of-consciousness speeches could be read as the discourse of madness: obsessive and paranoid.

Three Women, then, is concerned with the instability of socially-constructed female identities. Plath's rehearsal of subjectivity in this text can be paralleled with Regnier Gagnier's account:

The subject is a subject to itself, an 'I', however difficult or even impossible it may be for others to understand this 'I' from its own viewpoint, within its own experience. Simultaneously the subject is a subject to, and of, others; in fact, it is often an 'other' to others, which also affects its sense of its own subjectivity. ²¹

This exploration of the relation between the 'I' which speaks and its consciousness of its identity as 'other' is central to the play. The experience of pregnancy problematizes subjectivity for each of the three speakers. As Gagnier observes: 'the subject is also a subject of knowledge, most familiarly perhaps of the discourse of social institutions that circumscribe its terms of being.'²² The discourses of the institutions of marriage, the family and the medical profession, which inscribe the conditions of motherhood, are the significant ones in this play. The mother exists as a predetermined role which each of the women is forced to inhabit so that the mother, as an identity, is a

critical part of the 'other' which the subject will be to others. E. Ann Kaplan's analysis is particularly pertinent here. Kaplan identifies 'three distinct (but ultimately related) representational spheres':

those of the historical, the psychoanalytic and the fictional. These roughly correspond to three main kinds of discursive mothers, namely, first, the mother in her socially constructed, institutional role (the mother that that girls are socialised to become, and that historical or real mothers strive to embody); Second, the mother in the unconscious - the mother through whom the subject is constituted... and third, the mother in fictional representations who combines the institutionally positioned mother and the unconscious mother.²³

This tripartite representation of the mother is integral to Plath's text. Indeed, Kaplan's project 'to demonstrate how fictional mother - representations are produced through the tensions between historical and psychoanalytic spheres'²⁴ can be pursued through Three Women. We are aware of the interaction between the institutionally constructed mother and the points of divergence where the unconscious, imaginary mother becomes more dominant. The institutionally constructed mother role which each of the three women feels compelled to perform is passive, nurturing and self-abnegating. For the First Voice, the adoption of the role is involuntary, yet she is conscious of her fragmenting subjectivity as her 'dead self' is supplanted by the (m)other during the birth: 'I am

breaking apart like the world...I am used. (p.180) As I hope to have shown, although the First Voice readily submits to her altruistic identity, at the end of the dialogue the 'I' of the subject has been submerged into - indeed defined by - the speaker's relationship with her son:

I do not will him to be exceptional
...
I will him to be common
To love me, as I love him
And to marry what he wants and where he will.
(p. 186)

The boundaries between self and other have collapsed. The First Voice lives through her son, willing him to 'love me, as I love him.' The relationship is a dependent one. The institutional mother role is performed to perfection.

The Second Voice is unable to fulfil the mother role, for the foetus is blighted. Here the repressed returns in the form of the monster mother:

I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks
[them.

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
I know her. I know her intimately -
Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.
(p. 181)

The figure of the mother in this description is the antithesis of the First Voice's ideal, but still conforms to a stereotype as the negative, corrupting 'other' of the 'angel in the house' ideal. Kaplan notes:

when there is no identification with the mother-figure, the paradigm can look very different; the ideal, self-sacrificing mother threatens to collapse into the evil phallic one (always seen as evil from the patriarchal view point), who is perhaps defended against in the idealized 'sacrifice' image. (For instance, unconscious fear of being devoured by the maternal may lead to fantasies in which the opposite happens, namely where the mother is excessively devoted to the child.) Or the ideal figure may be made object of the text's sadistic urges against her. She is often excessively punished for slight deviation from her maternal role... Often the mother is associated with death and destruction, not only of herself but also of her child. 28

Plath's monster mother corresponds to Kaplan's description of the 'evil phallic' mother. Kaplan's use of the term 'devours' is particularly interesting in relation to Plath's version of the consuming mother who drinks the blood and eats the blighted fetuses. The violence of Plath's language creates a rupture in the text of Three Women, as this vampire-like figure comes across as anomalous, disturbing and disruptive. We note the shifting subjectivity as the Second Voice implicates herself as the monster: 'I am accused.../ I am a garden of black and red agonies. I drink them,'

and then conjures the figure of the 'other' in the form of the 'dark earth', mother nature. The Second Voice's horror and guilt is then displaced into the third person as she distances herself from the evil mother representation: 'she is the vampire of us all.'

The Third Voice is resistant to the institutional mother role, but is particularly conscious of the split between self and other which pregnancy creates. Hence her perception of her mirror-image: 'The face/ went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready.' The speaker's response to her child contrasts with the First Voice's positive but self-abnegating relationship with her son. The Third Voice conceives of her daughter as monstrous, animal-like. The mother distances herself from the 'red, terrible girl':

I think her little head is carved in wood,
A red, hard wood, eyes shut and mouth wide open.
And from the open mouth issue sharp cries

...

Scratching at my sleep, and entering my side.
My daughter has no teeth. Her mouth is wide.
It utters such dark sounds it cannot be good.
(p. 182)

But the institutional mother role is one which the speaker cannot easily abandon. As she leaves the hospital, the Third Voice mourns her loss of identity:

There is an emptiness.
I am so vulnerable suddenly.
I am a wound walking out of hospital.
I am a wound that they are letting go.
I leave my health behind. I leave someone
Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like
[bandages: I go.
(p. 184)

Maternal feeling, as well as guilt and loss, persist even at the end: 'My black gown is a little funeral...I had an old wound once, but it is healing.' (p.185) In her final speech the poignancy and ambivalence continues: 'It is so beautiful to have no attachments...What is it I miss?/ Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?' (p. 186) What is Plath working out here? The obvious youthfulness of the Third Voice and the Oxbridge connotations may indeed refer to Plath's student identity. Plath the daughter, and the ambivalence of her own relationship with her own mother, also form part of the text's unconscious in this obliquely autobiographical reference. By leaving the United States, Plath forged an independent identity, separated from her motherland as well as from her biological mother. It was a separation which ensured that her relationship with that mother was translated, as her letters home testify, into a predominantly textual one.

Her desire to establish a self-sufficient identity is inextricably related to her writing and its concern with subjectivity. In her journal Plath determines: 'I will write until I begin to speak my deep self, and then have children; and speak still deeper. The life of the creative mind first, then the creative body.'²⁶ Both literally and metaphorically, childbirth is linked to creativity; writing is seen as a procreative act. It is in this respect that a psychoanalytic perspective is crucial to Three Women. The competing subject positions Plath occupied as daughter, wife and mother are all acted out: the First Voice as mother, the Second Voice as wife and the Third Voice as daughter. I am reminded of Cixous' evocation of the complex relationship between mother and child:

In women there is always, more or less, something of the 'mother' repairing and feeding, resisting separation, a force that does not let itself be cut off but that runs codes ragged. The relationship to childhood (the child she was, she is, she acts and makes and starts anew, and unties at the place where, as a same, she even others herself), is no more cut off than is the relationship to the 'mother', as it consists of delights and violences.²⁷

These 'delights and violences' constitute the ambivalent textures of Three Women as Plath rehearses the dynamics of the mother/child relationship. For Plath, as for Cixous, the figures of the mother and of

motherhood are intimately connected with language and creativity. The prevalence of birth metaphors in Plath's poetry is developed into an extended metaphor in Three Women. Yet Plath's use of the metaphor remains oddly cryptic, requiring us to decode the mystery of pregnancy via the mystery of the poetic metaphor. The experience is irreducibly that which emphasises the difference between male and female as well as that between childless and childbearing women. The only way this experience can be negotiated between persons is in language. Thus, as in 'Dialogue Over a Ouija Board', language is the terrain upon which sexual difference is negotiated, but also, of course, constructed. The problem, however, is that language as a construct within the symbolic order is 'man made' and Plath is faced with the difficulty of finding a means to convey the uniquely female experience of pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood. This leaves us with the question of audience: to whom is this play addressed? To Plath's mother? To Ted Hughes? To Plath herself? To every mother and non-mother? The play itself provides no definitive answer to these questions, sets up no definitive, fixed or authoritative position in relation to motherhood from which the contradictory perspectives it offers may be unified and rendered intelligible.

Instead, Plath explores the psychic landscape of pregnancy and motherhood through (and as) metaphor. Birth, as a metaphor of both male and female creativity, contains a fecundity of meaning. Plath's three women are an extended rehearsal of metaphors for birth and pregnancy. Their speeches are circular, repetitive and cyclical, with no narrative progression. Plath confronted the problem of representing this form of multiple subjectivity in language, choosing the form of radio drama, which can only produce disembodied voices. Thus she literally attempts to 'write the body' but, unlike Cixous, avoids the physicality of theatre. Plath establishes control of the body through her writing, and gives birth to a self which is liberated from the prescribed identities of mother, wife and daughter through (and only through) the authority of authorship.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have addressed two interrelated questions to the dramatic writings of Gertrude Stein, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath: how do these plays generate meaning, and what performance possibilities do they present? In order to answer these questions I have attempted to show how the texts under consideration draw upon a diversity of theatrical vocabularies to explore issues of identity and sexuality through the rehearsal and production of subjectivities in performance. I have also argued that the orientation of these texts is autobiographical, not in the literal sense of staging the writers' life histories, but in the sense that they play with elements of memory, fantasy, language and desire in order to stage the repressed and, perhaps, unspeakable dimensions of the writers' psychic lives. In this respect, the dialogue between autobiography, psychoanalysis and theatre is critical to the theatre of identity. I see theatres of identity, as exemplified in these three writers, as a site in which difference and otherness may be temporarily entertained. As separate discourses, autobiography, psychoanalysis and theatre have been identified with the feminist project of discovering, recovering, writing and performing the self (however problematic this concept is); but as Linda Anderson points out in relation to both autobiography and psychoanalysis,

these activities are inevitably implicated in the dialectic between self-revelation and self-invention, a dialogue between absence and possibility:

In writing herself the woman is also reaching into writing and her story will more obviously be informed by a dynamics of self-becoming. But there is no point of arrival; she can neither transcend herself nor attain to some authentic fullness of being. It is a dynamic which is shadowed by loss, which exists between loss, absence and what might be.'

Like autobiography, the theatre event exists at a perpetual threshold: on the point of self-becoming through performance, only to evaporate as the performance ends. In the theatre, as Peter Brook puts it, 'the slate is wiped clean all the time.'²² Hence, perhaps, the concern with loss, absence and death which haunts the plays I have discussed, and which I see as a hallmark of the theatre of identity.

In Stein's work, these concerns are most evident in Four Saints in Three Acts, where the existential volatility of the saints themselves is linked with that of the text, and, self-reflexively, its author, and in Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights, where the nightmare of eternal daylight forms one half of a dialectic with the fear of death; but even in the dislocated voices of the early plays it is possible to read the signs of

anxiety and ontological insecurity. In Freshwater, Woolf's wish to look back through her maternal history involves her in the re-incarnation of Julia Margaret Cameron and her Victorian predecessors; despite its ostensibly farcical tone, the play is shadowed by the spectre of Ophelia, a figure who combines the tropes of female madness and suicide. Plath's 'Dialogue over a Ouija Board', is obsessed with the macabre fantasy of communications between the spirit world and the characters; in Three Women, birth is linked to loss and death: not only in the loss of adoption, but also in the sense that giving birth involves the death of the pregnant self. At the centre of all this is the death of the author herself, literal but also metaphorical, in the sense that the text for performance demands that she surrender control and acknowledge the temporary, provisional and uncertain status of the theatre medium itself. As I have shown, this was something which all three writers found very difficult to do. In the case of Woolf and Plath, the dramatic works reflect this difficulty through their negotiation of the differences between public and private performance spaces, through the mediums of salon theatre and radio drama respectively.

This leads, finally, to the question of what Jonathan Miller calls the 'afterlife' of the plays

themselves - that is, their capacity for continued existence within theatrical culture.³ As I have emphasised throughout this study, all three writers occupy a peripheral position in the existing canon of twentieth century drama, although in the case of Stein there are signs that this may be beginning to change. With the exception of Four Saints in Three Acts, Stein's experiments in playwriting were largely ignored in her own lifetime and have been relegated to the margins of her work by subsequent literary critics. Nonetheless, recent theatre history has shown an increasing interest in Stein's work both by pioneering avant-garde practitioners like Judith Malina and Julian Beck, and by postmodern directors such as Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson. Given the influence of Wilson in particular upon contemporary performance, it will be intriguing to see whether his 'rediscovery' of Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights will generate further interest in Stein's theatre work. The Mother of Us All has recently been reprinted in an anthology of works by American women playwrights⁴; equally welcome would be a re-issue of Stein's early plays.

Freshwater, similarly, is soon to be reprinted by the Hogarth Press, although, regrettably, in Lucio Rucolo's under-annotated edition; but while this may well provoke a revival of critical interest in Woolf's

'forgotten' play, it is, I think, unlikely to generate much theatrical excitement. As I hope to have demonstrated, Freshwater is a text which is embedded in its original conditions of production and reception, a text whose meaning and effect is so thoroughly entangled with the lives and fantasies of its author, its actors and its intended audience that, as a piece of salon theatre, its appeal beyond this coterie must be strictly limited. It is a play which remains very much an in-joke for its Bloomsbury spectators and participants.

In contrast to the plays of Stein and Woolf, Plath's Three Women is a text whose visibility, and reputation, has never seriously been in doubt - albeit that it has become absorbed into Plath's poetic canon rather than treated as a dramatic work in its own right. There has, to my knowledge, only been one production of Three Women in Britain since the original radio broadcast: this was directed by Barry Kyle for the Royal Shakespeare Company at The Place Theatre in 1973, as the second part of his dramatic biography, Sylvia Plath: A Dramatic Portrait.⁵⁵ Performed by the three actresses who played Plath herself in the first half of the piece, this was an implicitly quasi-autobiographical reading of Three Women, turning the drama of pregnancy into the staging of the author

herself. It remains to be seen whether the continuing fascination with all things Plath-related will yet allow space for a production of this text which is not tied to the cult of the author.

As with all of the playtexts discussed in this thesis, however, the death of the playwright is, in the end, only the beginning of the story. Just before her death Stein is famously reported to have asked 'what is the answer?' When she received no reply, she then asked 'In that case, what is the question?' The texts discussed in this thesis place readers, critics and theatrical practitioners in a similar position to Stein at this moment: instead of offering answers, they demand that we first determine what the questions are. Ultimately, as scripts for performance, these texts are not 'about' anything until we make them about something: we must be active producers rather than passive consumers of meaning. Acting as a source of fun and mischief in the corpus of the writers themselves, these texts, moreover, continue to refuse definition, to evade categories, and to perplex and stimulate readers, interpreters and practitioners. Their subversive potential lies in the possibilities of play that they offer. It is through play that the processes of socialisation, and of identity-formation, primarily operate; returning to a mode of playing

within a theatrical space offers the opportunity for these processes to be anatomised, negotiated, and contested. I would like the final word, however, to rest with the writers themselves. It seems to me that the thesis of my thesis, concerning the relationship between theatrical meaning and effect, is encapsulated in the first moments of Stein's 'curtain raiser', Ladies Voices[™]:

Ladies voices give pleasure.

...

Does that surprise you.
Very well good night.
Very well good night.
(Mrs. Cardillac.)
That's silver.
You mean the sound.
Yes the sound.

NOTES

CHAPTER 1

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CHAPTER 2

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139. Mellow, Charmed Circle, p. 167.

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141. Brinnin, The Third Rose, p. 169.
142. Ibid., p. 169.
143. Hobhouse, Everybody, p. 32.
144. Hoffman, Gertrude Stein, p. 89.
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149. Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation, p. 173.
150. Bridgman, Gertrude Stein in Pieces, p. 341.

CHAPTER 3

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3. Virginia Woolf, Diary entry dated 21 August 1934, in The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. IV: 1931-1935, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1982), p. 238.
4. Virginia Woolf, Moments of Being, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Granada, 1978), p. 84.
5. See the following entries in Woolf's diaries:

'The Waves, is I think resolving itself (I am at page 100) into a series of dramatic soliloquies...can they be read consecutively?' Diary entry dated 20 August 1930, in

The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. III: 1925-1930, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1980), p. 312.

'I am rewriting [The Pargiters] considerably. My idea is to [space] contrast the scenes; very intense, less so: then drama; then narrative...I think it should be called 'ordinary people.' Diary entry dated 30 December 1934, in Diary, Vol. IV, p. 266. This was to become The Years.

'It's [Here and Now] to be all in speeches - no play- I have made a sketch of what everyone is to say.' Diary entry dated 17 August 1934, in Diary, Vol. IV, p. 237.

'Here and Now' and 'The Pargiters' were both working titles for The Years See Bell's note in Diary, Vol. IV, p. 6.

'Can't settle either to my play (Pointz Hall is to become in the end a play)!' Diary entry dated 9 May 1938, in The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1936-1941, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984), p. 139

'P.H. is to be a series of contrasts...It's to end with a play.' Diary entry dated 4 August 1938, in Diary, Vol. V, p. 159.

'Pointz Hall' was a provisional title for Between the Acts.

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12. Woolf, Diary entry dated 30 January 1919, The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. I: 1915-1919, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 237.
13. See Woolf's letter written in mid-October 1923 in A Change of Perspective: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. III: 1923-1928, ed. Nigel Nicholson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), p. 75.
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15. The two versions of the play are published as Freshwater, ed. Lucio P. Ruotolo (London: The Hogarth Press, 1976). In his preface Ruotolo explains his dating: 'Although the "unrevised" first version of Freshwater, included here in the appendix, is somewhat harder to date, an examination of typescript, and of internal references, supports Quentin Bell's assertion that it was written in 1923' (p. x).
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17. Woolf, Diary entry dated 30 January 1919, Diary, Vol. I, p. 237.
18. Christopher St. John notes that Mary Frazer Watts's biography of her husband omits any reference to his first marriage. See her editorial note to Ellen Terry's Memoirs, ed. Edith Craig and Christopher St. John (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933) p. 51.
19. See Woolf's letter dated 6 March 1923, Letters, Vol. III, p. 19.
20. Woolf, Diary entry dated 8 July 1923, The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Vol. II: 1920-1924, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978), p. 251.
21. Woolf, Diary entry dated 20 April 1919, Diary, Vol. I, p. 266.
22. Woolf, Letters, Vol. III, p. 72.
23. Woolf, Diary entry dated 17 July 1923, Diary, Vol. II, p. 255.

24. See Woolf's letter dated 3 August 1923, Letters, Vol. III, p. 62
25. Woolf, Letters, Vol. 3, p. 75.
26. See Woolf's letter to Vanessa dated July 1926, Letters, Vol. III, pp. 278-79.
27. See Julia Margaret Cameron, Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women (London: The Hogarth Press, 1926).
28. Lyndall Gordon, Virginia Woolf: A Writer's Life, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 198.
29. Terry's autobiography was first published in 1908 as The Story of My Life. There is no evidence to indicate that Woolf had read this. However, Woolf did read Terry's letters and memoirs during the 1930s. In 1931 she requested the 'Ellen Terry Shaw letters' from Vita Sackville-West: see Woolf's letter dated 7 Sept 1931 (A Reflection of the Other Person: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. IV: 1929-1931, ed. Nigel Nicholson [London: The Hogarth Press, 1978] p. 376). In a letter to Ethel Smythe dated 31 January 1934, Woolf mentions that she has read Terry's letters and Terry's life, both of which were edited by St. John. See The Sickle Side of the Moon: The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. V: 1932-1935, ed. Nigel Nicholson (London: Chatto & Windus, 1982), p. 271.
30. Woolf's extensive drafts of her Ellen Terry essay and her notes on her research (housed in the University of Sussex library) reveal an obsessive fascination with Terry's biography. See the Monk's House Papers, B10 and B5a.
31. Woolf, letter to Ethel Smythe dated 15 August 1934, in Letters, Vol. V, p. 323.
32. Woolf, letter to Vita Sackville-West dated 5 March 1934, in Letters, Vol. V, p. 281.
33. Woolf, letter to Smythe dated April 14 1932, Letters, Vol. V, p. 47.
34. See Helmut Gernsheim, Julia Margaret Cameron (London: Fountain Press, 1948).
35. See Brian Hill, Julia Margaret Cameron: A Victorian Family Portrait (London: Peter Owen, 1973).

36. See St. John's editorial notes in Terry's Memoirs: 'The story that she once bounded into the room after a dinner party at Little Holland House, dressed as Cupid...may be apocryphal, but the girl who at Freshwater preferred larking with the young Tennysons to sitting sedately in the drawing room listening to their father's conversation is very likely to have incurred the displeasure of crabbed age by some such childish pranks.' (p. 52)
37. Catherine Belsey, 'Disrupting sexual difference: meaning and gender in the comedies', in Alternative Shakespeares, ed. John Drakakis (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 180.
38. Virginia Woolf, Orlando, p. 86.
39. Virginia Woolf, 'Professions for Women' in Women and Writing, ed. Michelle Barrett (London: The Women's Press, 1979), pp. 57-63.
40. Auerbach, Ellen Terry, p. 100.
41. There is some ambiguity in Ruotolo's edition of the shorter Freshwater script (dated 1923 by Ruotolo) due to a stage direction being illegible. It is clear from the original manuscript that the stage direction concerned indicates that a character 'has left the room', but the name of the character is, indeed, indecipherable. However, given that Mrs Cameron is on stage prior to this direction and does not speak again until a stage direction indicates 'Enter Mrs C. with her camera', it is probable that it is Mrs Cameron who exits earlier in the scene.
42. See Woolf's letter to Sackville-West dated 15 September 1933, Letters, Vol. V, p. 225.
43. Woolf, letter to Ethel Smythe dated 15 August 1934, Letters, Vol. V, p. 323.
44. Woolf, letter to Smythe dated 14 April 1932, Letters, Vol. V, p. 47.
45. Woolf, letter to Smythe dated 21 January 1934, Letters, Vol. V, p. 271.
46. Woolf, letter to Sackville-West dated 5 March 1934, Letters, Vol. V., p. 281

47. Ruotolo, Freshwater, p. 48.

48. Vita's petname is very much in evidence in Woolf's diaries and letters during the early 1930s and also in the letters of Sackville-West to Woolf. On her return from a trip to America in 1933, Vita writes 'Yes, your porpoise is back on the marble slab', Letter dated 24 April 1933, in The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf, ed. Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell A. Leaska (London: Hutchinson, 1985), p. 396. Woolf responded with a plea to 'ring me up, dearest Porpoise West, and say when', Letter dated 25 April 1933, Letters, Vol. V, p. 180. It is evident that the petname endured, despite the problems between Woolf, Sackville-West and St. John. In a letter dated 15 February 1935, Woolf writes: 'I'm longing for an adventure, dearest creature. But would like to stipulate for at least 48½ minutes alone with you...Mere affection to the memory of the porpoise in the pink window. I've been so buried under with dust and rubbish. But Now here's the spring...My mind is filled with dreams of romantic meetings. D'you remember once sitting at Kew in a purple storm?...Did I tell you about my new love?' (Letters, Vol. V, p. 419)

49. Woolf, Diary entry dated 31 May 1940, Diary, Vol. V, p. 290.

50. Harold Nicholson, Tennyson (1923; rpt. London: Arrow Books, 1960), p. 107.

51. Woolf, Diary entry dated 18 April 1921, Diary, Vol. II, p. 113.

52. Ibid., p. 113.

53. Woolf, A Room of One's Own, p. 12.

54. Ibid., pp. 14-15.

55. Ibid., p. 19.

56. Patricia Moran, 'Virginia Woolf and the Scene of Writing', Modern Fiction Studies, 38 (1992), p. 90.

57. Terry, Memoirs, p. 87.

58. Benstock, Women of the Left Bank, p. 301. Terry's adoption of trousers in the first version of Freshwater thus is as different from this kind of androgyny as Radclyffe Hall's was from that celebrated by Natalie

Barney. As Benstock records, 'the nymph-like creatures draped in gauze who danced in Barney's garden inhabited a world different from that of the monocled women in tuxedos...these women reacted to the heterosexual norm by aping its forms.' (pp. 306-307)

59. Woolf's notes on Terry's Memoirs, Monk's House Papers, B5a.

60. Woolf, Diary entry dated 20 December 1927, Diary, Vol. III, p. 167.

61. Angelica Garnett, Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 106.

62. Ibid., p. 111.

63. Louise DeSalvo's comments on Angelica Garnett offer an intriguing perspective on Woolf's treatment of Terry in the play: 'pampered, petted, photographed and painted' not only by Vanessa Bell but by the whole Bloomsbury coterie, Angelica was 'so infantilized that, at seventeen, she was totally ignorant of sexual matters', (Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work [London: The Women's Press, 1989], pp. 89-90). In an aside which casts an interesting light on the Ophelia motif in Freshwater, DeSalvo also quotes an anecdote from Frances Spalding's biography, recording Vanessa photographing Angelica in Charleston pond, 'floating in the water in a white dress in imitation of Ophelia' (Vanessa Bell [London: Macmillan, 1984], p. 179).

64. Woolf, Monk's House Papers, B5a.

65. There is much dispute over the role of Charles Reade and his influence in Terry's decision to return to her career. Terry's account in her Memoirs is quoted by Woolf in her notes on the autobiography:

'a whole crowd of horsemen in "pink" came leaping over the hedge into the lane. One of them stopped and asked if he could do anything. Then he looked hard at me and exclaimed "Good God it's Nelly."' (Monk's House Papers, B5a) In the Memoirs, Terry continues: 'The man was Charles Reade' and claims that he encouraged her to return to her work as actress:
'"Come back to the stage!"
"No, never"

"You're a fool! You ought to come back."

Suddenly I remembered the bailiff in the house a few miles away, and I said laughingly: "Well, perhaps, I would think of it if some one would give me forty pounds a week!"

"Done!" said Charles Reade.' (Memoirs, p. 69)

St. John, however, suggests that Terry's account is fabricated: 'The Arcadian bliss of Harpenden was in jeopardy long before Charles Reade leapt over the hedge into Ellen Terry's life. The young mother had other troubles than those financial ones which had culminated in bailiffs. Her future was uncertain, and she was worried about it on account of her children' (Memoirs, p. 174n). In the shorter version of Freshwater Terry recounts her first encounter with her lover: 'Signor and I were picking primroses in Maiden's Lane. Suddenly I heard the sound of galloping hoofs, and a horse and rider sprang right over our heads' (p. 60). In the revised script, the reference is more implicit as Terry's speech is cut, but her conversation with Tennyson hints at her prospective romance:

ELLEN

Tell me, Mr. Tennyson, have you ever picked primroses in a lane?

...

Then I suppose you were never in love. Nobody ever jumped over your head and dropped a white rose into your hand and galloped away?

... you see, Mr Tennyson, I was walking in a lane the other day picking primroses when - '

(p. 13)

Terry's account is interrupted, but the repetition of her initial questions suggests that she is about to describe how someone jumped over her head, dropping a white rose. Woolf thus elaborates Terry's account, but the reference is clear. The fact that Gordon Craig despised Godwin constitutes another of Woolf's private jokes as in Freshwater, Craig has become Godwin.

66. Woolf, diary entry dated 2 April 1935, Diary, Vol. V, p. 296.

67. Woolf, diary entry dated 17 July 1934, Diary, Vol. V, p. 226.

68. Ruotolo notes: 'Found Drowned is the title of a painting by Watts. His wife described it as "the wreck of

a young girl's life." Ellen Terry left a two-word note, "Found Drowned" attached to a photograph of Watts when in 1868 she ran off with Godwin' (Freshwater, p. 52). I would maintain, however, that the reference to Terry's note is one of the many anecdotes surrounding Terry's first marriage, while the phrase 'ran off with Godwin' is misleading as it implies Terry left Watts for Godwin.

69. Terry, Memoirs, p. 65. In the Memoirs it is clear from Terry's account and St. John's notes that the relationship with Godwin followed her separation from Watts which he initiated. (See Memoirs, pp. 46-53) It is also worth noting that Ruotolo makes no reference to the incident Terry describes in her Memoirs where she was presumed drowned. I presume that this is the source of Woolf's reference.

70. Woolf, Freshwater. MS, Monks House Papers, A25a.

71. Liz Stanley, The auto/biographical I: The theory and practice of feminist auto/biography (Manchester: MUP, 1992), p. 248.

CHAPTER 4

1. Alan Sinfield, Literature, Politics and Culture in Post-War Britain (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 191.

2. Ibid., p. 198.

3. Sylvia Plath, The Journals of Sylvia Plath, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982), p. 193.

4. Judith Butler, 'Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig and Foucault', in Feminism as Critique, ed. Seyla Benhabib and Drucilla Cornell (Oxford: Polity Press, 1987), p. 132.

5. Plath, Journals, pp. 193-94.

6. Butler, 'Variations', p. 133.

7. Ibid., p. 133.

8. E. Ann Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation: The Mother in Popular Culture and Melodrama (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 8.
9. Sinfield, Literature, Politics and Culture, p. 107.
10. Ibid., p. 205-206.
11. Ibid., p. 207.
12. Sylvia Plath, Collected Poems, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 276. Subsequent citations are in the text.
13. Sylvia Plath, Letters Home, ed. Aurelia Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), p. 324.
14. Plath, Journals, p. 170.
15. Rose, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, p. 155.
16. Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath (London: Viking, 1989), p. 112.
17. Paul Alexander, Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath (New York: Penguin, 1992), p. 208.
18. Ibid., p. 208.
19. Anthony Easthope, Poetry as Discourse (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 161.
20. Ibid., p. 133.
21. Ibid., p. 161.
22. Ibid., p. 93.
23. Ibid., p. 135.
24. Belsey, Critical Practice, p. 98.
25. Plath, Letters Home, p. 456.
26. Sylvia Plath, Winter Trees (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), Note by Ted Hughes, p. 7.
27. Quoted in Stevenson, Bitter Fame, p. 236.
28. Lindaw Wagner-Martin describes it as 'radio play' (Sylvia Plath, p. 199). It is for Robyn Marsack a 'long dialogue' (Sylvia Plath [Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992], p. 35); for Jacqueline Rose it is a

'verse play' (Haunting of Sylvia Plath, p. 48); Susan Bassnett, hovering between the medium and the manner of delivery, defines it at one point as a 'verse play for radio' and at another 'a verse play for three female voices' (Sylvia Plath [Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987], p. 32, p. 129); while Steven Gould Axelrod labels it first a 'poem for voices', and subsequently 'three alternating monologues' (Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words [Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990], p. 113, p. 163). Most recently, Elaine Aston, has it both ways, describing the text as 'a poem for three women's voices which was broadcast as a radio play' (An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre [London: Routledge, 1995], p. 51).

29. Robert Hewison, In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-60, rev. edn. (London: Methuen, 1988), p. 80.

30. Ibid., p. 81.

31. Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Brecht, pp. 206-207.

32. Hewison, In Anger, p. 81.

33. T. S. Eliot, 'Poetry and Drama', Selected Prose, pp. 145-46.

34. Williams, Ibsen to Brecht, p. 219.

35. Plath, Letters Home, p. 324.

36. Ibid., p. 324.

37. Timothy Materer, 'Occultism as Source and Symptom in Sylvia Plath's "Dialogue over a Ouija Board"', Twentieth Century Literature, 37 (1991), 131-47.

38. Stevenson, Bitter Fame, p. 112n.

39. R. Laurence Moore, In Search of White Crows: Spiritualism, Parapsychology and American Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 224.

40. Ibid., p. 222.

41. Ibid., p. 222.

42. Alex Owen, The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England (London: Virago, 1989), p. 11.

43. Niamh Baker, Happily Ever After? Women's Fiction in Postwar Britain 1945-60 (New York: St. Martins Press, 1989), p. 2.

44. Axelrod, Sylvia Plath, pp. 143-44.
45. Plath, Journals, p. 170.
46. Ibid., p. 172.
47. Ibid., p. 173.
48. Roland Barthes, 'Authors and Writers', in Selected Writings, ed. Susan Sontag (Glasgow: Fontana, 1983), p. 189.
49. Ibid., p. 187.
50. Sellers, Language and Sexual Difference, p. 7.
51. Ibid., p. 7.
52. Ibid., p. 7.
53. Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass (1871), in Alice in Wonderland, second edition, ed. Donald Gray (New York: W. W. Norton, 1992), pp. 163-64.
54. Ibid., p. 118.
55. Ibid., p. 163.
56. Rose, Haunting of Sylvia Plath, p. 155.
57. Plath, Journals, p. 171.
58. Ibid., p. 171.
59. Ibid., p. 280
60. See for example the poem 'Metaphors' (1959), Collected Poems, p. 116.
61. Plath, Journals, p. 171.
62. Smith, Subjectivity, Identity and the Body, p. 12.
63. Ibid., p. 12.
64. Douglas Cleverdon, 'On Three Women' in The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 227.
65. Stuart Laing, 'The production of literature', in Society and Literature 1945-1970, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 155.
66. Ibid., p. 158.

67. Hughes, Winter Trees p.
68. Alexander, Rough Magic, p. 305.
69. Laing, 'Production of literature', p. 160.
70. Hewison, In Anger, p. 174.
71. Peter Moss and Christine Higgins, 'Radio Voices', Media, Culture and Society, 6 (1984), p. 353.
72. Quoted in File on Churchill, ed. Linda Fitzsimmons (London: Methuen, 1989), p. 85.
73. Frances Gray, 'The Nature of Radio Drama', in Radio Drama, ed. Peter Lewis (London: Longman, 1981), p. 51.
74. Quoted in File in Churchill, p. 85.
75. Angela Carter, Preface to Come Unto These Yellow Sands (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1985), p. 8.
76. Gray, 'Radio Drama', pp. 52-53.
77. Ibid., p. 57.
78. Josette Feral, 'Writing and Displacement: Women in Theatre', trans. Barbara Kerslake, Modern Drama, 27 (1984), p. 558.
79. Aston, Feminism and Theatre, p. 51.
80. Ann Oakley, The Captured Womb: A History of the Medical Care of Pregnant Women (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 194.
81. Ibid., p. 194.
82. Ibid., p. 214.
83. Plath, Letters Home, p. 374.
84. As Oakley observes, 'the rise in institutional births from the early 1950s...almost merges with that for total births in the late 1970s' (Captured Womb, p. 214).
85. Plath, Letters Home, p. 443.
86. See for example Susan Bassnett's comment: 'leaving the child, she leaves behind some part of herself in a place that has been unreal to her' (Sylvia Plath,

p. 132).

87. See Cleverdon, 'On Three Women', p. 227?
88. Rose, Haunting of Sylvia Plath, pp. 48-49.
89. Stevenson, Bitter Fame, pp. 233-34.
90. Plath, Journals, p. 308.
91. Regenia Gagnier, Subjectivities: A History of Self-Representation in Britain, 1832-1920 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 8.
92. Ibid., p. 8.
93. Kaplan, Motherhood and Representation, pp. 6-7.
94. Ibid., p. 6.
95. Ibid., p. 77.
96. Plath, Journals, p. 166.
97. Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, The Newly Born Woman, trans. Betsy Wing (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 93.

CONCLUSION

1. Linda Anderson, 'At the Threshold of the Self: Women and Autobiography', in Women's Writing: A Challenge to Theory, ed. Moira Monteith (Brighton: Harvester, 1986), pp. 59-60.
2. Peter Brook, The Empty Space (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 157.
3. Jonathan Miller, Subsequent Performances (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 19.
4. Judith E. Barlow, Plays by American Women 1930-1960 (New York: Applause, 1994).
5. Barry Kyle, Sylvia Plath: A Dramatic Portrait (London: Faber and Faber, 1976).
6. Gertrude Stein, Ladies Voices, in Geography and Plays, p. 203.

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