

**ECLIPSE AND PRISMATICS: THE FEMINIST POST-IMPRESSIONISM
OF VIRGINIA WOOLF**

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ABSTRACT

This materialist feminist approach to Woolf's photological and colourist tropes seeks to revise orthodox interpretations of her Post-Impressionism. It falls into two interrelated parts, "Eclipse", and "Prismatics", each taking as its point of departure a significant moment for Woolf: the 1927 solar eclipse, and the 1910 Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Chapter 1 relates the thesis to Woolf criticism in general, and, as a basis for understanding the relation between its two parts, focuses on "The Moment: Summer's Night", where a luminous moment is understood as one of (patriarchal) oppression into which Woolf invites intervention. Chapters 2 to 8 examine photological theories in relation to Woolf; analyse Woolf's diary entry on the eclipse and her prose piece "The Sun and the Fish", along with other eclipse-related texts (ideal material for a close study of her engagement with the tropes of light, shade and colour); and explore Woolf's manipulation of gendered photological discourses in relation to a range of mythological sources. Part One's sustained close readings suggest Woolf intrudes into a discourse of solar subjectivity (traditionally inscribed as masculine), an intersubjective feminist colourism, discussed in relation to suffrage iconography and elegiac traditions. Part Two adopts a more varied approach. It begins with a contextualising account of Post-Impressionist theories and practice from 1910 and 1912; and along with samples of Woolf's later writing on feminism and art, it discusses two novels. Chapter 9 examines the reception of the 1910 exhibition in relation to colourism and to the contemporary spectacle of suffrage agitation. Chapter 10 charts the move from romantic colour-based definitions of Post-Impressionism to the second exhibition's more dominant theory of significant form. It proposes the former as more pertinent to Woolf's engagement with the visual arts than the latter (more orthodoxly emphasized). Chapter 11 considers in relation to Woolf the work of Vanessa Bell as part of an English, colourist and iconographic strand of Post-Impressionism; Chapter 12 examines, in close readings of her forewords to Vanessa Bell's exhibitions, Woolf's writerly, feminist understanding of her sister's art, suggesting her approach allows for both significant-formalist and feminist iconographic readings. Part Two finds Post-Impressionism's colourist displacement of traditional chiaroscuro (the balancing of light and shade) to inform Woolf's feminist manipulation of light and colour tropes. Chapters 13 and 14 read *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* as elegies contesting a patriarchal photology with a feminist colourist iconography. A number of colour plates, showing examples of suffragist art and Vanessa Bell's work, illustrate the thesis.

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DECLARATION

I declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: INTERRUPTED MOMENTS

... to catch and enclose certain moments which break off from the mass, in which without bidding things come together in a combination of inexplicable significance, to arrest those thoughts which suddenly, to the thinker at least, are almost menacing with meaning. Such moments of vision are of an unaccountable nature; leave them alone and they persist for years; try to explain them and they disappear; write them down and they die beneath the pen.¹

From the mass of Virginia Woolf's writing I have chosen to focus on two "moments" of significance to Woolf which might well be considered "almost menacing with meaning": one in June 1927, and the other November/December 1910. My thesis falls into two parts, "Eclipse", and "Prismatics", each of which takes one of these dates as its point of departure. If linear chronology were to dictate, we would begin with the prismatics of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910 and build up to the solar eclipse of 1927, but this would be to dispel the very qualities of Woolf's "moment" that my argument explores.

Yet what composed the present moment? If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it tremble and quiver. If you are old, the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it. All the same, everybody believes that the present is something, seeks out different elements in this situation in order to compose the truth of it, the whole of it.²

¹ Virginia Woolf, "Moments of Vision", *Times Literary Supplement*, 23 May 1918, p.243; *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, Volume 2: 1912-1918, edited by Andrew McNeillie (London, 1987) pp.250-51; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (E, I-IV).

² Woolf, "The Moment: Summer's Night", *The Moment and Other Essays* (London, 1947), p.9; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (M).

By beginning with a focus on 1927, we encounter Woolf in *medias res*, at the heart of her writing career. In 1910 it had barely begun. The events of 1910 gain significance in the first part of this thesis as a "waver" upon the moment of 1927, before being explored in the second part from a different perspective. Whereas Part One comprises an extensive and comparative close reading of samples of Woolf's writing (focusing on a diary entry and an essay, with excursions into other texts), Part Two adopts a more varied approach. Beginning with a contextualizing account of the emergence and development of theories of Post-Impressionism in 1910 and 1912, it concludes by returning, in the light of these theories, to Woolf's writing of the late 1920s and early 1930s, with readings of two novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. My exploration of the moment in 1927, therefore, necessitates an excursus into the earlier moment of 1910: the impetus for the investigation of Post-Impressionism arises from Woolf's reflections on it in the 1920s (after all it was on or around 1924 that Woolf declared the significance of 1910). Part One's discussion of the 1927 eclipse, accordingly, makes some preliminary connections with the events of 1910; and Part Two's survey of Post-Impressionism prompts further consideration of aspects of the eclipse. The nature of Woolf's moment, then, enables (and encourages) us to explore other, past and future moments in ways that obedience to linear chronology would make less accessible.

First, it might be useful if I indicate my sense of the position of my argument in relation to Woolf criticism in general; a body of criticism enormous in range and volume and very varied in focus, which includes nearly every shade (and combination) of critical approach:

biographical,³ psychobiographical,⁴ contextual,⁵ materialist,⁶ Marxist,⁷ mystic,⁸ philosophical,⁹ aesthetic,¹⁰ interartistic,¹¹ formalist,¹² psychoanalytic,¹³ deconstructive,¹⁴ modernist,¹⁵ postmodernist,¹⁶ and feminist.¹⁷ My approach combines

³ The standard remains Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf. A Biography*, 2 vols. (London, 1972); a more literary biography is Phyllis Rose, *Woman of Letters: A Life of Virginia Woolf* (New York, 1978).

⁴ See Jean O. Love, *Virginia Woolf: Sources of Madness and Art* (Berkeley, 1977); more extreme is Louise DeSalvo's *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (Boston, 1989).

⁵ See Leon Edel, *Bloomsbury: A House of Lions* (London, 1979); Richard Shone, *Bloomsbury Portraits: Vanessa Bell, Duncan Grant, and Their Circle* (Oxford, 1975).

⁶ For example, Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1986); Michèle Barrett, "Introduction", in *Woolf, Women and Writing*, edited by Michèle Barrett (London, 1979).

⁷ See Raymond Williams, "The Bloomsbury Fraction", *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (London, 1980), pp.148-169; Jeremy Hawthorn, *Virginia Woolf's "Mrs Dalloway": A Study in Alienation* (Sussex, 1975); Jane Marcus (who combines Marxism with mysticism), *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus, 1988).

⁸ See Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences. The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston, 1984).

⁹ See Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World. The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus, 1986).

¹⁰ See Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge, 1973).

¹¹ See Diane Filby Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts. The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Syracuse, NY, 1988).

¹² See the structuralist approach of Mitchell A. Leaska's *Virginia Woolf's Lighthouse: A Study in Critical Method* (London, 1970); and the close reading approach of Hermione Lee's *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London, 1977).

¹³ See Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago, 1989).

¹⁴ See Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987).

¹⁵ See Malcolm Bradbury, *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers* (Harmondsworth, 1989).

¹⁶ See Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford, 1988); Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself* (Urbana and Chicago, 1991).

¹⁷ Many examples cited in other categories above may also be considered as part of the feminist debate. For the dominant feminist debate over androgyny in the 1970s see: Alice Van Buren Kelley, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* (Chicago, 1973); Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* (New Brunswick, 1973); Elaine Showalter, "Virginia Woolf and

several of the above and while it does not emphasize biographical readings, it does begin with a moment from Woolf's life as she recorded it in her diary. It seeks to place that moment in the context of "the real world",¹⁸ that is in the material and historical realm beyond merely the personal and subjective, and to relate it to contemporary accounts, as well as to various critical theories (feminist, modernist and postmodernist).

As the choice of material suggests, this thesis does not attempt a comprehensive reading of Woolf's oeuvre,¹⁹ nor a systematic reading of her novels,²⁰ but rather it tends to focus on writings and events *between* novels. Nor are its findings necessarily to be considered as a paradigm for such a reading (although it closes with a reading of two novels). Nor does it claim to establish a totalizing Woolfian philosophy.²¹ It does, however, seek to understand some of the feminist implications of Woolf's aesthetics at the heart of her writing career. It is also relevant to the continuing debate over the reconciliation of Woolf's aesthetics (as noted in her fiction) to her politics (as noted in her non-fiction).²² I shall be suggesting that some of those elements critics

the Flight into Androgyny", *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (London, 1979). For introduction to the debate on feminism and post-structuralism see Toril Moi, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist readings of Woolf", *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London, 1985), pp.1-18.

¹⁸ Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1986).

¹⁹ Rarely is Woolf's entire oeuvre addressed by critics; see Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and her Works*, translated by Jean Stewart (London, 1965).

²⁰ See Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*.

²¹ See Guiguet who, in *Virginia Woolf and her Works*, reads Woolf as an existentialist; Howard Harper, in *Between Language and Silence: The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Louisiana, 1982), charts an interest in mythic transcendence in her work.

²² See Showalter, "Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny", and Moi, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist readings of Woolf".

have identified as Woolf at her most abstract, aestheticized, and philosophically remote, may alternatively (and paradoxically) be read, and reclaimed, in relation to an historically aware, materialist and feminist Woolf. This is not to deny the former in favour of the latter, but to suggest their intimate interrelation.²³

Woolf's much cited essay, "The Moment: Summer's Night", written possibly around 1929,²⁴ provides an appropriate point of entry into some of the main issues of Woolf criticism.

To begin with: [the present moment] is largely composed of visual and of sense impressions. The day was very hot. After heat, the surface of the body is opened, as if all the pores were open and everything lay exposed, not sealed and contracted, as in cold weather.... Then the sense of light sinking back into darkness seems to be gently putting out with a damp sponge the colour in one's own eyes.... But this moment is also composed of a sense that the legs of the chair are sinking through the centre of the earth, passing through the rich garden earth; they sink, weighted down. Then the sky loses its colour perceptibly and a star here and there makes a point of light. (*M*, p.9)

Under its rubric of one moment (albeit the duration of a "Summer's Night"), the essay unfolds a series of moments and explores the moment itself as a site of many other moments, of intersecting narratives, of physical sensation, of imaginative realization, individually and

²³ James Naremore, "Nature and History in *The Years*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1980), p.242, observes that "Woolf's program for modern fiction was an aestheticism which was also deeply political"; and Pamela J. Transue, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style* (Albany, New York, 1986), p.16, finds that "Woolf's committed feminism combined with her integrity as an artist and her outstanding capacity to metamorphose ideology into art make her work particularly suitable for a study of the complex relationship of polemic to aesthetics."

²⁴ See Jean Guiguet, "A Novelist's Essay: 'The Moment: Summer's Night' by Virginia Woolf", *Der Englische Essay: Analysen*, edited by Horst Weber (Darmstadt Germany, 1975), p.294.

collectively experienced.²⁵ Hermione Lee has noted, with reference to this essay, how Woolf's moments so often involve images of illumination and reflection;²⁶ and in connection with this point, we might note in the above passage Woolf's "sense of light sinking back into darkness", her sensual references to colour and to points of starlight. Differing somewhat from Lee's emphasis, this thesis will examine Woolf's manipulation of an imagery of light and dark.

Fleetingly, in "The Moment: Summer's Night", the moment is registered as something beyond human control, something we may witness but not affect: "One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant. And as nothing can interfere with the order, we have nothing to do but accept, and watch." (*M*, pp.9-10) Lee generalizes from this: "The moment is both in and out of time and it is registered passively, but must be formally 'composed'".²⁷ But while art is constructed here as a passive reflection of the natural order (the setting of the sun), Lee underplays the fact that the particular moment is dusk, and that against the inevitable crepuscular gloom lamps are lit, suggesting something more constructive than mere reflection or passive notation: "Yes the time has come in all cottages, in all farms, to light the lamps. Thus then the moment is laced about with these weavings to and

²⁵ Guiguet, "A Novelist's Essay: 'The Moment: Summer's Night' by Virginia Woolf", p.296, notes of Woolf's "visual and ... sense impressions" that here, "all the components of the moment, from the most superficial or peripheral to the deepest and most central are rendered in concrete terms". Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton, 1970), p.27, similarly observes that: "The center or meeting place for experience was, to Virginia Woolf, the moment - a cross section of consciousness in which perceptions and feelings converged and formed around something round and whole."

²⁶ Hermione Lee, "A Burning Glass: Reflection in Virginia Woolf", *Virginia Woolf: A Centenary Perspective*, edited by Eric Warner (London and Basingstoke, 1984), p.16.

²⁷ Lee, "A Burning Glass: Reflection in Virginia Woolf", p.17.

fro, these inevitable downsinkings, flights, lamp lightings." (*M*, p.10) So the moment may include counter-illumination, against the "natural" fall of light.

Woolf's art is often characterized as impressionistic - "a process of strenuously fixing such moments and trying to turn them into narrative"²⁸ - and her much quoted literary dictum to "look within" becomes relevant, since the process of "fixing" is one which the essay in which it appears addresses:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being "like this". Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms.... Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?²⁹

There is a paradox here in the dual aim of showing both the fluid and the fragmentary nature of experience, both the flow of time and one instant. The process of writing becomes a struggle to capture the subjective flux of experience and reproduce it for the reader in a fixed moment or image. "To render these moments of being in their entirety," it has been suggested, "to describe them so that the reader was placed in the very center of the consciousness experiencing the moment - receiving from all sides the shower of atoms as they fell, those myriad impressions of perception and emotion - was [Woolf's] task as she saw it."³⁰

²⁸ Lee, "A Burning Glass: Reflection in Virginia Woolf", p.25.

²⁹ Woolf, "Modern Fiction", *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), p.189.

³⁰ Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, p.27.

Such critical responses are imbued with the theories of Henri Bergson which have been widely and variously employed in the characterization of the Woolfian moment. Shiv Kumar, for example, makes one of the largest claims for reading Woolf through Bergson:

Time with her is almost a mode of perception, a filter which distils all phenomena before they are apprehended in their true significance and relationship.... All her literary experiments as a novelist can be explained in terms of Bergson's *la durée*.³¹

La durée may be briefly defined as subjective, psychological, non-spatial, time.³² True time is, then, impenetrable and seamlessly continuous, only existing within, subjectively: "Outside ourselves we should find only space, and consequently nothing but simultaneities, of which we could not even say that they are objectively

³¹ Shiv K. Kumar, *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel* (London and Glasgow, 1962), p.69. See also: Morris Beja, "Matches Struck in the Dark: Virginia Woolf's Moment of Vision", *Critical Quarterly*, 6 (Summer 1964), 137-152; Floris Delattre, *Le roman psychologique de Virginia Woolf* (Paris, 1932), pp.127-142; Paul Douglass, "The Gold Coin: Bergsonian Intuition and Modernist Aesthetics", *Thought: A Review of Culture and Idea*, 58 (June 1983), 234-250; J.W. Graham, "A Negative Note on Bergson and Virginia Woolf", *Essays in Criticism*, 6 (January 1956), 70-74; James Hafley, *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954); Kumar, "Memory in Virginia Woolf and Bergson", *University of Kansas City Review*, 26 (1960), 235-239; Kumar, "Virginia Woolf and Bergson's 'Memoire Par Excellence'", *English Studies*, 41 (October 1960), 313-318; Kumar, "A Positive Note on Bergson and Virginia Woolf", *The Literary Criterion*, 4 (Summer 1961), 27-31; Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge, 1973), pp.110-13; Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London and New York, 1990), pp.4, 101; William Troy, "Virginia Woolf: The Novel of Sensibility", *Literary Opinion in America*, edited by Morton Dauwen Zabel (New York, 1937); Josalba Ramalho Vieira, "Henri Bergson's Idea of Duration and Virginia Woolf's Novels", *Ilha do Desterro: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 24 no.2 (1990), 9-20.

³² Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1889), translated by F.L. Pogson (London, 1971), p.108: "Within myself a process of organization or interpenetration of conscious states is going on, which constitutes true duration. It is because I endure in this way that I picture to myself what I call the past oscillations of the pendulum at the same time as I perceive the present oscillation."

successive, since succession can only be thought through *comparing* the present with the past."³³ Bergson speaks of "two different selves ... one of which is ... the external projection of the other, its spatial and, so to speak, social representation"; but the more "fundamental" of which is connected to *la durée* and is therefore "free". It is reached

by deep introspection, which leads us to grasp our inner states as living things, constantly *becoming*, as states not amenable to measure, which permeate one another and of which the succession in duration has nothing in common with juxtaposition in homogeneous space. But the moments at which we thus grasp ourselves are rare, and that is just why we are rarely free.³⁴

Bergson emphasizes that only in "rare moments" do we have access to *la durée* and to our true selves, and that only in such moments may we "act freely".³⁵ Such a concept of freedom is at odds with theories which seek political freedom in the spatial, the historical and "the real world". Bergsonian readings of Woolf, then, risk discounting such elements in her work; and it is these elements that I will be examining. But it is sensible to acknowledge that Bergson's "rare moments" of introspection do often seem similar to Woolf's; and his suggestion of an inner illumination casting its "colourless shadow" into the external world may also inform Woolf's "luminous halo" imagery. Such similarities, I suggest, may cause us to overlook more materialist aspects of Woolf's work.³⁶

³³ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p.116.

³⁴ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, pp.231-232.

³⁵ Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p.232.

³⁶ Randall Stevenson helpfully discusses connections between Bergson's theories and modernist fiction (including Woolf's), in *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), pp.104-5: "Time could be truly understood not through the divisive intellect, but by means of intuition, able to apprehend the permeation of conscious states; the seamless flow of creative evolution and becoming. Such views of continuity and duration also create in Bergson's work a central role for memory; in the evolving flow of conscious states, past ones do not disappear but coexist

Kumar summarizes the Bergsonian interpretation of Woolf in terms which still permeate Woolf criticism:

In this continuous movement of inner life there are no pauses; perceptions, memories and sensations roll on, as it were, in laval flow, recreating the self in eternally new forms. Life, as Virginia Woolf conceives it, is not a predetermined and precisely patterned thing. Since its determining aspect is *la durée*, it has no spatial symmetry or cohesion about it.³⁷

But to characterize all of Woolf's writing in such terms is to risk its homogenization into an unbroken record of life as inner flux, and of existence primarily as passive, subjective and ahistorical. Woolf can then be read as a writer who plumbs the universal psyche for its transcendent Bergsonian verities. But James Hafley, who finds Woolf "a better artist than Bergson is a philosopher", in his sustained Bergsonian interpretation of her work nevertheless cautions: "Woolf is not to be explained away by one word, 'Bergsonism' or any other."³⁸

Although we may find Woolf reminiscent of Bergson, we might be wary of fully equating the two. Indeed, Tony Inglis in 1977 notes that for some time in Woolf studies "pondered reading and critical accounts [have] tended to show that Woolf's novels are better read as weapons against flux than as inert surrenders to it."³⁹

with and interpenetrate present ones.... Bergson's belief that time exists truly as duration, within the self, and that the conscious states constituting this duration are seamlessly continuous, also coincides with some more general modernist principles. It matches both the assumption that the truest experience is found by looking within, and that this mental experience is stream-like and continuous in nature."

³⁷ Kumar, *Bergson and the Stream of Consciousness Novel*, p.101.

³⁸ Hafley, *The Glass Roof: Virginia Woolf as Novelist*, pp. 166, 43-44.

³⁹ Tony Inglis, "Virginia Woolf and English Culture", first published in French in *Virginia Woolf et le groupe de Bloomsbury*, edited by Jean Guiguet (Paris, 1977); first English version in *Virginia Woolf*, edited by Rachel Bowlby (London and New York, 1992), p.48. He continues: "From Empson onward it had been possible to

Alternative readings of "flux" as dynamically engaged in Woolf's work, then, are possible, but they do not necessarily entail historical or materialist approaches. Inglis, furthermore, does not mention in his optimistic survey the possibility of feminist criticism, which at the time of his writing was becoming dominant in Woolf studies. It is not my concern to establish in detail the accuracy or otherwise of Woolf's, or of Woolf criticism's, understanding of Bergson, but rather to comment on how the invocation of Bergsonism has often tended to encourage certain readings of her work which neglect its feminist import.

Woolf's alleged "Bergsonism", I am suggesting, may be interpreted differently. For example, an early and hostile critic of Woolf, characterizing her technique as "essentially static", also finds what we might identify as Bergsonian qualities in her prose, and takes exception in terms which, given a different emphasis, have particular significance to the main argument of this thesis:

A single moment is isolated and forms a unit for the sensibility to work on. The difficulty lies in relating the various moments.... Everything receives the same slightly strained attention: the effect is not unlike that of a tempera painting, where there is exquisite delicacy of colour, but no light and shade. (The connection of this with the refusal to assent to a

take for granted Woolf's *dynamic* use of the stream-of-consciousness convention; Daiches and Auerbach had shown how she used reverie, rather than simply reducing experience to reverie. Savage's impatient and reductive accounts ... are coloured and unduly sharpened by an anxiety over indeterminacy and the lack of absolutes that, a generation later, has been substantially overcome - we swim in the waves of flux instead of drowning in them." Inglis refers to William Empson, *Scrutinies by Various Writers II*, edited by Edgell Rickword (London, 1930), p.211; David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1945); Eric Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking", *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953); D.S. Savage, *The Withered Branch* (London, 1950).

statement absolutely is too obvious to need any stressing.)⁴⁰

M.C. Bradbrook focuses on Woolf's depiction of the single moment, which according to Bergsonian readings (for which Bradbrook appears to have little sympathy) paradoxically allows us special access to *la durée*; hence she sees in Woolf's prose a pointless subjective "intensity". Woolf offers no plot, that is no narrative movement and therefore no sense of historical movement. Bradbrook likens Woolf to a fastidious, "myopic", painter capable of fine detail but with no overall sense of design: infatuated with technique, she has no "statement" to make. "Woolf refuses to be pinned down" asserts Bradbrook, "... and consequently she is debarred from narrative technique, since this implies a schema of values, or even from direct presentation of powerful feelings or major situations."⁴¹ Woolf's writing so focuses on the present moment that it remains outside narrative progression, and therefore seems without historical awareness and without a sense of value (moral or aesthetic). It may be possible, however, to see history not as "debarred" from Woolf's moment but actually signalled in the very imagery that Bradbrook finds so static.

Bradbrook's painting simile alludes to the aestheticism she finds distasteful in Woolf's work, but it also identifies an important point about Woolf's management of light, shade and colour which my thesis will explore more fully. Bradbrook finds stylistically flattening Woolf's replacement of the traditional handling of light and shade (*chiaroscuro*) with a mosaic of colour. In this analogy Bradbrook is assuming a "schema of values", that

⁴⁰ M.C. Bradbrook, "Notes on the Style of Mrs Woolf", *Scrutiny* (May 1932), 33-38; Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1975), pp.310-11.

⁴¹ Bradbrook, p.309.

is the combined moral and aesthetic evaluations of light and shade, traditionally inscribed in Western thought: light is equated with positive or good values and shade with negative or evil. She censures Woolf's descriptions of the play of light, shade and colour, for departing from the traditional scheme.

Woolf's alleged dispersal of large swathes of light and shade (and all that these terms stand for morally and aesthetically) into myriad pinpoints of colour, then, may be seen as "the refusal to assent to statement". I concur with Bradbrook's observation of Woolf's compositional replacement of light and shade with exquisite colour, but disagree with her interpretation of this manoeuvre. It may be seen not as a flight from "statement", but on the contrary, as the possible basis of a coded articulation of historical intervention. Furthermore, when light and shade are evaluated with reference to gender and subjectivity (as implicitly they have been from Genesis on), Woolf's departure from traditional chiaroscuro, as my thesis will explore, may be seen as a positive and *feminist* statement, a denial of oppressive binary oppositions, and an interruption of a patriarchal continuum. Critical use of Bergsonism is frequently at odds with such readings.

Walter Benjamin observes that Bergson's conception of *la durée* denies "genuine historical experience" and is

estranged from history. 'Bergson the metaphysician suppresses death'. The fact that death is eliminated from Bergson's *durée* isolates it effectively from a historical (as well as prehistorical) order.... The *durée* from which death has been eliminated has the miserable endlessness of a scroll. Tradition is excluded from it.⁴²

⁴² Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, translated by Harry Zohn (London and New York, 1983), pp.144-45; Benjamin quotes from Max Horkheimer, "Zu Bergsons Metaphysik", *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 3 (1934), p.332.

If the *durée* denies history it may not account for historical change. A reading of Woolf which emphasizes the Bergsonian *durée* as immanent in her "moments", then, may find difficulties in reconciling itself to her engagement with the historical interventions of feminism. In keeping with the line of criticism identified by Inglis, however, Randall Stevenson suggests a more dynamic interpretation of the Bergsonian *durée*, identifying in both Bergson and Woolf a "tension between 'worlds' separated by different concepts of time", between senses of "order" and "intuition", external and internal.⁴³ Woolf's writing is not, according to this view, an endless scroll of metaphysics, but rather an exploration of the gap between two modes of experience.

Yet such an approach also tends to emphasize Woolf's references to such things as "this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit" as evidence of a commitment to a sense of the transcendent and metaphysical over the materiality of the "alien and the external". This view may gain further authority from Woolf's much cited pronouncements against the materialism of the Edwardian writers, Wells, Galsworthy, and Bennett, who, she claims, "laid an enormous stress on the fabric of things".⁴⁴ It may be possible, however, to understand in terms of materialism Woolf's inward gaze and her interest in the evanescent and the flux of life. Perhaps for Woolf such "intuitive" things are actually material, constructed discourses (not naturally and eternally given), and subject to historical change and intellectual challenge.

⁴³ Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction*, p.135.

⁴⁴ Woolf, "Character in Fiction" ["Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"], *Criterion*, 2: 8 (July 1924); *E*, III, p.432. See also Madeline Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), pp.224-225.

We might also consider Bergson's dualism (spirit and matter) in relation to gender:

As in most metaphysical dualisms, Bergson makes what can be termed a male-female distinction: one reality is active, the other passive. . . . Spirit seeks to express itself by incarnation within matter, but this incarnation is not a synthesis, it is not a union of two equal realities; rather, organic life is a victory over static matter, spirit's triumphant use of matter to express and realise itself.⁴⁵

In the mind of Wyndham Lewis (an anti-feminist and arch-enemy of Bloomsbury) Bergson is the "feminine philosopher of the flux",⁴⁶ according to whose "school of thought [man] has been taught to regard *intuition* (the 'intuition of the Woman', for example, contrasted with 'the mere logic of the Man') as superior to Intellect".⁴⁷ As an alleged champion of feminine intuition, then, Bergson may hold potential for feminists wishing to put a positive case for traditionally negative feminine qualities; but for the same reasons he is also likely to be seen as detrimental to feminism. The reinforcement of the feminine as naturally intuitive and outside reason is more often seen as central not to women's emancipation, but to women's oppression.

To "look within", then, may not be regarded as a neutral activity, unaffected by gender. Bergson puts forward a model of subjectivity in which the true self, in touch with *la durée*, paradoxically may be regarded as masculine. He also locates "freedom" in subjective intuition rather than in the spatial, material and historical "real world", the site in fact of feminist struggle. Although potentially inspiring as a site of utopian vision, this subjective dimension remains cut off

⁴⁵ Thomas Hann, "The Bergsonian Heritage", *The Bergsonian Heritage*, edited by Thomas Hann (New York and London, 1962), p.6.

⁴⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled* (London, 1926), p.391.

⁴⁷ Lewis, *Paleface* (London, 1929), p.241.

from events in the real world. This becomes a problematic model for a woman writer to adopt for her notion of the "uncircumscribed spirit", but it may be one she is, in some ways, obliged to adapt.

The androgyny debate in Woolf criticism may also be considered in relation to Bergson's dualism: feminist readings which emphasize a balance between feminine intuition and masculine intellect, and between the shifting and the stable in Woolf's writing, may be regarded as in sympathy with Bergsonian analysis.⁴⁸ But Woolf may not necessarily conform to Bergson's implicit gender code so much as undermine it.

Woolf herself, furthermore, may be regarded as bringing to bear an emphatically materialist analysis in *A Room of One's Own*, the very title of which suggests a concern with the *spatial* location of the self. If her demand for "a room of one's own" seems to cast Woolf as a literary Greta Garbo (wanting always to be alone), it is not necessarily to be taken as a demand for the non-spatial introspective solitude of Bergsonian duration. For such introspection is at odds with the essay's inquiry into the material and external factors in the production of writing by women.

fiction, imaginative work that is, is not dropped like a pebble upon the ground, as science may be; fiction is like a spider's web, attached ever so lightly perhaps, but still attached to life at all four corners. Often the attachment is scarcely perceptible But when the web is pulled askew, hooked up at the edge, torn in the middle, one remembers that these webs are not spun in mid-air by incorporeal creatures, but are the work of suffering human beings, and are attached to grossly

⁴⁸ See, Alice Van Buren Kelley, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf: Fact and Vision* (Chicago, 1973); Nancy Topping Bazin, *Virginia Woolf and the Androgynous Vision* (New Brunswick, 1973); Carolyn Heilbrun, *Towards Androgyny* (London, 1973).

material things, like health and money and the houses we live in.⁴⁹

There is not so much a tension here between inner and outer concerns, perhaps, as a positive weighting in favour of the latter. Fiction is characterized spatially and materially: it is a web "attached to grossly material things". Art, according to Karl Kraus, "can come only from denial. Only from anguished protest."⁵⁰ Similarly, fiction for Woolf is the "work of suffering human beings".

"However much Woolf relishes ... cloistered moments of solitude," warns Lucio P. Ruotolo, "they tempt her most memorable heroines to ignore political as well as aesthetic realities. To withdraw from an abrasive external world presumes for women in particular an excessive reliance on the protection of men, what Woolf, in describing her own inheritance, terms 'a legacy of dependence'."⁵¹ Ruotolo examines figures of intrusion and interruption in Woolf's work. Woolf herself declares "interruptions there will always be" (AROO, p.117): introspective solitude, then, is broken into by "an abrasive external world". It is this sense of material intervention (rather than of retreat into isolation), I suggest, that is central to an understanding of Woolf's luminous moment.⁵²

⁴⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp.62-63; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (AROO).

⁵⁰ Karl Kraus, *Die Fackel*, 7 November, 1912; quoted in Thomas Szasz, *Karl Kraus and the Soul-Doctors* (London, 1977), p.159.

⁵¹ Lucio P. Ruotolo, *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf's Novels* (Stanford, California, 1986), pp.2-3; he quotes Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past", *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind (London, 1976), p.114.

⁵² Such a sense of intervention is missing from Erich Auerbach's characterization of the "random moments" in Woolf as hidden democratic moments where "the strata of societies and their different ways of life have become inextricably mingled."; Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking", *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in*

At one point in "The Moment: Summer's Night" Woolf goes further than the depiction of the tension identified by Stevenson. She exposes a moment of illumination as a moment of oppression, and as therefore a moment to be interrupted:

Then a light is struck; in it appears a sunburnt face, lean, blue-eyed, and the arrow flies as the match goes out:

"He beats her every Saturday; from boredom, I should say; not drink; there's nothing else to do."

The moment runs like quicksilver on a sloping board into the cottage parlour; there are the tea things on the table; ... and Liz comes in and John catches her a blow on the side of her head as she slopes past him, dirty, with her hair loose and one hairpin sticking out about to fall. And she moans in a chronic animal way; and the children look up and then make a whistling noise to imitate the engine which they trail across the flags; and John sits himself down with a thump at the table and carves a hunk of bread and munches because there is nothing to be done. A steam rises from his cabbage patch. Let us do something then, something to end this horrible moment, this plausible glistening moment that reflects in its smooth sides this intolerable kitchen, this squalor; this woman moaning; and the rattle of the toy on the flags, and the man munching. Let us smash it by breaking a match. There - snap. (*M*, p.12)

In advocating the smashing of this "horrible moment" of illumination, Woolf seems also to advocate the rupture of the oppressive social and familial relations it brings: there must be an end to "this woman moaning", and an end in a wider sense to the subjugation of women. The passage is introduced by the striking and extinguishing of a match, perhaps suggesting that its light not only illuminates or reveals the scene, but also in some sense causes it. Enlightenment, then, may cause, or even be constructed out of suffering (its dark side, perhaps). Snapping the match, the pun on which suggests the ending of the marriage, may be interpreted as a refusal to see

what the light reveals, but also perhaps as a veto on its very construction. The children's imitation of "the engine which they trail across the flags" insidiously suggests the possibility (or even likelihood) of their imitating also the violent habits of their father and the bleak submission of their mother. It is this oppressive tradition (figuratively and literally), that the reader is invited to join in stopping, in terms which also dramatize the very act of reading: "Let us smash it by breaking a match. There - snap."

For Guiguet, however, this scene is "a finely graphic, realistic sketch, the suggestive power of which in its squalor is just as intolerable to the reader as to those in whose mind it has risen".⁵³ His reasons for finding it "intolerable" remain unclear: Guiguet seems to suggest that its lack of aesthetic appeal causes the scene's banishment, while offering no discussion of its social and political impact. Woolf's sense of collective agency signalled in "Let us smash ..." is neutralized by Guiguet's emphasis on the moment's passive dissolution: "Thus it dissolves as it was born and the moment smoothly ebbs to its original mood of muffled sounds and blurred shapes, fraught with peace and harmony".⁵⁴ We can see Guiguet reducing the depiction of the woman's suffering to an exercise in aesthetic technique, with the injunction to end it correspondingly signalling a failure to acknowledge the political import of the very realism he admires.⁵⁵

⁵³ Guiguet, "A Novelist's Essay: 'The Moment: Summer's Night' by Virginia Woolf", p.301.

⁵⁴ Guiguet, p.301.

⁵⁵ Compare, Madeline Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.226, who, ignoring the man's violence towards his wife in this passage, suggests it as an example of "the negative moment when one becomes aware of the obduracy of matter and material objects. Then the natural world impinges upon and sometimes overcomes the individual.... There is no pleasure in this dualistic moment;

Walter Benjamin observes: "In every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it."⁵⁶ Woolf's writing here may be viewed as just such an attempt, for it does more than record subjective impressions, or represent the Bergsonian flow of life: it seeks to intervene in life, and change it. This interpretation rests on close and detailed attention to Woolf's writing practice. The pun on "match" in the passage above, for example, may be regarded as pivotal in locating Woolf's proposed site of change in the social, "real world", and not just in the aesthetic vision. The injunction to "smash the moment" is nevertheless one which speaks clearly to both realms (art and life), and in so doing connects them.

Modernism (including Woolf's work) is often characterized as an impressionistic, Bergsonian approach to art, and identified in narrative techniques engaged with "the uninterrupted, indistinguishable flow of time".⁵⁷ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, who do acknowledge Woolf's understanding that "the modern stylistic revolution came from the historical opportunity for change in human relationships and human character, and that modern art therefore had a social and epistemological cause", conclude not that Woolf's work is bound up with historical change or interested in historical intervention, but on the contrary that she "nonetheless believed in the aesthetic nature of the opportunity":

instead it is often apprehended as an absorbing or paralyzing force which can be broken only by intense effort or violence."

⁵⁶ Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", *Illuminations*, edited by Hannah Arendt, translated by Harry Zohn (New York, 1969), p.255.

⁵⁷ Michael Hollington, "Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time", *Modernism*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth, 1985), p.43; see also, A.A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel* (New York, 1965).

it set the artist free to be more himself, let him move beyond the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of light. Now human consciousness and especially artistic consciousness could become more intuitive, more poetic; art could fulfil itself. It was free to catch at the manifold - the atoms as they fall - and create significant harmony not in the universe but within itself (like the painting which Lily Briscoe completes at the end of *To the Lighthouse*).⁵⁸

The artistic freedom Bradbury and McFarlane identify seems close to Bergson's rare moments of subjective freedom which allow the self "to get back into pure duration". In their reading, Woolf's art, like that of James Joyce, comprises "the means to transcend both history and reality".⁵⁹ With the phrase "significant harmony", moreover, Bradbury and McFarlane link this Bergsonian idea of aesthetic withdrawal from the world to an echo of the aesthetics of Roger Fry and Clive Bell (commonly summarized under the heading of "Significant Form").

This Bergsonian connection with Bloomsbury aesthetics, which may tend to foreground Woolf's aesthetics at the expense of her politics (and indeed to see it as a retreat from politics altogether), is not unusual in Woolf criticism, as Allen McLaurin's work demonstrates.⁶⁰ Relating Woolf's work primarily to the theories of Roger Fry, he invokes as a link the Bergsonian study by Woolf's sister-in-law, Karin Stephen.⁶¹ Interestingly, McLaurin focuses on Stephen's discussion of colour and change in relation to Bergson's theories to reinforce his own reading of Woolf's psychological and impressionistic use

⁵⁸ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, "The Name and Nature of Modernism", *Modernism*, edited by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane (Harmondsworth, 1985), p.25.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, *Modernism*, p.26.

⁶⁰ Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge, 1973), pp.110-121.

⁶¹ Karin Stephen, *The Misuse of the Mind: a Study of Bergson's Attack on Intellectualism* (London, 1922).

of colour.⁶² My argument will discover in Woolf's writing the possibility of a more interventionist and feminist understanding of colour.

There remain views of modernism which contend with those such as Bradbury's and McFarlane's; and Woolf's smashing of the moment may find a more appropriate fit with notions of "modernist disruption or interruption".⁶³ Her fragmentary texts, then, may be read not merely as passively reflecting fragmentary experience, but also as actively engaging in fragmentation and intervention.⁶⁴ Woolf's interruption of the moment is not one which characterizes subjectivity as grounded according to exclusive sexual identity: it does not intervene on a purely masculine subjectivity, replacing it with a purely feminine one. Her inclusive plea "let us smash it" is signalled not as an invitation to women only, but as a collective impetus to alter the moment and thus alleviate women's suffering. This "horrible moment" shows not the previous exclusion of the feminine from the patriarchal domain, but its occlusion and oppression. Woolf

⁶² McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*. pp.70-84.

⁶³ In keeping with Ruotolo's understanding of Woolf's "interrupted moment", Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca and London, 1990), p.240, argues: "As a historical paradigm, then, modernism is caught between the crisis or even breakdown of modern rational discourse and the attempts of that very discourse to critique its own social and ideological effects and functions. The various individual devices of modernist disruption or interruption are elements of a paradigmatic effort to interrupt the "progress" of rationality, and perhaps to initiate a "new" discourse, which we can, however, not really know, since it is (still) the negativity of the discourse in which we are immersed. It is the other (of) modernity, or ... it is modernity held in abeyance." See also, Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Michael Shaw (Manchester, 1984).

⁶⁴ See, Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, p.240: "We can observe modernist interruption as a gesture halting monological speech in its various social and political guises. By interrupting a discourse (or by consciously making "use" of an interruption), we are implicitly claiming the right to participate in and even change that discourse; we are insisting on our right to speak and write."

dramatizes this point in *A Room of One's Own*, where she does describe an intervention by a woman:

One goes into the room - but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room.... One has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one's face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force. (AROO, p.131)

Peggy Kamuf observes that this passage "creates a disturbance on both sides of the threshold of subjectivity",⁶⁵ with Woolf showing how the entering woman encounters femininity "fly[ing] in one's face". Kamuf calls this a "double figure of self-interruption":

that is, there is both a recognition and an infringement of the place of a creative subject which is no longer or not yet a "one". The feminine "subject" is here constituted through illegitimate intervention in the language since its "one-ness" resides already in the other's place, its unity derives retrospectively from an infraction which flies in the face of the grammatical order of subject and predicate.⁶⁶

The intervention of a woman, then, subjectively described by a woman, requires the invention of new literary codings. Out of the ruins of the smashed legitimate language of subjectivity emerges a new language of feminism, winging its way with "whole flights of words ... illegitimately into existence".

⁶⁵ Peggy Kamuf, "Penelope at Work: Interruptions in *A Room of One's Own*", *Novel* 16 (1982), p.17. On "interrupters and destroyers" in Woolf see also, Reuben Brower, "Something Central Which Permeated", *Twentieth Century Views: Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Claire Sprague (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1971), pp.51-62.

⁶⁶ Kamuf, p.17.

This thesis will investigate Woolf's handling of the basic vocabulary of such a language, that is, its central tropes of subjectivity - light, shade and colour - at two important moments: first, in her depictions of the solar eclipse of 1927, which emerges not so much as a moment in touch with the Bergsonian *durée*, but as a transitional moment of feminist challenge and change; second, in her engagement with the theories of Post-Impressionism which are examined contextually with an emphasis not on abstract aesthetics but on materialist, interventionist, feminism. Exploring Woolf's new language of feminism in relation to Post-Impressionism's new language of colour, the thesis concludes with readings of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* as (different) moments in a modernist discourse of interruption.

PART ONE: ECLIPSE

CHAPTER II

VIRGINIA WOOLF: HELIOTROPICS, SUBJECTIVITY AND FEMINISM

At the back of us were great blue spaces in the cloud. These were still blue. But now the colour was going out. The clouds were turning pale; a reddish black colour. Down in the valley it was an extraordinary scumble of red & black; there was the one light burning; all was cloud down there, & very beautiful, so delicately tinted. Nothing could be seen through the cloud. The 24 seconds were passing. Then one looked back again at the blue; & rapidly, very very quickly, all the colours faded; it became darker & darker as at the beginning of a violent storm; & we thought now it is over - this is the shadow when suddenly the light went out. We had fallen. It was extinct. There was no colour. The earth was dead. That was the astonishing moment: & the next when as if a ball had rebounded, the cloud took colour on itself again, only a sparky aetherial colour & so the light came back. I had very strongly the feeling as the light went out of some vast obeisance; something kneeling down, & low & suddenly raised up, when the colours came. They came back astonishingly lightly & quickly & beautifully in the valley & over the hills - at first with a miraculous glittering & aetheriality, later normally almost, but with a great sense of relief. It was like a recovery. We had been much worse than we had expected. We had seen the world dead. This was within the power of nature. Our greatness had been apparent too.¹

Shortly after dawn on Wednesday 29 June 1927 Virginia Woolf witnessed the total eclipse of the sun. In personal and professional terms this "astonishing moment" came very much *in medias res*: Woolf was then approaching the zenith of her literary career - she had just published *To the Lighthouse* a month before, and was already making preparations for *Orlando*, *A Room of One's Own*, and *The Waves*. Her reputation as an essayist had been consolidated with the publication of *The Common Reader* two years earlier. The eclipse of the sun was clearly of great significance to Woolf: she recorded it

¹ Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols., edited by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London, 1977-84), III, pp.143-144; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (D, I-V).

in her diary, drew upon it for an essay, "The Sun and the Fish",² and re-wrote it (in many drafts) for her closing meditation on "the world seen without a self" in *The Waves*.³ A landscape described in *Orlando* also seems to be drawn from the event.⁴ More intriguingly, in "Sympathy",⁵ a story apparently "written in the spring of 1919" (*CSF*, p.299), Woolf makes an extended simile of "an eclipse of the sun" (*CSF*, p.109) which bears many resemblances to "the astonishing moment" described here. I have chosen to begin with this moment because it focuses upon Woolf's engagement with light, the central concern of this thesis.

2.1 Photology and feminism

Jacques Derrida has called "the metaphor of darkness and light (of self-revelation and self-concealment), the founding metaphor of Western philosophy as metaphysics. The founding metaphor not only because it is a photological one - and in this respect the entire history of our philosophy is a photology, the name given to a history of, or treatise on, light - but because it is a metaphor".⁶ Woolf has said that "metaphors are necessary

² Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish", *Time and Tide*, 9, 5 (3 February 1928) 99-100; reprinted in *New Republic*, New York, 8 February 1928, pp.321-3; *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London, 1950); *Collected Essays*, vol. 3 (London, 1967); *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4, edited by Andrew McNeillie (London, 1994).

³ Woolf, *The Waves* (London, 1931), pp. 310ff; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (W).

⁴ Woolf, *Orlando* (London, 1928), p.21; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (O).

⁵ Woolf, "Sympathy", *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, New Edition, edited by Susan Dick (London, 1989), pp.108-111; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (CSF).

⁶ Jacques Derrida, "Force and Signification", *Writing and Difference* (London, 1978), p.27.

directly you deal with thought",⁷ but it seems that to discover a photological trope in her writing is merely to discover a commonplace. Yet in Woolf's work "the heliotrope", as Derrida elsewhere calls it,⁸ is clearly much more than a commonplace:⁹ her novels *Night and Day* and *To the Lighthouse* pay it eponymous homage; Rachel Vinrace's death is linked to the heat of the sun in *The Voyage Out*; the refrain "Fear no more the heat o' the sun",¹⁰ haunts *Mrs Dalloway*; and there are the solar passages punctuating *The Waves*. Woolf's famous dictum conforms to it: "Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end."¹¹ These few examples show her writing to be extraordinarily photological. Her predilection for the luminous is everywhere discussed, analysed and debated.¹²

⁷ Woolf, *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks*, edited by Brenda Silver (Princeton, 1983), p.109.

⁸ Derrida, "White Mythology", *Margins of Philosophy*, translated with additional notes by Alan Bass (Hemel Hempstead, 1982), p.271.

⁹ Gillian Beer, "The Victorians in Virginia Woolf: 1832-1941", *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London and New York, 1989), pp.151, 153-154, notes that Woolf's "favourite reading as a girl" included John Tyndall's *On Radiation* (London, 1865) and *Six Lectures on Light* (London, 1873).

¹⁰ Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, IV.ii.258; Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London, 1925), p.16; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (Mrs D).

¹¹ Woolf, "Modern Fiction", *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), p.189; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (CR).

¹² For example: David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1945), pp.55-92; Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness. Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1970), pp.180-194; Hermione Lee, "A Burning Glass: Reflection in Virginia Woolf", *Virginia Woolf. A Centenary Perspective*, edited by Eric Warner (London and Basingstoke, 1984), pp.12-27; Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven and London, 1980), chapters 2, and 3; Jane Marcus, "The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination", *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, edited by Jane Marcus (Lincoln and London, 1983), pp.7-36; Jack F. Stewart, "Light in *To the Lighthouse*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 23 (1977) 377-388.

Woolf's evaluation of the qualities of light, dark and colour at the moment of solar eclipse, furthermore, comprises a serious challenge to recent, deconstructive, interpretations of her work. She describes in her diary entry the world without the sun, without light, and without colour. It is clearly not a condition cherished by the author. Darkness, it seems, is not to be celebrated - except as a foil against which to revel in the re-emergence of light and colour. Woolf here seems to set up a binary opposition between light and dark in which she evaluates light as positive, and dark as negative. This binary opposition is therefore also hierarchical. Indeed it seems rigorously to comply with the most traditional primary order of binary oppositions which feminists have identified as complicit with "the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity".¹³ These oppositions have their roots in, among other things, the first sublime moment:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness.¹⁴

From this first act of division - of light from darkness - follow all other divisions, including that between the sexes:

Yahweh Elohim created the world and concluded alliances by *dividing* (*karath*) light from darkness, the waters of the heavens from the waters of the earth, the earth from the seas, the creatures of the water from the creatures of the air, the animals each according to their kind and man (in His own image) from himself. It's also by division that He places them opposite each other: man and woman.... Divided from man, made of that very thing which is lacking in him, the biblical woman will be wife,

¹³ Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London, 1985), p13.

¹⁴ Genesis 1.i-iv, *The Holy Bible, Authorized Version* (Oxford, 1908).

daughter or sister, or all of them at once, but she will rarely have a name.¹⁵

Woman's place is always that of the subjugated and oppressed within all binary oppositions which proliferate from this first opposition. Hélène Cixous has rehearsed some of the more familiar "hierarchized oppositions" (her own neologism) which traditionally inform our writing and culture:

Where is she?

Activity/passivity,
Sun/Moon,
Culture/Nature,
Day/Night,

Father/Mother,
Head/heart,
Intelligible/sensitive,
Logos/Pathos.

Form, convex, step, advance, seed, progress.
Matter, concave, ground - which supports the step,
receptacle.

Man
Woman¹⁶

All terms associated with light are positioned on the opposite side of the division from Woman. Light, and particularly its first source, the sun, is always the province of the masculine. Freud held the "view that the sun is a symbol of the father" so much so that "symbolism overrides grammatical gender - at least so far as German goes, for in most other languages the sun is masculine. Its counterpart in this picture of the two parents is 'Mother Earth' as she is generally called."¹⁷ This binary opposition, it seems, deeply embedded in all our

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, "About Chinese Women", *The Kristeva Reader*, edited by Toril Moi (Oxford, 1986), pp.139-140.

¹⁶ Hélène Cixous, "Sorties", *New French Feminisms*, edited by Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron (Brighton, 1981), p.90.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Notes on a Case of Paranoia", *The Pelican Freud Library* (Harmondsworth, 1979), vol. 9, pp.190, and 222.

cultural practices, is fundamental to our thought processes:

Always the same metaphor: we follow it, it transports us, in all of its forms, wherever a discourse is organized. The same thread, or double tress leads us, whether we are reading or speaking, through literature, philosophy, criticism, centuries of representation, of reflection.

Thought has always worked by opposition,
Speech/Writing
High/Low¹⁸

Genevieve Lloyd has examined Western philosophy from Plato to Sartre for its treatment and construction of the 'feminine' as something excluded and transcended by (masculine) reason: "the feminine has been associated with what rational knowledge transcends, dominates or simply leaves behind".¹⁹ Her analysis concurs with Cixous's generalizations on oppositions, but also charts the variations and developments of philosophy's exclusion of the feminine, thus offering a historicized, and more subtle, version of Cixous's model.

In response to this analysis some feminists have concluded that the path to liberation from this patriarchal thought structure lies in the abolition of binary oppositions altogether. Inspired by Derrida's "critique of binary logic [and of] ... the static closure of the binary opposition",²⁰ feminists are encouraged to deconstruct binary oppositions and celebrate *différance* and the free play of the signifier: "Against any binary scheme of thought, Cixous sets multiple, heterogeneous *difference*."²¹

18 Cixous, p.90.

19 Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London, 1984), p.2.

20 Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, pp.105-106.

21 Ibid.

Woolf, furthermore, has been rediscovered as a deconstructor of binary oppositions *par excellence*.²² She subversively disrupts all fixed oppositions; her texts exemplify and celebrate the free play of the signifier. Toril Moi recommends, therefore, a cocktail of Derridean and Kristevan theories to assist feminist literary criticism in reconciling Woolf's aesthetic practice to her politics.²³

Makiko Minow-Pinkney reads Woolf's work through the theories of Kristeva and Derrida;²⁴ and finds Woolf's "concept of androgyny" compatible with deconstructive notions of subjectivity. "Woolf argues", she claims,

Against an Enlightenment universalism which defines humanity as disembodied Reason and reduces sexual difference to a merely phenomenal form Androgyny is the rejection of sameness. It aims to cultivate difference on an individual level, in the teeth of a cultural impulse to reduce the two sexes into something which is seemingly neither, but in actuality male.²⁵

This is where Woolf's account of the solar eclipse becomes so significant - and so intriguing. The sun may be regarded as the primary metaphorical instance of patriarchal supremacy (perhaps "the Absolute Subject" in Louis Althusser's term),²⁶ as the very light of masculine subjectivity which, from Genesis on, has cast femininity

²² Moi, p.13, for example, claims that Woolf "has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing oppositions of masculinity and femininity".

²³ Moi also acknowledges the work of other feminist thinkers, such as Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who assert notions of a positive feminine morphology.

²⁴ See Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987), p.92: "Binary oppositions and hierarchies in [*To the Lighthouse*] are ceaselessly undone. Philosophy condemns fiction, but does not escape a persistent fictionality of its own. ... as Nietzsche has argued, ... truth is just a metaphor or fiction whose fictionality we have forgotten."

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

²⁶ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (London, 1971), p.168.

in its shadow, relegating woman to darkness and chaos. Irigaray engages with solar terminology when she identifies problems encountered by feminists in attempting to assert a feminine subjectivity:

The Copernican revolution has yet to have its final effects in the male imaginary. And by centring man outside himself, it has occasioned above all man's ex-stasis within the transcendental (subject). Rising to a perspective that would dominate the totality, to the vantage point of greatest power, he thus cuts himself off from the bedrock, from his empirical relationship with the matrix that he claims to survey. To specularize and speculate. Exiling himself ever further (toward) where the greatest power lies, he thus becomes the "sun" if it is around him that things turn, a pole of attraction stronger than the "earth." Meanwhile, the excess in this universal fascination is that "she" also turns upon herself, that she knows how to re-turn (upon herself) but not how to seek outside for identity within the other: nature, sun, God ... (woman).²⁷

Woolf herself alludes to a Copernican model of the subject in her discussion of "a new novel by Mr.A":

But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was like a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter "I". One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure. Back one was always hailed to the letter "I". One began to tire of "I". Not but what this "I" was a most respectable "I"; honest and logical; as hard as a nut, and polished for centuries by good teaching and good feeding. I respect and admire that "I" from the bottom of my heart. But - here I turned a page or two looking for something or other - the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter "I" all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman. But ... she has not a bone in her body, I thought, watching Phoebe, for that was her name, coming across the beach. Then Alan got up and the shadow of Alan at once obliterated Phoebe. (AROO, pp.149, 150)²⁸

²⁷ Luce Irigaray, "Any Theory of the 'Subject' Has Always Been Appropriated by the 'Masculine'", *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated Gillian C. Gill (New York, 1985), pp.133-134.

²⁸ Woolf's ellipsis.

The light of the masculine "I" casts the feminine into its shadow: the woman reader discerns lurking in the mists of its shadow the figure of a woman. Phoebe is associated with the object world of the landscape, the tree, and the darkness. Yet her name, which means "the bright one", suggests that she may also be a source of light. But there is only one sun in the solar system, and it is masculine. Phoebe is sometimes the name given to the moon whose light is merely a reflection of the sun's. According to optical logic, moreover, we might read the "dark bar" of the masculine "I" as a phallic shadow blocking the light of the (woman) reader; and this undermines the notion of masculine enlightenment, paradoxically transferring the attribute of light from masculine to feminine in suggesting that the male ego has cut off the women reader from her own light just as Alan's shadow obliterates Phoebe.

This is at once a vision of possible feminine enlightenment, and a model of oppressive solar masculinity which keeps the feminine in its shade. In describing woman as both a source of light and as imprisoned in shadow, this passage shows how women's place historically has been conceptually marked out (or inscribed) as shadow by the discourse of masculine enlightenment, and how women's emancipation yet lies with the very illumination of this shadow. Within the figure of masculine solar subjectivity, then, we may find the seeds of feminist enlightenment. It is important to note that in general my argument is concerned with this conceptual (or discourse-based), rather than literal or optical, model of light and shade.

Woolf relates Alan's overcoming of Phoebe in sexual terms: "For Alan had views and Phoebe was quenched in the flood of his views. And then Alan, I thought, has passions It took place on the beach under the sun.

It was done very openly. It was done very vigorously. Nothing could have been more indecent." (AROO, pp.150-151) Phoebe is physically overwhelmed, an object dominated by Alan, the subject. Mr. A's novel is "bor[ing]", Woolf asserts, "because of the dominance of the letter 'I' and the aridity, which, like the giant beech tree, it casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there." (AROO, p.151) The model of solar, masculine subjectivity has no space for a feminine subject to flourish. Indeed Woolf ironically suggests that women's attempts to change this model are responsible for Mr. A's new "sex-consciousness": "The Suffrage campaign was no doubt to blame." (AROO, p.149)

Woolf's feminism, then, seems pitched against this model of solar masculinity and arid feminine darkness,²⁹ a patriarchal view-point, which she delineates in the closing passage of her first novel:

All these voices sounded gratefully in St John's ears as he lay half-asleep, and yet vividly conscious of everything around him. Across his eyes passed a procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed.³⁰

Conceptually, the masculine solar light of St John's semi-consciousness renders everything else - people and objects - as shadows. The novel shows how Rachel Vinrace withers to death in such solar light. A major priority for feminism, then, following Irigaray, might well lie in abolishing this solar model of subjectivity, in

²⁹ J. Hillis Miller, "Mr. Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: The Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*", *Modernism Reconsidered*, edited by Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle (Cambridge, 1983), p.187, commenting on Mr. A's sexual dominance, suggests: "Against this false rhythm of unjustified solar male superiority may be opposed the more lunar rhythm of writing like a woman."

³⁰ Woolf, *The Voyage Out* (London, 1915), p.458; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (VO).

"Dispersing, piercing those metaphors - particularly the photological ones - which have constituted truth by the premises of Western philosophy".³¹ Yet, contrary to Moi's assertions, in her diary account of the eclipse Woolf does not disrupt oppositions of light and dark; nor does she seem to offer here a feminist counter to photological metaphors so much as reinforce them. When Woolf witnesses the solar eclipse, we might expect from this apparent arch-feminist deconstructor of oppositions some signal of her awareness of such implications, or at least something more positive than "We had fallen". This would surely be a moment to celebrate as positive the darkness, the body, the earth, and all that, alongside the feminine, has been obscured and oppressed by the light of day. It might also be a moment to release light and dark from fixed dichotomies and values, and to assert endlessly transgressive readings of these terms. Yet, as we can see, this is not at all the case. Woolf is here reinscribing light as positive and dark as negative.

If we are not to find Woolf in sympathy with patriarchy, then, we might rethink our analysis of her engagement with oppositions. Woolf's account of the eclipse is ideal material for an investigation of this engagement since it unavoidably addresses the founding binary opposition of light and dark out of which all other oppositions are seen to arise. What is of interest is whether in adopting a *hierarchized* opposition, Woolf is in fact guilty of maintaining patriarchal values. Connected to this and of equal concern to feminists are the questions of subjectivity and reason. If Woolf maintains positive photological metaphors, or engages heliotropic discourses, she may be guilty of reinscribing the notions of masculine subjectivity and reason which have so effectively excluded the feminine from Plato to

³¹ Irigaray, p.136.

the present. This is where deconstructive models of subjectivity are appealing. Judith Butler has argued for the political necessity of such an approach to subjectivity.

Indeed, the question of women as the subject of feminism raises the possibility that there may not be a subject who stands "before" the law, awaiting representation by the law. Perhaps the subject, as well as the invocation of a temporal "before", is constituted by the law as the fictive foundation of its own claim to legitimacy.... Apart from [this] ... there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term *women* denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent *women*, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety.³²

Butler concludes that the "internal paradox of this foundationalism is that it presumes, fixes, and constrains the very 'subjects' that it hopes to represent and liberate."³³ Woolf, however, was writing at a time when public acknowledgement of women as subjects was still being sought - the full enfranchisement of women in Britain came in 1928, the year after the eclipse. Christine Di Stefano has summarized the disquiet registered by some feminist critics regarding deconstructive approaches to subjectivity:

The postmodernist project, if seriously adopted by feminists, would make any semblance of a feminist politics impossible. To the extent that feminist politics is bound up with a specific constituency or subject, namely, women, the postmodernist prohibition against subject-centred inquiry and theory undermines the legitimacy of a broad-based organized movement dedicated to articulating and implementing the goals of such a constituency.³⁴

³² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, 1990), pp.2-3.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.148.

³⁴ Christine Di Stefano, "Dilemmas of Difference: Feminism, Modernity, and Postmodernism", *Feminism/Postmodernism*, edited by Linda J. Nicholson (London, 1990), p.76.

Di Stefano exposes the frailty of the deconstructive position(s). Feminism needs (the necessary fiction of) a stable subject if it is to achieve anything constructive. Butler's argument is beset with worryingly provisional and conditional statements.³⁵ The assertion of an entirely separate feminine reason is also fraught with paradoxes. Lloyd has noted that although "Rationality has been conceived as transcendence of the feminine", it is also the case that "the 'feminine' itself has been partly constituted by its occurrence within this structure".³⁶ To assert a positive feminine realm outside the light of masculine reason, then, is also no escape: "The affirmation of the value and importance of 'the feminine' cannot of itself be expected to shake the underlying normative structures, for, ironically, it will occur in a space already prepared for it by the intellectual tradition it seeks to reject".³⁷

2.2 Enlightening the Enlightenment

It is modernity (the tradition of Enlightenment) that the philosopher Jürgen Habermas has credited with the potential "to shake normative ... structures".³⁸ Pauline Johnson focuses the argument between modernity and postmodernism on the work and critical reception of Woolf herself. First, she identifies the common ground of Enlightenment rationality, feminism and modernism:

the modernists enter into essentially sympathetic relations with a feminist interrogation (itself rooted in

³⁵ Butler, p.149: "If identities were no longer fixed as the premises of a political syllogism, and politics no longer understood as a set of practices derived from the alleged interests that belong to a set of ready-made subjects, a new configuration of politics would surely emerge from the ruins of the old."

³⁶ Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, p.104.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.105.

³⁸ Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project", *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (London and Sydney, 1985), p.5.

Enlightenment thinking) of the apparent inevitability of established tradition and the merely received social norm. The modernist no less than the feminist aims to break with the traditionally sanctioned norm. Like the feminist, the modernist refuses to credit the merely traditional with the authority of a 'second nature'. Both, in their various capacities, offer a provocative challenge to the supposedly self-evident certainties of unquestioned existence.³⁹

With reference to the "Bloomsbury aesthetics" of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, Johnson acknowledges the positive and negative points in the feminist-modernist position she ascribes to Woolf: "Drawing on the modernist conception of the transcendent nature of the aesthetic, Woolf's work articulates a conception of the ideal, emancipated self which presents a critical alternative to the oppressive, restricted experience of femininity encountered in everyday life."⁴⁰ But on the other hand, she notes that Woolf's "vision of an emancipated ... self is conceived in terms of a mere aesthetic sensibility."⁴¹ Art stands separate from life as a vantage point from which to offer critical or idealistic commentary; yet by virtue of its removal from life, it may also be ineffectual. Johnson concludes, however, that "at least [Woolf's] art does preserve the protest at an unfree, subordinated femininity essential to a feminist outlook", and this is something "sacrificed in the relativist perspective assimilated by a post-modern feminist aesthetic." By taking the transcendentalism of Bell and Fry as the defining influence on Woolf, Johnson is perhaps guilty of creating a problem where none need exist. She continues on subjectivity and the postmodern in the same vein as Lloyd and Di Stefano.⁴²

³⁹ Pauline Johnson, "From Virginia Woolf to the Post-Moderns: Developments in a Feminist Aesthetic", *Socialism, Feminism and Philosophy. A Radical Philosophy Reader*, edited by Sean Sayers and Peter Osborne (London and New York, 1990), p.104.

⁴⁰ Johnson, p.119.

⁴¹ Johnson, *ibid.*.

⁴² Johnson, p.120.

Johnson, Lloyd and Di Stefano, all seem anxious to retain some aspects of "the Enlightenment project" as fundamental to feminism, but as they themselves acknowledge, feminism must also revolt against the "norms" of the Enlightenment built on the exclusion and transcendence of the feminine. Such a revolt, however, is not launched from outside Enlightenment thinking, but may be seen as within the remit of the Enlightenment itself. In this sense feminism may be a project for "enlightening the Enlightenment", in the phrase of Habermas.⁴³ He sees the proponents of postmodernity's "farewell to modernism" as "merely" the attempt "to revolt against it once again. It could be that they are merely cloaking their complicity with the venerable tradition of counter-Enlightenment in the garb of post-Enlightenment."⁴⁴ Habermas suggests that the arguments of postmodernity are constructed within the very discourse of reason they are supposed to reject: "If they were to be consistent, their own investigation of the other of reason would have to occupy a position utterly heterogeneous to reason - but what does consistency count for in a place that is a priori inaccessible to rational discourse?"⁴⁵

To enlighten the Enlightenment is to remain within it but to shed new light upon it. Such a project requires the

⁴³ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, 1987), p.302.

⁴⁴ Habermas, *ibid.*, p.5.

⁴⁵ Habermas, *ibid.*, pp.302-303. He continues: "This methodological enmity toward reason may have something to do with the type of historical innocence with which studies of this kind today move in the no-man's-land between argumentation, narration, and fiction. The New Critique of Reason suppresses that almost 200-year-old counterdiscourse inherent in modernity itself The latter discourse set out from Kantian philosophy as an unconscious expression of the modern age and pursued the goal of enlightening the Enlightenment about its own narrow-mindedness. The New Critique of Reason denies the continuity with this counterdiscourse, within which it nevertheless still stands."

retention of light as a positive trope for feminism. There must be, then, alternative, feminine, sources of illumination to counter the singular universal norm of the masculine. This suggests that the continued valorization of light also necessitates the maintenance of oppositions, rather than their abolishment. Habermas points out the dangers inherent in postmodernity's advocacy of the latter.

Enlightenment and manipulation, the conscious and the unconscious, forces of production and forces of destruction, expressive self-realization and repressive desublimation, effects that ensure freedom and those that remove it, truth and ideology - now all these moments flow into one another. ... Now the differences and oppositions are so undermined and even collapsed that critique can no longer discern contrasts, shadings, and ambivalent tones within the flat and faded landscape of a totally administered, calculated, and power-laden world.⁴⁶

Habermas claims that the "paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness is exhausted", and he seeks to replace "the paradigm of the knowledge of objects" with "the paradigm of mutual understanding between subjects capable of speech and action".⁴⁷ He offers a model of "communicative reason" instead of "subject-centred reason". This displaces "the sort of objectifying attitude that an observer assumes toward entities in the external world" with a "a *different* relationship of the subject to itself": "intersubjectivity".⁴⁸

It is not just the subject's understanding of self and external world that changes but the subject in relation to other subjects. Habermas's own argument here remains unenlightened with regard to gendered pronouns, and reinscribes the norm of subjectivity as already masculine. His model of contestive intersubjectivity

⁴⁶ Habermas, *ibid.*, p.338.

⁴⁷ Habermas, *ibid.*, p.296.

⁴⁸ Habermas, *ibid.*, p.297.

nevertheless has potential for feminism in its displacing of subject-centred reason.

Then ego stands within an interpersonal relationship that allows him to relate to himself as a participant in an interaction from the perspective of alter. And indeed this reflection undertaken from the perspective of the participant escapes the kind of objectification inevitable from the reflexively applied perspective of the observer.⁴⁹

Habermas may refer to the subject as masculine, but it is a subject no longer constructed according to the transcendence of the object world, and this is surely of interest to feminism. The feminine appropriation of this model of subjectivity does not entail the reinscription of the *hierarchized* opposition between subject/object, man/woman. The solar model of subjectivity has been displaced by what we might call an interstellar model. With this in mind, we might contrast Mr. A's solar "I" with Woolf's plural use of the first person singular in *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf begins this work by claiming that "'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being" (*AROO*, p.7). She then playfully resorts to using a trinity of female personae: "Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please - it is not a matter of any importance)." (*AROO*, p.8) In the course of the book, however, these women emerge as being far from interchangeable textual gaps; for Woolf weaves biographical snippets about them into her text.⁵⁰ In doing so, she is enacting the advice given by "Mary Beton" to "Mary Carmichael": "Above all, you must illumine your own soul" (*AROO*, p.135). Mary Carmichael must address "what happens when Olivia - this organism that has been under the shadow of the rock these

⁴⁹ Habermas, *ibid.*.

⁵⁰ See *AROO*, pp.28, 56, 120ff.

million years - feels the light fall on it". (AROO, p.127) The "I" of Woolf's text is constructed in relation to a number of subjects, not as the dominator of an object world. *A Room of One's Own* is articulated through a contestive constellation of subjects speaking to each other as well as including the reader. The project of revealing feminine experience is presented as a feminist act of enlightenment (illumination),⁵¹ and the trope of light is maintained as positive, but no longer focused entirely on a singular solar model.

Woolf delineates, then, a patriarchal model of light and dark, which keeps feminine experience shrouded in darkness; but she also recommends a feminist literary project to reclaim the light for women.

Women are beginning to explore their own sex, to write of women as women have never been written of before; for of course until very lately, women in literature were the creation of men For the first time this dark country is beginning to be explored in fiction; and at the same moment a woman has also to record the change in women's minds and habits which the opening of the professions has introduced. She has to observe how their lives are ceasing to run underground; she has to discover what new colours and shadows are showing in them now that they are exposed to the outer world.⁵²

Significantly, the "dark country" of the feminine emerging into the light from "underground", is described by Woolf in terms of "new colour". It is this prismatic exploration of the newly illuminated feminine that marks Woolf's innovatory feminist aesthetic.

⁵¹ "Feminine", of course, as one half of the binary masculine/feminine does not necessarily denote "feminist", which itself means the promotion of the cause of women. But Woolf seems to suggest that the exploration of feminine experience by women writers is an integral part of feminist aesthetics. Descriptions of a feminine terrain, then, may be interpreted with reference to this aspect of feminist aesthetics.

⁵² Woolf, "Women and Fiction", *The Forum*, March 1929; *Granite and Rainbow* (London, 1958), p.82; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (GR).

After consideration of Woolf's engagement with the aesthetics and (gender) politics of light and colour tropes, we might conclude that Woolf does indeed retain a notion of light as positive and dark as negative, but that this does not amount to the reinscription of a necessarily patriarchal model of binary oppositions. Woolf may in fact do quite the reverse in reclaiming it for feminism. Here we might make a distinction between patriarchal oppositions and what I suggest to be Woolf's feminist oppositions. Two terms from William Blake⁵³ may assist in this distinction: "Negation" and "Contrary". We might call patriarchal oppositions "negations", and feminist ones "contraries". Woolf's positive use of oppositions seems in keeping with Blake's advocacy of contraries: "Without Contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence".⁵⁴ Blake's definition of "Negation", on the other hand, is helpful in understanding the nature of patriarchal oppositions:

"There is a Negation, & there is a Contrary:
 "The Negation must be destroy'd to redeem the Contraries.
 "The Negation is the Spectre, the Reasoning Power in Man:
 "This is a false Body, an Incrustation over my Immortal
 "Spirit, a Selfhood which must be put off & annihilated
 away."⁵⁵

Negations, then, are rigid and exclusive oppositions, constructed upon "selfhood"; and contraries are dialectical oppositions. Woolf's use of contraries, I suggest, maintains light as a positive term but not as a masculine one. I will also address the mythopoeic

⁵³ Diane Filby Gillespie has shown the considerable extent of the influence of Blake's (verbal and visual) work on Woolf; see Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts. The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Syracuse, NY, 1988), pp.334-35n37, and 24-26, 27-28, 30, 131, 134, 226, 313.

⁵⁴ William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell", Plate 3, *Complete Writings*, edited by Geoffrey Keynes (Oxford, 1966), p.149.

⁵⁵ Blake, *Milton*, 2, Plate 40, ll.32-36, *ibid.*, p.533.

significance of light and dark in Woolf's work, and her introduction (or rediscovery) of a feminine source of light. In this way, Woolf retains light as a positive metaphor of rationality but discards its masculine (and, ultimately, all gender) associations.

2.3 Woolf's photology - mystical or rational?

Some feminist interpretations of Woolf's treatment of light conclude that she does indeed engage a positive and feminine light, but one that is also mystical. Jane Marcus, claiming Woolf was strongly influenced by the works of "her aunt, Caroline Emilia Stephen, a great Quaker theologian", suggests "Woolf's work, like her aunt's, based religious and political stances on a celebration of celibacy and remade male repressive ideology into a feminist ideology of power."⁵⁶ From Stephen's books,⁵⁷ Woolf learned

to speak the language of light. Her mysticism, "agnosticism with mystery at the heart of it" was a particularly suitable philosophy ... for the daughter of a Cambridge-educated man with such an emotional attachment to the rational as Leslie Stephen and the wife of a Cambridge-educated man with such an edgy and psychological attachment to the rational as Leonard Woolf. Those mystical meditations on life and death, the Jungian suggestions of a collective unconscious in Woolf's novels ... are essentially rational.⁵⁸

Marcus makes the paradoxical case for a rational mysticism but actually emphasizes the mystical at the expense of the rational. She achieves this by associating the element of rationality in Woolf's supposed philosophy with the men in her life. The

⁵⁶ See Jane Marcus, "The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination", *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, p.7.

⁵⁷ Caroline Emilia Stephen, *The Light Arising: Thoughts on the Central Radiance* (Cambridge, 1908), and *The Vision of Faith* (Cambridge, 1911).

⁵⁸ Marcus, "The Niece of a Nun", p.23.

suggestion that theirs is in any case an "emotional" and "psychological attachment to the rational" undermines the notion of rationality itself in connection with Woolf. Marcus further manipulates the argument by claiming that "Woolf did learn from her aunt how to speak the language of the light - it was a 'little language', unknown to most men".⁵⁹ It is "a female language of the light, a language of silence - acts of light and acts of silence."⁶⁰ Marcus insists that this essentially mystical light is most true to Woolf the feminist, and that the ("emotional") rationality associated with the men in her life is at odds with it. "Woolf learned", she concludes, "to turn her lack of education to advantage; she trained herself to trust memory and inner voices."⁶¹ Woolf learns, then, from her aunt that "the daughters of educated men ... can be mystics".⁶²

From the fact of Woolf's exclusion from Cambridge, Marcus draws the dangerous conclusion that Woolf lacked an education altogether. Her deprivation of the same educational advantages as her brother does not mean that she had no education at all. Marcus conveniently forgets that Woolf was taught classical Greek and Latin, learnt several modern European languages, and was well schooled in literature, philosophy and history. She was considered educated enough to be employed as a teacher, and as writer of articles and reviews for the serious press from youth onwards.

The silent light Marcus attributes to Woolf is worryingly ineffectual as an expression of the author's socialist-feminist views. Newly converted to the idea of a mystical Woolf, Marcus herself bears witness:

⁵⁹ Marcus, *ibid.*, p.28.

⁶⁰ Marcus, *ibid.*.

⁶¹ Marcus, *ibid.*.

⁶² Marcus, *ibid.*, p.26.

As a feminist critic I had avoided the subject of Woolf's mysticism, and of *The Waves*, feeling that acknowledging her as a visionary was a trap that would allow her to be dismissed as another female crank, irrational and eccentric. I was drawn to her most anticapitalist, anti-imperialist novels, to Woolf the socialist and feminist, logical, witty, and devastating in argument.⁶³

Marcus is shown the light by Catherine Smith who "asks us to study mysticism and feminism together."⁶⁴ Smith details the life of Jane Lead (1624-1704), a Protestant Mystic and spiritual autobiographer. Madeline Moore is struck by the account of Lead's "vision [in April 1670] of 'an over-shadowing bright Cloud and in the midst of it the Figure of a Woman.'"⁶⁵ This is Lead's prophesy in composite:

the great Wonder to come forth, A Woman Cloathed with the Sun ... With the Globe of this world under her feet ... with a Crown beset with stars, plainly declaring that to her is given the Command and Power ... to create and generate spirits in her own express likeness.⁶⁶

Moore compares Lead's woman in the sun with the "deified sun goddess"⁶⁷ (Moore's tautology) in the *The Waves*.⁶⁸ "If there is a feminist collective unconscious," Marcus asserts, "this figure was passed down to Woolf from her aunt Caroline and lives in Eleanor Pargiter and Lucy Swithin".⁶⁹ This mystical feminist interpretation is in

⁶³ Marcus, *ibid.*, p.27.

⁶⁴ Marcus, *ibid.*. See, Catherine Smith, "Jane Lead: Mysticism and the Woman Cloathed with the Sun", in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*, (Bloomington, 1979). Madeline Moore is also converted to similar views about Woolf after reading Smith's essay.

⁶⁵ Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences. The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston, 1984), p.27.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.27; See Moore's note p.35: "This quotation ... is a composition made from several sources in Lead. The main source is *A Fountain of Gardens Watered by the River of Divine Pleasure and Springing Up in all Variety of Spiritual Plants ...*" (London, 1697-1701, I, p.27).

⁶⁷ Moore, p.27.

⁶⁸ See *W*, p.5.

⁶⁹ Marcus, *A Feminist Slant*, p.28.

keeping with orthodox aesthetic analysis of light in Woolf's work;⁷⁰ but does not account for Woolf's "rich yellow flame of rational intercourse." (AROO, p.17)

While I agree that Woolf does indeed colonize the figure of the sun for feminism, and may well have made use of her aunt Caroline's luminous imagery, I am not convinced that this amounts to quasi-Quakerism or mysticism in her writing. Woolf engages a positive and prismatic, rational light, I suggest, one associated with the feminist movement, and indicative of a feminist project "to enlighten the Enlightenment". This approach also entails a reconsideration of subjectivity and subject-object relations.

In Part Two I will argue that Post-Impressionism, as defined specifically with reference to the work of Vanessa Bell, Woolf's sister, is of essential importance to this interpretation of Woolf's work. The notion of "Significant Form", associated with the ideas of Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and initially (and traditionally) used to define Post-Impressionism,⁷¹ is rejected in favour of a definition based on the use of colour to express the values of light and dark. Once this new interpretation of Post-Impressionism is in play alongside a reinstated but revised (feminist) model of binary oppositions (contraries), we are in a position to consider other approaches to Woolf's work. For if both the old notion of significant form (which defers all

⁷⁰ For example, Jack F. Stewart, in "Light in *To the Lighthouse*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, p.377, suggests that there are three different interpretations of light in *To the Lighthouse*, corresponding to each of its three parts: light is, respectively, "the positive force of visionary consciousness", "the negative counterpart of departed consciousness", and "the reanimation of consciousness in a creative rhythm that seeks spiritual and aesthetic Oneness."

⁷¹ This view is evident in Stewart's analysis of light in the above note.

reference to content or subject matter, in favour of an emotionally understood form for form's sake), and the more recent methods of deconstruction (which unleash the free play of the signifier), discourage more specific evaluative readings, then their reappraisal and rejection as guides presents the opportunity for just such readings. As Moi herself indicates, if Woolf's art is to be considered as feminist, we must seek to locate "the politics of Woolf's writing *precisely in her textual practice*".⁷² Rather than adopt certain deconstructive approaches, then, I suggest that an investigation of Woolf's writing at the level of metaphor and allegory opens out into a fresh consideration of both literary and painterly references. In particular I will refer Woolf's Post-Impressionist techniques to her engagement with the pastoral (elegiac) motif of the "umbra", which emerges as a significant point of focus for her feminism and her aesthetics.

This is the broad shape of the thesis as it emerges from the initial consideration of the apparent impasse posed by the account of the eclipse, and its challenge to some feminist interpretations of binary oppositions. Woolf's retention (and modification/transformation) of oppositions is based upon some complex aesthetic processes, as we have glimpsed, and involves not least a reassessment of subject-object relations within binary oppositions, in favour of an alternative model of intersubjectivity. The most important area of consideration, however, is Woolf's positive and prismatic engagement with photological tropes. It is thus with some irony one might read her comment on Fry's *Vision and Design*: "I think it reads rudimentary compared with Coleridge. Fancy reforming poetry by discovering something scientific about the composition of light!" (*D*,

⁷² Moi, p.16 (Moi's italics).

II, p.81) I hope to show how in some respects Woolf reforms fiction for feminism with just such a discovery.

We will now address the impasse of the eclipse. The discussion will focus upon: Woolf's diary entry which sketches her immediate response to the event; some contextualizing examples of contemporary press coverage of the event; and Woolf's fascinating story-essay, "The Sun and the Fish", which retells the story of the eclipse in both an interesting and stylized fashion. This story has three distinct parts: the first describes "an amusing game"; the second, the eclipse; and the third a scene in London's Zoological Gardens. Our investigation of this story will involve a discussion of the feminist context in which it first appeared, and a very close reading of each of its parts. The first part will be discussed with reference to a passage from Woolf's "A Sketch of the Past", and to theories of language drawn from Roland Barthes and M.M. Bakhtin. The second part will be closely compared to the diary version of the eclipse, and discussed with reference to a diverse range of topics, including ancient myth and classical literature, suffrage art, and pastoral elegy. Some essays and other stories of Woolf's will also be drawn upon. The third part will be compared to an earlier description by Woolf of the Zoological Gardens, and discussed with reference to nineteenth and early twentieth century theories of solar mythology.

The issues touched upon above, that is the nature of Woolf's feminist engagement with notions of subjectivity and aesthetics will emerge during our discussion of these texts. The structural principle of Part One, then, lies in a close reading of Woolf's two accounts of the eclipse (diary entry and story-essay), and her two accounts of the Zoological Gardens, with excursions, as indicated. These excursions inform what would otherwise

be a straightforward comparison between the two pairs of texts. This structure allows us to develop a critical vocabulary which is both derived from and applicable to Woolf's writing, and which might meet with literary theories developed elsewhere and since.



CHAPTER III

THE ASTONISHING MOMENT

Part One's opening passage is from Woolf's diary entry of Thursday 30 June 1927, the day after that of the eclipse. The entry begins with the rather ominous imperative: "Now I must sketch out the Eclipse". But before we examine what follows, let us attempt to view this momentous event from a wider perspective, for the eclipse was an "astonishing moment" for many people besides Virginia Woolf.

3.1 Press coverage of the eclipse

As contemporary news coverage reveals, both before and after the event, the eclipse captured scientific and popular imagination alike. *The Times* devotes several columns anticipating and recording the eclipse from both these perspectives, and so provides an appropriate point of context for Woolf's own account. Two days before the eclipse, for example, *The Times* reports (alongside a story on the expulsion of Trotsky and Zinovieff from the central committee of the Communist Party) on both scientific and popular preparations for the first total eclipse of the sun to be visible from Britain in two hundred years. The central line of totality was to run in diagonal from the north east of England to the extreme north of Wales. The staff of the Astronomer Royal made their preparations to observe it from Giggleswick:

It is about 100 years since scientific observation of solar eclipses began to be made on a serious scale, but it was not until 1860 ... that photography was successfully employed and not until 1871 that really satisfactory photographs of the corona were secured. There is still a good deal to find out about the corona and its constitution, and the efforts of the Greenwich observers at Giggleswick will be applied to obtaining a direct photograph of the corona during the period of

totality and to getting two spectroscopes in order to determine from them the physical condition of the sun's chromosphere.¹

The paper also notes other scientific experiments and observations to be attempted, such as air observations and investigations of solar influences on wireless signals² particularly "with the change of conditions from daylight to darkness".³ The eclipse provides "the means of extending our knowledge as to what happens when the sun's rays are suddenly cut off for a period of a few seconds to a few minutes, and only over a limited portion of the earth's surface".⁴ The eclipse, then, provides a very special opportunity to observe sunlight. Normally it might be said to be either totally present or totally absent, but during an eclipse these conditions are no longer absolute, and are contained within a small space and a very short period of time. The public response was more concerned with the cosmic singularity of the event:

Apart from the scientific standpoint, the eclipse is arousing exceptional popular interest. The fact that it is only at long intervals of years that a total eclipse can be seen in England, that no living person has ever seen the phenomenon in this country, and that it is extremely unlikely that more than a few will live to the year of the next eclipse [1999], has stirred public imagination, and enormous numbers have planned to travel to some point within the limit of the totality.⁵

Special trains were run to many places lying within this belt, and Virginia Woolf, accompanied by some close friends and family, was a passenger on one of these trains. She was among the 20,000 people who gathered to observe the eclipse from Richmond, Yorkshire.

¹ *The Times*, Monday June 27, 1927, p.14.

² *Ibid.*, pp.14 and 21.

³ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁴ *Ibid.*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.14.

The Times' next editorial seems to pander more to popular than to scientific anticipation of the event; although it does so largely by communicating in lay terms its scientific significance. It reminds readers that "the eclipse of 1919 [not visible from Britain] ... was notable for the fact that the photographs taken enabled astronomers to prove to their satisfaction, by the displacement of the stars around the sun, that the Einstein theory of relativity was correct".⁶ The year of that eclipse, incidentally, is the year in which Woolf's second novel, *Night and Day*, was first published: its heroine is a closet mathematician-astronomer ("looking up through a telescope at white shadow-cleft disks which were other worlds").⁷ It was also in this year, apparently, that Woolf wrote her story "Sympathy" which makes reference to a solar eclipse.

Given the enormous impact of Einstein's theories upon both the scientific community and popular imagination alike, it is worth recalling in a little more detail what it was that the eclipse of 29 May 1919 confirmed. Expeditions were made to Northern Brazil and West Africa in order to observe this eclipse. It was not until November of that year that it really made headline news. Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity is summarized in *The Times* under the heading "Space Warped":

the Newtonian principles assume that space is invariable, that, for instance, the three angles of a triangle always equal, and must equal two right angles, and that a circle is really circular. But there are certain physical facts that seem to throw doubt on the universality of these observations, and suggest that space may acquire a twist or warp in certain circumstances, as, for instance, under the influence of gravitation, a dislocation in itself slight and applying to the instruments of measurement as well as to things being measured. The Einstein doctrine

⁶ *The Times*, Tuesday June 28, 1927, p.17.

⁷ Woolf, *Night and Day* (London, 1919), p.317; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (N&D).

is that the qualities of space, hitherto believed to be absolute, are relative to their circumstances. He drew inference from his theory that in certain cases actual measurement of light would show the effects of the warping in a degree that could be predicted and calculated.⁸

The particular circumstances of an eclipse provide an excellent opportunity to attempt measurements of light. The experiment relies upon the temporary obfuscation of the sun, which allows the light of other stars to become visible and available for calculation. It is this particular aspect of Einstein's theory which, I will argue, is of considerable relevance to Woolf's aesthetic of light; since she seems to undermine, in her work, the notion of the sun as a fixed absolute and self-contained value, and to reveal (in its absence) other, multiple points of illumination: the stars. For example, in *Jacob's Room*, the stars seem to represent a distant yet desirable set of alternative possibilities, in contrast to the relentless turmoil of mundanity: "Infinite millions of miles away powdered stars twinkled; but the waves slapped the boat, and crashed, with regular and appalling solemnity, against the rocks."⁹ In *To the Lighthouse*, the stars try to break through from behind the leaves of a tree which is the focus of Mrs Ramsay's narrow thoughts: "It was windy, so that the leaves now and then brushed open a star, and the stars themselves seemed to be shaking and darting light and trying to flash out from behind the edges of the leaves."¹⁰

The Times explains how the eclipse illustrates Einstein's theory:

⁸ *The Times*, Friday November 7, 1919, p.12.

⁹ Woolf, *Jacob's Room* (London, 1922), p.83; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (JR).

¹⁰ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London, 1927), p.175; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (TL).

At each of these places ... it would be possible to take during totality a set of photographs of the obscured sun and a number of bright stars which happened to be in its immediate vicinity. The desired object was to ascertain whether the light from these stars, as it passed the sun, came as directly towards us as if the sun were not there, or if there was a deflection due to its presence, and if the latter proved to be the case, what the amount of the deflection was.¹¹

The Royal Astronomical Society met in London in November 1919 to discuss the discovery of the momentous evidence which was to topple its founding Newtonian principles. It is little wonder that Alfred North Whitehead, who was present, describes "the whole atmosphere of tense interest [as] exactly that of the Greek drama". He continues:

We were the chorus commenting on the decree of destiny as disclosed in the development of a supreme incident. There was a dramatic quality in the very staging - the traditional ceremonial, and in the background the picture of Newton to remind us that the greatest of scientific generalizations was now, after more than two centuries, to receive its first modification. Nor was the personal interest wanting; a great adventure in thought had at length come safe to shore.¹²

This last metaphor of Whitehead's ("a great adventure in thought") attributes to scientific breakthroughs an epic quality; and although his references to the Greek drama suggest that Newtonian thought itself has been tragically eclipsed, this is to an extent tempered by the word "modification", which suggests refinement rather than iconoclasm - or perhaps even the enlightenment of the Enlightenment.

If the eclipse of 1919 was illuminating to the enlightened (scientific community), then the eclipse of 1927 was billed as a major opportunity for ordinary

¹¹ *The Times*, *ibid.*.

¹² Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (Cambridge, 1926; 1956), p.13; Jeremy Bernstein, *Einstein* (Glasgow, 1973), p.119.

people to witness the discovery and confirmation of scientific laws in a dramatic spectacle:

For the first and only time in their lives a large number of people, if the conditions are favourable, will see the solar corona. ... They will see the shadow of the moon sweeping towards and past them at a speed of over ninety miles a minute from the southwest.¹³

Also visible to the masses will be "the chromosphere, or layer of red gas surrounding the sun, and also the chaplet of points of light known as Bailey's Beads, may be visible towards the tips of the thin crescent along the lower edge of the sun at mid eclipse".¹⁴ It is warned that the shadow of the moon, the umbra, rather alarmingly, has provoked a somewhat irrational response, not in lay people, but actually in "scientific observers of previous total eclipses":

In particular the sight of the black lunar shadow seems to have stirred their imagination by its appalling grandeur. It has been variously described as "something unnatural", "horribly menacing", "producing a feeling that something material was sweeping over the earth at a speed perfectly frightful", "the most terrifying sight I ever saw". "A vast palpable presence seems overwhelming the earth". In these words there lies the horror of great darkness, the darkness of one of the plagues of Egypt. Something of that awe must surely affect the multitude of untrained observers who may tomorrow look upon the same rare conjunction of the two heavenly bodies most closely connected with the being of this earth and its inhabitants.¹⁵

These pieces from *The Times* provide a context of common expectation against which to read Woolf's version of the event. As we can see from her diary entry on the day after the eclipse, her response is quite similar in many respects to the "horror" and "awe" of the umbra predicted here (for example, compare with these her "some vast obeisance"); and, as we will see below, there are a

¹³ *The Times*, Tuesday June 28, 1927, p.17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*.

number of other points of resemblance between the newspaper's account and Woolf's account. Also of note, of course, are the many differences between them. The context, however, does underline for us the fact that the experience Woolf describes, although recorded in her private journal, is neither something highly personal nor élitist. Her immediate response seems not too different from those responses predicted, and indeed shared, by many others. In fact it is this very sense of shared experience which comes across most powerfully in her description. This does not detract from her individual powers of description, or from the personal significance of the event, but rather suggests that this personal significance lies in the communal experience. Woolf's diary entry and remarks in letters¹⁶ suggest that she saw it as a very exciting adventure, and one worthy of careful inscription.

3.2 Woolf's diary account of the eclipse

Woolf records in her diary the journey she made with her husband Leonard Woolf, her nephew Quentin Bell, and friends Harold Nicholson, Vita Sackville-West (Nicholson's wife, and Virginia Woolf's lover), Ray Strachey, the feminist, Saxon Sydney-Turner, and Eddie Sackville-West (Vita's cousin). She gives a very lively, if sketchy, account of the various stages of the journey, including glimpses of the changing landscape, recollections of odd incidents, snatches of conversation - all narrated in an appropriately fitful style. What is of interest here is her handling of the imagery of light, dark and colour.

¹⁶ Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, 6 vols., edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London, 1975-1980), III, pp.377 and 382; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (L, I-VI).

The voyage to the eclipse starts as dusk turns to darkness at "about 10 on Tuesday night" when "several very long trains ... left King's Cross" (*D*, III, p.142) Woolf records the mounting anticipation of the voyagers: "Before it got dark we kept looking at the sky: soft fleecy; but there was one star, over Alexandra Park. Look Vita, that's Alexandra Park, said Harold". Here a twilight star acts as a coordinate for an urban landmark familiar to the voyagers; and the further they travel from this reassuring point of light, the more unsettling their relation to the heavens becomes. By the time they get north of York, the first signs of dawn can be seen in mute contrast to the artificial lights emanating from the vehicles gathered to transport them to the observation points: "then here was a level crossing, at which were drawn up a long line of motor omnibuses & motors, all burning pale yellow lights. It was getting grey - still a fleecy mottled sky". The artificial lights are seen as pin-points of precise colour against the diffuse and opaque grey of the cloud covered sky. The sense of the cloud cover acting as a curtain lends to the general air of anticipation before revelation.

The passengers now transfer from train to bus:

We went off in the omnibus, saw a vast castle It had a front window added, & a light I think burning. All the fields were aburn with June grasses & red tasselled plants, none coloured as yet, all pale. Pale & grey too were the little uncompromising Yorkshire farms. As we passed one, the farmer, & his wife & sister came out, all tightly and tidily dressed in black, as if they were going to church. At another ugly square farm, two women were looking out of the upper windows. These had white blinds drawn down half across them.

Here artificial light is contrasted not with that of the sky, but with that of the land. There is introduced into this description a slight air of uncertainty; for Woolf

is not sure if she did see a light in the castle window ("a light I think burning"). When she says that "the fields were aburn with June grasses & red tasselled plants", although this suggests a veritable blaze of bright fierce colour, she thwarts our expectations by adding that they are without colour (in spite of the "red"). This remarkable conjunction of burning with pale qualities suggests that the rippling texture of the plants, not their colour, makes them seem like a (pale) fire. Like the grey clouds, they have an almost tangible light and colour, which seems to contrast with the yellowness of the car and house lights.

Woolf and her party, having "found [them]selves very high on a moor, boggy heathery, with butts for grouse shooting", join the many other spectators gathering for the dawn:

So we joined them, walking out to what seemed the highest point looking over Richmond. One light burnt down there. Vales and moors stretched, slope after slope, round us. It was like the Haworth country. But over Richmond, where the sun was rising, was a soft grey cloud. We could see by a gold spot where the sun was. But it was early yet. (*D*, III, pp.142-143)

This rural setting contrasts with (and is in fact an inversion of) their initial urban experience of observing a star above Alexandra Park. Here they look down from the heights of moorland onto a single light burning below in Richmond. The "gold spot" of the sun is seen as a counterpoint to this. In describing their enclosure in natural landscape, Woolf also alerts us to the literary and aesthetic associations of this sort of terrain: she likens it to Brontë ("Haworth") country, perhaps intimating at a particularly feminine mythopoeic significance. Here we might also note that she earlier likens Vita Sackville-West to Sappho ("She looked like Sappho by Leighton, asleep"), and that the feminist, Ray

Strachey, is also present: the company of these women might perhaps suggest to Woolf a feminine and feminist perspective on the scene. This perspective, tentative here, I will argue below, becomes more evident in the story version.

In the diary, the various preparatory antics of Woolf's companions are now described, as well as the sight of "four great red setters ... leaping over the moor". Woolf also makes some enigmatic remarks about sheep, guinea pigs and other animals. Then she returns to the main point of focus:

There were thin places in the cloud, & some complete holes. The question was whether the sun would show through a cloud or through one of these hollow places when the time came. We began to get anxious. We saw rays coming through the bottom of the clouds. Then, for a moment we saw the sun, sweeping - it seemed to be sailing at a great pace & clear in a gap; we had out our smoked glasses; we saw it crescent, burning red; next moment it had sailed fast into the cloud again; only the red streamers came from it; then only a golden haze, such as one has often seen. The moments were passing. We thought we were cheated; we looked at the sheep; they showed no fear; the setters were racing round; everyone was standing in long lines, rather dignified, looking out. I thought how we were like very old people, in the birth of the world - druids on Stonehenge: (this idea came more vividly in the first pale light though;) (*D*, III, p.143)

Woolf conveys the human anticipation and frustration as the sun is glimpsed "sweeping" behind obscuring clouds. *The Times* reports the next day that heavy cloud cover and rain prevented the eclipse from being seen in many parts of the country, disappointing the crowds, but it adds, rather intriguingly: "All the crowds, even when they were quite wet, were cheery. They were composed chiefly of young women".¹⁷ We might begin to wonder about the attraction of this spectacle for feminine consciousness. In the above account Woolf contrasts the anxiety of the

¹⁷ *The Times*, Thursday June 30, 1927, p.18.

people with the total indifference of the animals: like Auden's dogs, the setters, it seems, "go on with their doggy life".¹⁸ Humanity is marked out by its stillness and dignity, which leads Woolf to ponder on "the birth of the world - druids on Stonehenge". Here she links ancient sun-worshipping practices at Stonehenge to the origins of the whole world, yet her parenthetical remark suggests that this connection is not necessarily a permanent or primary one in her mind: "(this idea came more vividly in the first pale light though;)". "Though" suggests some doubt, and qualification to her connection.¹⁹

3.3 Stonehenge and solar myth

Woolf had actually been to Stonehenge in 1903, and recorded her feelings about it in a journal. She has two separate entries, recording two different visits: "Stonehenge", and "Stonehenge Again". Her comments here prefigure the sentiments expressed in her allusion to Stonehenge at the eclipse: "The singular, & most intoxicating charm of Stonehenge to me, & to most I think, is that no one in the world can tell you anything about it."²⁰ She is impressed, then, by its mystery, its inexplicability. She is aware, however, of the various "theories" which seek to dispel the mystery:

The most attractive and most likely, is that some forgotten people built here a Temple where they worshipped the sun; there is a rugged pillar someway out

¹⁸ W.H. Auden, "Musée des Beaux Arts", line 12, *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London, 1976), p.147.

¹⁹ Compare, Blake, *Jerusalem*, Plate 70 (c.1820), *The Illuminated Blake*, annotated by David V. Erdman (London, 1975), p.349, where we find images of Stonehenge, druids, and a solar eclipse.

²⁰ Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice. The Early Journals 1897-1909*, edited by Mitchell A. Leaska (London, 1990), p.199; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (PA).

side the circle whose peak makes exactly that point on the ruin of the earth where the sun rises in the summer solstice. And there is a fallen stone in the middle, longer & larger than the other hewn rocks it lies among which may have been the altar - & the moment the sun rose the Priest of that savage people slaughtered his victim here in honour of the Sun God. We certainly saw the dent of his axe in the stone. (PA, pp.199-200)

Woolf favours the theory of sun worship, and clearly sees it as the practice of a patriarchal society, presided over by male priests. In her second entry, foreshadowing her account of the eclipse, she imagines Stonehenge to be the centre of sun worship for "the whole world": "one can imagine why this spot was chosen by the Druids - or whoever they were - for their Temple to the sun. It lies very naked to the sun. It is a kind of altar made of earth, on which the whole world might do sacrifice." (PA, p.205) Again, she makes much of the opposition between earth and sun. Although Woolf is much taken with the theory of Druid sun worship, she is careful to keep it as one theory amongst many: "Set up the pillars though in some other shape, & we have an entirely fresh picture; but the thing that remains in one's mind, whatever one does, is the stupendous mystery of it all." (PA, p.200) This is an important point with regard to Woolf's creative imagination. Although it is significant for the eclipse story to note Woolf's strong emphasis on sun worship here, the fact that she does not keep to a singular interpretation is equally significant. The ruins of Stonehenge provide the stimulus for theories "without end" (PA, p.199); they cannot be reduced to one fixed interpretation. Walter Benjamin's definition of allegories as being "in the realm of thoughts what ruins are in the realm of things"²¹ is relevant here. Woolf shares a similar interest in the construction of thought out of something unfinished, partly destroyed, or in

²¹ Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, translated by John Osborne (London, 1977), p.178.

process; something which has an integral air of mystery and potential because of this condition.

imagine those toiling pagans doing honour to the very sun now in the sky above me, & for some perverse reason I find this a more deeply impressive temple of Religion - block laid to block, & half of them tumbled in ruin so long that the earth almost hides them, than that perfect spire whence prayer & praise is at this very moment ascending.

It is a matter for thought, surely, if not irony, that as one stands on the ruins of Stonehenge one can see the spire of Salisbury Cathedral. (PA, p.200)

Woolf prefers the pagan ruin to the perfection of Christian symbolism. Stonehenge is "more deeply impressive" than Salisbury Cathedral, but in neither case does Woolf move from the condition of wonder to actual religious belief. What interests her is the aesthetic and imaginative potential.

However we interpret Woolf's interest in this imagery, it is clear, in both her account of Stonehenge and her account of the eclipse, that she sees in humanity a strong fascination with the sun, and in being "naked to the sun". In her account of the eclipse, for example, although the "racing" setter dogs may at first appear to be paralleling the "sweeping" movement of the sun, it is in fact the clouds and the earth which are moving; and the solemn stillness of the people seems to be a tribute to the sun's constancy behind it all. The people, then, seem to be subjectively connected to the sun, perhaps seeing it as "the Absolute Subject". The solemnity of the occasion arises from the prospect of witnessing the momentary extinction of its light. Woolf's account signals her awareness of the event as an optical illusion ("the sun seemed to be sailing"), but also emphasizes a more subjective perspective by describing the sun as active, personified, ("we saw it crescent ... it had sailed") where in fact it is passive. We might also

note, in passing, that Woolf does not specify a gender for this personification.

Woolf's reference to pagan worship, then, is couched in hesitant enough terms to suggest a sense of wonder rather than a specifically religious experience; and she certainly makes no overt reference to the Christian significance of the eclipse (that is, the eclipse at the crucifixion). There is clearly a biblical resonance, however, to the terse post-lapsarian statement, "We had fallen", in the passage which follows this one (and with which Part One of this thesis opens). This is where Woolf describes the actual moment of the eclipse, and I want now to look closely at how she describes this moment.

3.4 The eclipse

In this passage Woolf very carefully charts the disappearance of light, the coming of darkness, and the re-emergence of light, in terms of colour. The eclipse is heralded by a change of colour from one end of the spectrum to the other - from blue to red - and by the simultaneous fading of colour altogether. It seems to be a somewhat contradictory state of affairs: Woolf describes "the clouds ... turning pale" when she has already described them as "soft grey" (therefore already pale), and even more oddly, she enlarges upon this paleness by describing it as "a reddish black colour". Thus she communicates a paradoxical sense of simultaneously pale and strong colour; a sense of even very weak light being composed of strong colour. This is repeated in her description of the valley below which is "an extraordinary scrumble of red & black" and yet is "all ... cloud ... delicately tinted". In the midst of this is noted "the one light burning" - a sign of human

consciousness in the gathering darkness. Although Woolf does not mention this light again, we might assume that it is the one point of illumination which remains visible during the eclipse; and it seems to act as a counterpoint to what follows in her account.

Woolf likens the sudden descent into darkness to "the beginning of a violent storm"²² and she describes the falling of darkness in terms of the fading of colour. We might remember that in Woolf's recently published novel, *To the Lighthouse*, she describes a "down-pouring of immense darkness" engulfing the familiar pre-war state of things, and initiating a sequence of decay and recovery. (TL, p.195) What is most interesting about her diary account is the way Woolf conveys the spectators' assessment of the increasing darkness: "the light sank & sank: we kept saying this is the shadow; & we thought now it is over". Whenever they conclude that the light has finally disappeared, they discover that it can still get darker; so relatively speaking, what they first see as the shadow is still in fact, it transpires, part of the light, and still colour, however weak. This sense of increasing darkness is dramatically contrasted with the final moment when the light disappears: "& we thought now it is over - this is the shadow when suddenly the light went out. We had fallen. It was extinct. There was no colour. The earth was dead." The loss of the sun, then, causes humanity to fall; the concomitant loss of colour signals the death of the earth.

The sudden removal of light is something quite other and final in comparison to the relativity of the slide into darkness. Suddenly there is no doubt in the minds of the spectators. Very certain and concise statements are made:

²² *The Times*, Thursday June 30, 1927, p.17, similarly reports: "In the west was the kind of leaden sky which comes before a thunderstorm".

the finality of death means absolutely no light, no colour, no life. Yet as soon as this "astonishing moment" has been apprehended, it is followed by another - death is followed by rebirth: "as if a ball rebounded, the cloud took colour on itself again, only a sparky aetherial colour & so the light came back". Colour and light inseparably return. The absence of light not only means the absence of colour, however, it also means the absence of shadow. Woolf's description clearly opposes the statement "this is the shadow" against the statement "the light went out". Shadow is therefore observed as a phenomenon of light and colour, as part of life, against which is contrasted the total absence of all of these.

Woolf is clearly describing the eclipse in terms of two contrary states: life and death, light and no light. She also conveys a strong sense of human consciousness and intelligence observing the event, which we might take as connected with the single light burning in the valley. If we take the human interpretation of the eclipse as one which sees the extinction of the sun's light as symbolic of the extinction of human consciousness, then the scene presented by Woolf suggests that neither state is absolute - both because the light in fact re-emerges, and because there is yet at least one other point of light or consciousness present as counterpoint or witness. The experience of witnessing this "astonishing moment" is not described as the experience of an individual subject, singled out from the crowd, but as one shared by many. It is a communal moment ("We had fallen"). Although she gives her personal response and feeling at the moment of eclipse, the overwhelming impression Woolf gives is of the self as part of an inclusive "we".

There is a religious tone evident in such words and phrases as "vast obeisance ... kneeling ... low ... raised up", yet these reverential acts are not attributed

to the human beings present but to a mysterious "something". Woolf describes this "something" as performing a cosmic genuflection but does not give any clear sense of for what or whom this honour is meant, if indeed it is for anyone. Perhaps Woolf is hinting that she herself is to be considered the object of this gigantic act of suppliance. Alternatively she may be the suppliant. This ambiguous description seems ultimately to be of something rather remote and chillingly mundane: as if the view is spoilt by some unknown giant bending down in front of an enormous lamp. *The Times* similarly reports that "The sinister twilight faded away, as if some unseen hand were turning off a gas jet. The shadow, says our correspondent, enveloped us".²³

Woolf's selection of the word "obeisance" suggests an echo of the "auxiliar light" passage in William Wordsworth's *The Prelude*.²⁴ Here he discusses the retention of his own "first creative sensibility"²⁵ even during the time when he was "feed[ing] the spirit of religious love/ In which I walked with Nature."²⁶

A plastic power
Abode with me; a forming hand, at times
Rebellious, acting in a devious mood;
A local spirit of his own, at war
With general tendency, but, for the most,

²³ Ibid..

²⁴ William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or, Growth of a Poet's Mind*, (1850); *The Prelude, 1799, 1805, 1850. Authorative Texts, Context, and Reception, Recent Critical Essays*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979), p.85. Woolf owned a first edition of *The Prelude* (1850) which had belonged to her father, Leslie Stephen; she had other editions of his poetry including *The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, with an introduction, and edited, by John Morley, 1902, which seems to have been her working copy. See *Catalogue of Books from The Library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf Taken from Monks House, Rodmell, Sussex and 24 Victoria Square, London and now in the possession of Washington State University Pullman, U.S.A.* (Brighton, 1975), V/s I 39; V/s II 8

²⁵ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Two, line 360.

²⁶ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Two, lines 357-8.

Subservient strictly to external things
 With which it communed. An auxiliar light
 Came from my mind, which on the setting sun
 Bestowed new splendour; the melodious birds,
 The fluttering breezes, fountains that ran on
 Murmuring so sweetly in themselves, obeyed
 A like dominion, and the midnight storm
 Grew darker in the presence of my eye:
 Hence my obeisance, my devotion hence,
 And hence my transport.²⁷

The "auxiliar light" emanating from the poet's mind complements that of "the setting sun", at the same time displacing it. This light, like Woolf's "one light burning", becomes a point of illumination in the darkness created by the sun's absence ("and the midnight storm/ Grew darker in the presence of my eye"). It is not clear to what "A like dominion" refers. The birds and breezes may also be "Subservient ... to external things", but then they are "external things", so what is the "like dominion", "obeyed" by them? It is the light of the poet's mind that holds sway: "Bestowed new splendour". Although this light is "auxiliar", it becomes central. The pun on "eye" ("I") allows us to read the orientation of "my obeisance, my devotion" and "my transport" as self-reflexive. The intrusion of the object world serves as self confirmation for the masculine subject. The poet, paradoxically, serves nature by subordinating it to himself. The sun itself, with all its divine and religious associations, has become the object of the poet's bestowal of "splendour".

Earlier, Wordsworth declares his early devotion to the sun, which he personifies as male, suggesting at the same time perhaps a Christian understanding of the term.

already I began
 To love the sun; a boy I loved the sun,
 Not as I since have loved him, as a pledge
 And surety of our earthly life, a light
 Which we behold and feel we are alive;

²⁷ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Two, lines 362-67.

Nor for his bounty to so many worlds -
 But for this cause, that I had seen him lay
 His beauty on the morning hills, had seen
 The western mountains touch his setting orb,
 In many a thoughtless hour, when, from excess
 Of happiness, my blood appeared to flow
 For its own pleasure, and I breathed with joy.²⁸

Woolf certainly knew *The Prelude* well, and makes direct allusions to it in her first novel (*VO*, p.118). In April 1911 she wrote to Saxon Sydney-Turner: "I am reading the *Prelude*. Dont you think it one of the greatest works ever written? Some of it, anyhow, is sublime; it may get worse." (*L*, I, p.460)

Woolf's "obeisance" in the presence of the sun in eclipse, then, does seem to echo Wordsworth's use of the term in the presence of the setting sun. Both describe the sensation at the loss of the sun as a sort of godhead. Wordsworth's "obeisance" comes after the sunset, with the source of his own creative powers, his "auxiliar light". The sun itself does not reappear. The poet's light has become the new dawn in a sense. Woolf's "obeisance", on the other hand, is felt at the moment of solar eclipse. Only after the return of the colours does she convey a sense of (collective) self worth ("Our greatness had been apparent too").

What seems to move Woolf more than the light going out is the re-emergence of the colours: "They came back astonishingly lightly & quickly & beautifully in the valley & over the hills - at first with a miraculous glittering & aetheriality, later normally almost, but with a great sense of relief". Here the sense of wonder diminishes with the return to normality, but this normality is all the more appreciated after the experience of the eclipse has heightened the sensibilities of the observers.

²⁸ Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, Book Two, lines 178-88, *ibid.*, p.75.

The sense of refreshment and rebirth apparent at the return of colour is further emphasized in a short passage inserted by Woolf in her diary to the side of her description of "some vast obeisance": "The colour for some moments was of the most lovely kind - fresh, various - here blue, & there brown: all new colours, as if washed over & repainted." (*D*, III, p.143). In comparison, the "aeronautical correspondent" for *The Times* reports that "the colours of the patchwork countryside turned from greys and purples to greens and yellows; the aeroplane passed from a momentary night to a subdued day".²⁹ It is notable that Woolf's description steers clear of religious terminology here and instead favours an artist's vocabulary - "washed over and repainted". There is missing any sense of mystic or religious destiny; instead Woolf finds communicated in the event a sense of artistic license to "make it new", to re-construct. Although she and her companions witness the return to ("almost") normality "with a great sense of relief", Woolf qualifies this sense by adding "It was like a recovery". This suggests that it was similar to, but not actually, a relief: they had partly remained detached from the event.

Woolf explains "We had been much worse than we had expected. We had seen the world dead". This again emphasizes not the death of the sun, lost from sight in the eclipse, but the subsequent effect this has: the death of the world. Again the collective nature of the experience is stressed in the communal sense of loss. Yet there is also a conflicting sense, in Woolf's account, of analytical detachment rather than involvement. They expected to find the experience unnerving and were surprised by the extremity of their

²⁹ *The Times*, June 30, 1927, p.18.

response, yet they still measure this response. This suggests that the rational, scientific explanation of the eclipse underpins their understanding of the event however much its visual effects move them. Woolf's report not only conveys the emotional splendour of witnessing the eclipse, and in so doing acknowledges how such an occurrence led our ancestors to mystical and religious interpretations; it also clearly distances itself from acceptance of such interpretations. The sense of triumph informing Woolf's summarizing statements arises from the endurance of the apocalyptic moment *without* succumbing to superstition: "We had seen the world dead. This was within the power of nature. Our greatness had been apparent too".

Whilst Woolf might acknowledge the mythopoeic significance of this moment and its aesthetic sublimity, she does not regard it as evidence of divine or supernatural intervention. Hers is a radically different conclusion to that of *The Times'* editorial: "For those fleeting moments the eyes of men, women, and children had looked upon a stupendous manifestation of the works of the CREATOR. 'The heavens declare the glory of GOD; and the firmament showeth His handiwork.'"³⁰ (God has become artist here). This suggests that the event is a confirmation of the Deity as the prime mover of the universe. Woolf concludes that no such absolute frame of reference is possible. There is no ambiguity or hesitation in her statement that "This was within the power of nature"; but nor is this statement without a certain awe. Woolf's sentiments here are reminiscent of Conrad's opinions on the "Supernatural":

all my moral and intellectual being is penetrated by an invincible conviction that whatever falls under the dominion of our senses must be in nature and, however exceptional, cannot differ in its essence from all the

³⁰ Ibid., p.17.

other effects of the visible and tangible world of which we are a selfconscious part. The world of the living contains enough mysteries and marvels as it is; marvels and mysteries acting upon our emotions and intelligence in ways so inexplicable that it would almost justify the conception of life as an enchanted state.³¹

Woolf's celebratory assertion, "Our greatness had been apparent too", corresponds to Conrad's sense of communal self-conscious participation in a world of near enchantment. Woolf notes the departure from that celebratory moment by remarking: "Now we became Ray in a blanket, Saxon in a cap &c. We were bitterly cold. I should say that the cold had increased as the light went down" (*D*, III, p.144). After the event the communal "we" is atomized into separate individuals, discreet persons enclosed in garments. The matter-of-fact tone suggests an earnest attempt to remain objective, as well as marking the return of the mundane, and the remark "it was all over till 1999" is a reminder that the writer is fully aware that what she has witnessed is part of the predictable clockwork of the solar system.

Woolf's reference to the "bitterly cold" resulting from the loss of light, and her enormous relief at the light's return, can leave us in little doubt that seeing "the world dead" was an important and moving event for her, but primarily in so far as it reaffirmed the world of light and colour:

What remained was a sense of the comfort which we get used to, of plenty of light & colour. This for some time seemed a definitely welcome thing. Yet when it became established all over the country, one rather missed the sense of its being a relief & a respite, which one had had when it came back after the darkness. How can I express the darkness? It was a sudden plunge, when one did not expect it: being at the mercy of the sky: our own nobility: the druids; Stonehenge; & the racing red dogs; all that was in ones mind. Also, to be picked out of ones London drawing room & set down on the wildest moors in England was impressive. (*D*, III, 144)

³¹ Joseph Conrad, "Author's Note", *The Shadow Line* (London, 1920).

In order fully to appreciate the "comfort ... of plenty of light & colour" Woolf suggests that we need to experience its contrary - the darkness. Here the word "relief" takes on its special meaning of "distinctness by contrast" as well as its more usual one of a "removal of burden". Darkness is seen as a frightening yet necessary foil to light and colour, a negative against which "all that was in ones mind" might be examined. The sense of contrary states is continued in Woolf's awareness of the experience as a kind of pastoral one - her "London drawing room" is set against "the wildest moors in England"; she and her party have moved between these two states.

Woolf finds the darkness a challenge to her descriptive powers. Interestingly, she recalls it as an event rather than as a static condition. It triggers a flurry of thoughts, images, and emotions; it can only be described subjectively as "a sudden plunge when one did not expect it". However mysterious and unutterable the darkness, it nevertheless remains for Woolf an experience of something quite other, distinct from light and colour. This point is worth labouring because it is fundamental to an understanding of Woolf's engagement with darkness and light throughout her work. In this account of the eclipse, Woolf offers a very precise testimony to her perception and understanding of these phenomena as they are manifested in a rare and dramatic, yet natural, occurrence. Such a moment unavoidably moves her to focus specifically upon darkness and light, and is thus extremely pertinent to any investigation concerned with her aesthetic command of these terms. It is Woolf's very positive attitude to light and colour here which makes the event so important to the main argument of this thesis.

CHAPTER IV
THE AMUSING GAME

4.1 "The Sun and the Fish"

If her diary entry is an important document in this investigation, how much more so is the story Woolf develops from it. "The Sun and the Fish" is a formalized and highly stylized account of the same event, and as such provides a good opportunity to observe Woolf's literary polishing techniques;¹ and it is of particular relevance to Woolf's handling of darkness and light. The critical minefield which comes into view in the comparative study of diary ("sensibility" or truth) and story ("intellect" or fiction) is not of concern. Here are two texts addressing the same subject matter, one private (or at least not destined for immediate publication), the other public and therefore more finished in its construction.

4.2 The feminist context of "The Sun and the Fish"

"The Sun and the Fish" was first published in February 1928, in *Time and Tide*, the weekly magazine founded in 1920, and later edited, by the militant feminist Lady Rhondda,² a prominent suffragette, active in the Woman's Social and Political Union. In the same year that Woolf's story appeared in *Time and Tide*, Lady Rhondda's

¹ This point has been noted by one of the few critics to analyse "The Sun and the Fish", Sharon Louise Wood Proudfit, *The Fact and the Vision: Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Aesthetic*, The University of Michigan, Ph.D. (1967), p.194: "A comparison of the diary account with the final essay provides us with an excellent example of an experience to which Mrs. Woolf responded with her sensibility, and which she used her intellect to reshape in order to express the significance which the eclipse had for her."

² Margaret Haig Thomas (1883-1958).

*Leisured Women*³ was published by the Woolfs in the Second Series of Hogarth Essays.

Rhondda's magazine was run and staffed entirely by women, had no party associations, and offered an open-minded, progressive, feminist perspective. According to Johanna Alberti, however, "it did not claim to put forward women's views".⁴ Commenting upon the magazine's aspirations "to show 'all sides of national life, dealing with them solely on the ground that they are interesting'", she observes:

The paper aimed to be 'untainted by any suspicion of preconceived views'. The first editorial also stated that it would be possible to lay 'too much stress' on the fact that the paper was run by women, that the significance lay in women's need and demand for an 'Independent Press'.... Rhondda saw women as free from party and sectarian ties, and ... that women wanted a paper which would 'treat men and women as equally part of the great human family'.⁵

Alberti does not bring out the opening editorial's implicit irony, which seems a riposte to the supposedly impartial, yet obviously male dominated, press of the establishment. If impartiality is at all possible, the interests of women must be served. An editorial seeking impartiality may still be strategically feminist. Alberti herself cites Rhondda's reasons for founding the paper as lying in her desire "'passionately, urgently, to change customs and influence ideas ...'"⁶ Rhondda also claims that in founding the magazine she saw "The chance of reaching out to the people like-minded with oneself who would understand what one was trying to say. That way", she continues, "I could find the people who were worth

³ Viscountess Rhondda, *Leisured Women* (London, 1928).

⁴ Johanna Alberti, *Beyond Suffrage. Feminists in War and Peace, 1914-28* (Basingstoke, 1989), p.138.

⁵ Ibid.; Alberti is quoting from Octavia Wilberforce, autobiography, pp. 253-4, and *Time & Tide*, 14 May, 1920.

⁶ Ibid., p.137; Alberti is quoting from Rhondda, *This Was My World*, (London, 1933), p.294.

hearing, and see that they were heard - heard, if not by the big multitude, at least by the inner group, the keystone people who ultimately directed that multitude. I could put before the public that mattered the things that I wanted them to hear."⁷ Rhondda's retrospective view suggests she may have had in mind a political agenda, one which presumably saw the views of the suffrage movement as "worth hearing".

Woolf herself joined the Women's Suffrage Movement in January 1910, and was actively involved in a number of ways. On New Year's Day 1910 Virginia Stephen, full of seasonal good resolve, writes to Janet Case:

Would it be any use if I spent an afternoon or two weekly in addressing envelopes for the Adult Suffragists? I dont know anything about the question. Perhaps you could send me a pamphlet, or give me the address of the office. I could neither do sums or argue, or speak, but I could do the humbler work if that is any good. You impressed me so much the other night with the wrongness of the present state of affairs that I feel that action is necessary. Your position seemed to me intolerable. The only way to make it better is to do something I suppose. How melancholy it is that conversation isnt enough! (*L*, I, p.421.)

For Alex Zwerdling, "These are the words of a naive and reluctant political participant who nevertheless feels outraged enough ... to become an active suffragist." He notes the distinction between "Suffragist" ("constitutional methods") and "Suffragette" ("extralegal tactics"), suggesting "Woolf's decision to join the nonviolent section of the movement is characteristic and important."⁸ By November 1910, however, Woolf's enthusiasm for the movement seems to have waned:

My time has been wasted a good deal upon Suffrage. We went to two meetings, at which about a dozen people

⁷ Rhondda, *This Was My World*, p.304.

⁸ Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1986), p.212.

spoke, like the tollings of a bell. If they spoke faster all their words went into one. It was at the Albert Hall. The only amusement was that a baby cried incessantly, and this was taken by some as a bitter sarcasm against women having a vote. (*L*, I, p.438)

This may imply not so much disillusion with the goals of the movement, as impatience with its interminable progress.⁹

The feminist context in which "The Sun and the Fish" first appeared assists in our understanding of Woolf's manipulation of her material. Indeed, the feminist company of Ray Strachey, a suffragist, on the actual trip should also be borne in mind.¹⁰ In 1927, the year of the eclipse, Ray Strachey published *Women's Suffrage and Women's Service*,¹¹ and in 1928 her feminist classic, "*The Cause*".¹² The following year came Woolf's own feminist classic, *A Room of One's Own*, excerpts from which appeared in *Time and Tide*.¹³ The time of the eclipse, then, closely precedes the publication of Woolf's and Strachey's most important feminist documents, both appearing around the time of the full enfranchisement of women in Britain (1928). Although Strachey's brand of feminism appears to have sometimes met with Woolf's disapproval,¹⁴ the two nevertheless collaborated on

⁹ Compare Woolf's fictional treatment of the suffrage movement in *N&D*, p.76ff.. Mary Datchet who at first works for a suffrage society later moves to one dedicated to a more general socialist agenda. See, Julia Briggs, "Introduction" to Woolf, *Night and Day*, edited by Julia Briggs (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.xxvi.

¹⁰ Woolf in an earlier diary, *D*, II, p.123, even likens Rhondda to Ray Strachey: "Lady Rhondda was more plain dealing I thought; a solid bull dog, something after Ray's pattern".

¹¹ Ray Strachey, *Women's Suffrage and Women's Service: The History of the London and National Society for Women's Service* (London, 1927).

¹² Ray Strachey, "*The Cause*": *A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London, 1928).

¹³ Woolf, "An Excerpt from 'A Room of One's Own'", *Time and Tide*, 10, 4 (22 November 1929) 1403-4; "Excerpt from 'A Room of One's Own'", *Time and Tide*, 10, 5 (29 November 1929) 1434-6.

¹⁴ See Woolf's letter to Vanessa Bell, Sunday [18 May 1919], *L*, II, p.357: "Ray is becoming more and more the public woman - floppy,

feminist projects.¹⁵ This feminist context, I will later discuss in relation to Woolf's construction of "The Sun and the Fish"; but we might first consider some matters arising from the overall structure of the story.

4.3 The amusing game

What strikes one immediately about "The Sun and the Fish" is its title: a far from straightforward reference to the eclipse. The introductory paragraph, furthermore, is even more enigmatic. The story begins not with material drawn from Woolf's diary entry but with the outline for an intellectual game which at first seems entirely without connection to it, but in fact offers the key to how we should read it. Yet out of these strange origins the story of the eclipse does emerge, only to be eclipsed itself by another story: the "Fish" refers to the final section of the piece which is to be read dialectically against the section on the eclipse. The title sets up this oppositional play, but equally, it promises to the reader some sort of biblical parable, perhaps referring us to the story of the feeding of the five thousand, if we take "Sun" as "Son" (of God).¹⁶ The title also refers us to ancient and pre-Christian mythology, to the many and continuing variants of the Apollo and Python story. The mythopoeic resonance of this imagery will be discussed below, but first let us consider the binary opposition it erects.

fat, untidy, clumsy, and making fewer concessions than ever to brilliancy, charm, politeness, wit, art, manners, literature and so forth; full of news upon women's future of course; but my God, if *thats* the future whats the point in it?"

¹⁵ For example, Woolf published under Strachey's editorship, "The Plumage Bill", *Woman's Leader*, 23 July 1920, pp.559-560; Appendix II, D, II, pp.337-338; see also *Our Freedom and Its Results, by Five Women*, edited by Ray Strachey (London, 1936).

¹⁶ See Malachi IV.2: "The Sun of Righteousness".

"The Sun and the Fish" is written in six long paragraphs, and may be divided into three sections. The first describes "an amusing game", the second gives an account of the eclipse, and the third shifts focus to a scene in the London Zoological Gardens. Woolf anticipates this non-sequitur by establishing its rationale according to the rules of the game set out in the opening paragraph.

It is an amusing game, especially for a dark winter's morning. One says to the eye Athens; Segesta; Queen Victoria; and one waits, as submissively as possible, to see what will happen next. And perhaps nothing happens, and perhaps a great many things happen, but not the things one might expect. The old lady in horn spectacles - the late Queen - is vivid enough; but somehow she has allied herself with a soldier in Picadilly who is stooping to pick up a coin; with a yellow camel who is swaying through an archway in Kensington Gardens; with a kitchen chair and a distinguished old gentleman waving his hat. Dropped years ago into the mind, she has become stuck about with all sorts of alien matter. When one says Queen Victoria, one draws up the most heterogeneous collection of objects, which it will take a week at least to sort.¹⁷

This "amusing game" of associations suggests it is impossible to think of anything in isolation, that the mind only recalls things by paradoxical connection with other unrelated things. As James Ramsay discovers, "nothing [is] simply one thing". (TL, p.286) Queen Victoria can only be remembered against that which she is not - "all sorts of alien matter" and "the most heterogeneous collection of objects". Dr Johnson's denunciation of the Metaphysical art comes to mind: "the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together".¹⁸

¹⁷ Woolf, "The Sun and the Fish", *The Captain's Death Bed and Other Essays* (London, 1950), p.193; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (CDB).

¹⁸ Samuel Johnson, *Lives of the Poets: Abraham Cowley* (London, 1779); *Donne: Songs and Sonnets. A Casebook*, edited by Julian Lovelock (London and Basingstoke, 1979), pp.44-45.

The strange conjunction of things is only the start of Woolf's exercise, however, and what follows is a period of sifting and discrimination ("it will take a week at least to sort"). The game is not always stimulating or rewarding:

On the other hand, one may say to oneself Mont Blanc at dawn, the Taj Mahal in the moonlight; and the mind remains a blank. For a sight will only survive in the queer pool in which we deposit our memories if it has the good luck to ally itself with some other emotion by which it is preserved. Sights marry, incongruously, morganatically (like the Queen and the Camel), and so keep each other alive. Mont Blanc, the Taj Mahal, sights we travelled and toiled to see, fade and perish and disappear because they failed to find the right mate. (CDB, p.193)

Behind the horse-play is a model of oppositional relations. Woolf has carefully drawn attention to the somewhat involuntary nature of this imaginative exercise: conscious effort is made only in initiating the game ("one says to the eye"), after which one cannot be held responsible for the mind's riposte ("a great many things happen, but not the things one might expect"). The ensuing transgressions of decorum - for example, the morganatic marriage of Queen Victoria to a camel, or the nuptial disappointment of the Taj Mahal - are communicated with childish glee.

Woolf's dominant metaphor here is marriage, and this is of some importance to understanding her use of hierarchy in oppositions. Woolf clearly does not see her oppositions forming equal partnerships: "Sights marry, incongruously, morganatically ... and so keep each other alive". This statement needs some consideration. "Incongruously" suggests that marriage occurs between inconsistent, unsuitable, or dissimilar partners; and this may imply merely that the partners are different from each other, not that one is superior to the other. "Morganatically", however, supplies definite connotations

of a hierarchy, since a morganatic marriage is one "between persons of unequal rank (latterly only where one is of a reigning or mediatised house)".¹⁹ Woolf's sentence structure is ambiguous: the comma between the two adverbs can mean "and", or it might suggest that the second adverb offers a clearer definition of the first. In effect, Woolf is saying either that "some sights marry incongruously and others marry downright morganatically", or that "sights marry incongruously, which is to say more accurately - morganatically".

The sentence also ends in ambiguity ("and so keep each other alive"). Does this reciprocity arise from marriage *per se*, or only from morganatic marriage? Woolf goes on to observe that some sights "fade and perish and disappear because they failed to find the right mate". This suggests that marriage *per se* is not sufficient - an appropriately incongruous partner is necessary; but whether "the right mate" can only be found in a morganatic relationship is not made clear. What is certain, however, is that whether or not equal relations are possible, Woolf predominantly concerns herself with morganatic ones. Queen Victoria is her main example of a successfully married "sight"; and every partner selected from the "heterogeneous collection of objects", each example of "alien matter" with which Her Royal Highness "has become stuck about", is cast in a role of servility: "a soldier ... stooping", the camel, "the kitchen chair", and the "distinguished old gentleman waving his hat". One might argue that *of course* all these are examples of servility, because the sight which prompts them is a queen, and it is almost inevitable that a monarch should only conjure forth morganatic partners in metaphor. This in itself returns us to the question of Woolf's choice of illustration in the first place. Perhaps it is precisely

¹⁹ *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, New Edition (Edinburgh, 1972), pp.855-856.

because it gives such a clear-cut model of power relations that Woolf uses it. The initial instruction to the eye and the mind is seen, then, as a sort of royal summons to bring forth the lowly: every subject needs an object through which to establish sovereignty. This tone is reflected in the remark rounding off the opening paragraph of "The Sun and the Fish": "On our deathbeds we shall see nothing more majestic than a cat on a wall or an old woman in a sun-bonnet". (CDB, p.193)

We might compare this game with Woolf's observations on the nature of language in "Craftsmanship" where she talks of words as having minds of their own - "Our consciousness is their privacy; our darkness is their light"²⁰ - and she attributes to them other human qualities:

[Words are] the wildest, freest, most irresponsible, most unteachable of all things. Of course, you can catch them and sort them and place them in alphabetical order in dictionaries. But words do not live in dictionaries; they live in the mind they are much less bound by ceremony and convention than we are. Royal words mate with commoners. English words marry French words, German words, Indian words, Negro Words, if they have a fancy. Indeed, the less we enquire into the past of our dear Mother English the better it will be for that Lady's reputation. For she has gone-a-roving, a-roving fair maid. (DM pp.130-131)

The example of Queen Victoria is significant not only because it suggests a *hierarchized* opposition, but also because it appears to be an example of a gender opposition in which woman is positioned as master rather than slave. Cixous, in "Sorties", asks some questions pertinent to the issue of gender in traditional *hierarchized* oppositions:

²⁰ Woolf, "Craftsmanship" (A radio talk, broadcast in the series "Words Fail Me"), *Listener*, 5 May 1937, p.868; *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London, 1942), p.132; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (DM).

By dual *hierarchized* oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books. Philosophical systems. Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions. And all the couples of oppositions are *couples*. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought - all the concepts, the codes, the values - to a two term system, related to 'the' couple man/woman?²¹

Feminists must consider the possibility of the presence of "'the' couple man/woman" as inherent in all other couples. Thus we might question the effectiveness of inserting a woman in the place of a man: the couple Queen Victoria/Camel is in this sense just another example of man/woman. The Queen here is a token man, and the gender implications already written into subject/object relations are reinforced rather than challenged. We might also note that man in this opposition means both male individual and humanity. Thus "'the' couple" may also be expressed as mankind/woman.

This particular articulation of the "law" of binary opposition is addressed in the leading article of the *Time and Tide* in which "The Sun and the Fish" was first published. "Human Beings - and Females" concludes that "There can be nothing more dangerous to the whole structure of society than this attempt of the reactionaries to train women from their earliest years for a subordinate position and to divide the community into two groups: human beings - and females".²² Woolf's "amusing game", then, in engaging with such oppositions, has particular resonance for the feminist context in which it first appears; and when this context is acknowledged the feminist import of her story becomes more explicit. Careful comparison between diary entry

²¹ Cixous, p.287.

²² "Human Beings - and Females", *Time and Tide*, 9, 5 (3 February 1928) 97.

and story, I suggest, will also reveal Woolf's feminist interpretation of the eclipse.

4.4 "A Sketch of the Past"

Before we follow Woolf's application of the game to her account of the eclipse, it is necessary to make an excursus to another of her autobiographical writings. Although "A Sketch of the Past"²³ was "never intended for publication", as its editor reminds us, it still "richly illuminates [Woolf's] vision and sensibility". (MB, p.7) Critics have used this work as a key to understanding Woolf's art as well as her personality. It is here that Woolf delineates a "constant idea of mine" (MB, p.72) within her writing. Here also Woolf makes some observations which must give us pause for further thought on her game.

Woolf seems to have learned her game early in life: it resembles the method of reaching "a philosophy" she claims in "A Sketch of the Past". The latter shares with "The Sun and the Fish", in the first place, a similar project - the exploration of memory. Woolf's game, furthermore, is initiated by her recollection of an "astonishing moment", just as her "philosophy" comes from three "exceptional moments" in her childhood. (MB, p.71)

Woolf identifies her "three instances of exceptional moments" as: (i) a fight with her brother Thoby: "Just as I raised my fist to hit him, I felt: why hurt another person? I dropped my hand instantly, and stood there, and let him beat me. I remember the feeling. It was a

²³ Woolf, "A Sketch of the Past" (April, 1939), *Moments of Being*, Second Edition, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Jean Schulkind (London, 1985); further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (MB).

feeling of hopeless sadness."; (ii) in a garden: "I was looking at the flower bed by the front door; 'That is the whole', I said. I was looking at a plant with a spread of leaves; and it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower. It was a thought I put away as being likely to be very useful to me later." (iii) on overhearing of a suicide: "The next thing I remember is being in the garden at night and walking on the path by the apple tree. It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark - it was a moonlit night - in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralysed." (MB, p.71)

Each instance involves Woolf as an individual subject in relation to the (physical, bodily, material, natural) object world. Each "exceptional moment" is recalled with its own "alien matter": Thoby's fists, the flower bed, the apple tree. In this sense Woolf's recollections here are similar to her game in "The Sun and the Fish". Woolf claims that these moments often surprise her mind: "I often tell them over, or rather they come to the surface unexpectedly". (MB, p.71) There is an element of "shock" involved, not unlike the surprise element we have noted in the game. In "A Sketch of the Past" Woolf realises something new: "Two of these moments ended in a state of despair. The other ended, on the contrary, in a state of satisfaction". The game, similarly, is sometimes successful, sometimes not. Perhaps the flower bed resembles the case of Queen Victoria, whereas the fight with Thoby, and the suicide case, are as unsuccessful as the Taj Mahal.

The instance of the flower bed has special relevance. Woolf discovers that "the real flower" is only "whole" when it is seen with its ground - with what surrounds it - and, that as a whole, it is "part earth; part flower". This resembles the example of Queen Victoria: both flower and queen are "stuck about with ... alien matter", and in this condition flourish; that is, they move the observer to mental stimulation and satisfaction. Woolf's conclusions about the flower are pertinent to understanding her game:

When I said about the flower 'That it is whole,' I felt that I had made a discovery. I felt that I had put away in my mind something that I should go back [to], to turn over and explore. It strikes me now that this was a profound difference. It was the difference in the first place between despair and satisfaction. This difference I think arose from the fact that I was quite unable to deal with the pain of discovering that people hurt each other; that a man I had seen had killed himself. The sense of horror held me powerless. But in the case of the flower I found a reason; and thus was able to deal with the sensation. I was not powerless. I was conscious - if only at a distance - that I should in time explain it. (MB, pp.71-72)

Woolf distinguishes "between despair and satisfaction" in terms of "sensation" in opposition to "reason": she finds that where reason transcends sensation (reason/sensation), satisfaction results; but where reason fails (sensation/reason), she finds despair. In the latter case the traditional hierarchy of subject/object has been overturned to object/subject ("the sense of horror held me powerless") - the subjective and rational has been overcome by sensation. This has important implications for readings of Woolf's feminism. From this evidence it appears that Woolf does not see as desirable the submission of mind to body, or subject to object. She does, however, seem to derive great intellectual pleasure from what might well be described as reason transcending its own eclipse by the

physical ("I was not powerless. I was conscious ... that I should in time explain it").

The sense of human triumph and reaffirmation noted in Woolf's diary account of the "astonishing moment" of the eclipse, is echoed in her consideration of the three "exceptional moments" experienced earlier in her life:

I do not know if I was older when I saw the flower than I was when I had the other two experiences. I only know that many of these exceptional moments brought with them a peculiar horror and a physical collapse; they seemed dominant; myself passive. This suggests that as one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and that this explanation blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow. I think this is true, because though I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome; after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it.
(MB, p.72)

Woolf gives an explicit indication of the power relations between subject and object operating in these experiences: the first two ending in despair she describes as object/subject, that is the self overcome by the physical, the material, the body ("they seemed dominant; myself passive"). She has been overwhelmed ("physical collapse") and transfixed. Reason makes possible a transcendence of this earth-bound position, but is not entirely independent of it. For if Woolf claims that it "blunts the sledge-hammer force of the blow" of sensation, then she also implies that reason whets its own blade in the exchange.

Woolf claims this process to be "particularly valuable" to her creative and imaginative powers, and indeed to be what makes her a writer. Her celebration of the powers of imaginative and communicative reason here marks her

out as a rational rather than a mystical writer. In the passage immediately following this one, words such as "revelation" and "rapture" might be taken out of context to endorse a mystical or religious interpretation, but in context, their effect is quite different, having much in common with Conrad's sense of worldly "mysteries and marvels".

Woolf seems anxious to impress that she has developed a more sophisticated response to her moments of shock than her childhood assumption that she had suffered "simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life". (MB, p.72) She dismisses this in favour of rational teleological enquiry: "it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words". As the rest of this passage makes clear, however, Woolf does not adhere to a principle of discovering one final cause to things. She enlarges upon these ideas to give an explanation of her artistic methods:

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 because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me. It is the rapture I get when in writing I seem to be discovering what belongs to what; making a scene come right; making a character come together. From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we - I mean all human beings - are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock. (MB, p.72)

This sets apart Woolf's ideas on subject/object relations from traditional romantic ones, where the individual

subjectivity of the (male) author is thought to be simultaneously outside and immanent in his work in imitation of the creator's relationship to the world.²⁴ Woolf positions herself as part of a community of subjects, accessible through language but with no transcendent position outside it. Woolf's writing "rapture" is similar to Roland Barthes' "pleasure of the text", and her declaration that "there is no Shakespeare ... there is no God" anticipates his "death of the author".²⁵

Woolf seems to suggest a sense of community when she says "we are parts of the work of art" or "we are the music"; she places subjects within, rather than outside, language. For her the individual is woven into the group, not isolated. Woolf goes on to speak of her "pattern" as specifically connected to the incident of the flower bed:

This intuition of mine - it is so instinctive that it seems given to me, not made by me - has certainly given its scale to my life ever since I saw the flower in the bed by the front door at St Ives. If I were painting myself I should have to find some - rod, shall I say - something that would stand for the conception. It proves that one's life is not confined to one's body and what one says and does; one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions. Mine is that there is a pattern hid behind the cotton wool. And this conception affects me every day. ... I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else. (MB, pp.72-73)

The "background rods" of Woolf's painting analogy may be referred to the artist, Paul Cézanne's dictum: "treat nature by the cylinder, the sphere, the cone".²⁶ Compare

²⁴ See M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), p.235ff.

²⁵ Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author", *Image-Music-Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London, 1977), pp.142-148.

²⁶ Paul Cézanne, Letter to Emile Bernard, 15 April 1904, *Paul Cézanne: Letters*, translated by Marguerite Kay, edited by John Rewald (London, 1941), p.234; *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book*

also Lily Briscoe's discovery: "She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral." (*TL*, p.78) This relationship between framework and colour is of importance. It becomes clear in "The Sun and the Fish" that colour does not lie on, so much as comprise, the structure. Similarly, Woolf's argument about "background rods" takes a somewhat self-reflexive turn here, in that she seems to inscribe her conceptual model at its every level. "This intuition" refers to her idea that there is a pattern behind things, and in telling us the origin of this idea, she suggests that it comes from the pattern itself ("it seems given to me, not made by me"). She repeats this tactic when she claims that "one is living all the time in relation to certain background rods or conceptions", and then defines her own particular rod or conception as precisely this ("Mine is that there is a pattern behind the cotton wool")! The effect of this is to show that there is no position outside this state of affairs, that we are implicated at every level. There is no act of writing or speaking transcending this condition. The "background rods" are in the background but not in a separate realm. Given that Woolf's concept seems to be operating at several levels, we might also see how it reads into the incident of the flower bed, which as the source of the revelation must also reflect the concept.

Woolf's initial discovery is "that the flower itself was part of the earth", and one could take the relationship between flower and earth as a metaphor of the very concept which it inspires. The earth then represents Woolf's "pattern" or "background rods or conceptions", and the flower her particular words or music. Woolf suggests that these two elements, flower and earth, are

by Artists and Critics, edited by Herschel B. Chipp (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1968), p.19.

not separate and opposed entities but part of one whole, and she extends the analogy to stand for all of human existence. Yet at the same time as Woolf points to the "whole", she also maintains a distinction between its parts. The whole is a synthesis of the binary opposition flower/earth. Woolf's insistence that "we are the words" suggests that she understands language to be socially constructed and present only in its material utterances. The individual cannot ultimately be separated from the social. This is where Bakhtin's model of language has relevance. Language has a "social origin":

In this way ... every actually spoken word (or comprehensibly written one), and not the one slumbering in the dictionary, is an expression and product of the social interaction of three components:- the speaker (author), the listener (reader), and the one of whom (or of which) they speak (the hero). The word is a social event, it is not sufficient in itself, like an abstract linguistic constant is; it cannot be psychologically drawn out of the subjective consciousness of the speaker in isolation.²⁷

There is no transcendent individual subjective position governing utterance - no Shakespeare, Beethoven, or God.²⁸ Woolf's observation, "we are the words", corresponds to Bakhtin's "the word is a social event".

²⁷ V.N. Voloshinov [M.M. Bakhtin], "Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry", translated by John Richmond, *Bakhtin School Papers*, edited by Ann Shukman (Oxford, 1983), p.17 (Bakhtin's italics).

²⁸ Jane Marcus, in *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (Columbus, 1988), p.172, suggests that Woolf's is "the most extraordinary expression of a 'Marxist' aesthetic imaginable.... No highbrow snob could express such a radical democratic concept of art. It matches Marx's definition of history." But I think it would be more appropriate to think of Woolf's position here as materialist. Compare also, Madeline Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.222, who comments on the same passage with reference to Heidegger: "Paradoxically ... Woolf's moments of being are initially experienced as ecstatic and violent shocks. Yet potentially they are moments of mystical unity where each person is connected to the other, and all are part of some inexplicable pattern."

Woolf's model of language, it might be argued, is untroubled by notions of social conflict. Her idea of the world as a work of art might also suggest a harmonious picture at odds with her feminist critique. Yet this model might be seen as her corrective to dominant hierarchized visions of the world, as Pauline Johnson has suggested. Woolf's model does not, however, preclude the possibility of conflicting discourses within the whole.

The figure of the flower in its bed presents some interesting questions about subject/object relations. If the flower is taken to be the individual instance growing out of the communal (and plural) earth, or the particular word out of the pattern or background rods, does this set of relations amount to a feasible set of binary oppositions, and if so, are these oppositions hierarchized? If we read flower/earth as Queen Victoria/alien matter, in other words, is it also to be read as a morganatic couple?

Woolf does not make clear in "A Sketch" that there is any notion of hierarchy in her model of the flower bed; she merely sets it apart from her other two examples as the only instance in which reason led her to satisfaction as opposed to sensation leading her to despair. Yet if we acknowledge the similarity of this idea to the game in "The Sun and the Fish", we may see that the latter elaborates on the former by drawing attention to the hierarchized structure of the "couple"; but we may also see that the former likewise might inform the latter in presenting the possibility of the couple's relationship as non-hierarchized (contraries not oppositions). If the issue of gender is introduced, furthermore, we might ask (with Cixous) of both Woolf's pieces "Where is she?". If we read man/woman into flower/earth, queen/alien matter,

is there anything in Woolf's writing to resist or subvert the implied hierarchy of man/woman?

In "A Sketch" that Woolf's "I" is not positioned with Shakespeare, Beethoven or God, but with "we" - that is, "we ... the words ... the music", suggesting that the authorial "I", for Woolf, does not transcend the flower/earth whole and is in fact in the same relation to the earth as its own product, its particular work of art. The act of writing for Woolf is thus communal: "it is only by putting it into words that I make it whole", she claims; and this may be read as the individual participating in the collective of language. In contrast to this model Woolf places the traditional and very masculine trio - Shakespeare, Beethoven and God - as exemplary of the now defunct notion of authorial detachment.

The question of gender might be clarified by the distinction between morganatic and non-morganatic versions of the couple flower/earth: morganatically it is read as man/woman, master/slave. Perhaps non-morganatically it might be read as the non-hierarchized couple subject/subjects. Habermas's intersubjectivity is also relevant here. It is only in the morganatic couple subject/object that the issue of gender arises; the alternative subject/subjects does not address it.

We have noted that flower/earth may be read as a metaphor or allegory of speech and language; but it is also possible to read flower/earth as a model of metaphor itself - a metaphor of metaphor in fact. A metaphor consists of two parts: the tenor and the vehicle, one part carrying the sense of the other. We might consider subject/object as tenor/vehicle, where the subject or tenor is grounded in the object or vehicle. In the couple Queen Victoria/camel or Queen Victoria/stooping

soldier, the morganatic relationship between subject and object is equivalent to the servile relationship of vehicle to tenor in metaphor. Woolf says that the "real flower" (the tenor) is "part earth; part flower" (the vehicle). This is not morganatic: the flower is partly earth - the tenor is partly the vehicle.

Woolf's eponymous couple, sun/fish, may be interpreted morganatically and non-morganatically. As subject/object (morganatic) we have already put it in the company of hierarchized couples such as mind/body, spirit/flesh, man/woman. The model subject/subjects, on the other hand, at once alerts us to the fact that the noun fish is simultaneously singular and plural. This makes the couple sun/fish very appropriate as a model of individual/social. Sun/shade, a possible alternative couple, does not carry such a dimension.

CHAPTER V
THE GATHERING CROWD

Following her exordium on Queen Victoria, Woolf applies the rules of her "amusing game" to the eclipse:

So, on this dark winter's morning, when the real world has faded, let us see what the eye can do for us. Show me the eclipse, we say to the eye; let us see that strange spectacle again. And we see at once - but the mind's eye is only by courtesy an eye; it is a nerve which hears and smells, which transmits heat and cold, which is attached to the brain and rouses the mind to discriminate and speculate - it is only for brevity's sake that we say that we "see" at once a railway station at night. (CDB, pp.193-194)

The title gives us sun/fish, the exordium gives queen/heterogeneous collection, and now we have eclipse/railway-station-at-night. This sequence suggests the plural reading of "fish"; and the fish half of the couple eclipse/station does carry the suggestion of darkness ("at night"). The railway station is a connection point for many people. Woolf focuses on it as the meeting point of a crowd:

A crowd is gathered at the barrier; but how curious a crowd! Mackintoshes are slung over their arms; in their hands they carry little cases. They have a provisional, extemporized look. They have that moving and disturbing unity which comes from the consciousness that they (but here it would be more proper to say "we") have a purpose in common. Never was there a stranger purpose than that which brought us together that June night in Euston Railway Station. We were come to see the dawn. (CDB, p.194)

The passage begins by describing the crowd objectively in the present tense ("A crowd is gathered"), and ends by describing it subjectively in the past ("We were come ..."). The narrative technique is cinematic: the reader is given a broad, distant and objective view of a station at night, and then a closer view of a crowd, and as the description becomes more detailed and the observation

closer, the less confident the narrative objectivity becomes. The transition from outside observation of the crowd to inside experience is marked by the statement "They have a provisional, extemporized look" which signals a change of perspective: this way of looking is not going to last. In the next sentence the crowd's status moves from object to subject - "they" to "we". This shift occurs during a description of common experience, more appropriately expressed subjectively than objectively - "(but here it would be more proper to say 'we')". Here the tense shifts from present (or present historic) to past: no longer "extemporized" in an objectified continuous present, the crowd is recollected as a subjective historical experience.

It is significant that the crowd's sense of unity is described as "moving and disturbing" when seen in this transitional sentence. This gives a sense of double perspective (the crowd is aware of itself as object and subject), which is reinforced by the larger narrative framework: the story begins with the impersonal "one" ("One says to the eye Athens"). It shifts to the subjective "we": "Show me the eclipse, we say to the eye". This sentence demonstrates the individual instance of a common plural experience, evident not only in the play between "me" and "we" but also in the pun "eye"/I. The instruction to the individual self comes from a pluralized subjectivity: the individual speaks from the plural/social subjective "we" to itself as singular object - "me".

The description of the crowd starts with the authorial "we" seeing a railway station and then a crowd, which turns from "they" to "we". Thus the authorial "we", which both signals impersonal narrator and conjoins writer and reader, deepens to an experiential "we" recalling a past common experience. Nowhere, apart from

the pun on "eye", has the first person singular appeared: this is a notable departure from the diary account of the eclipse, where a private individual self does call itself "I". In fact nowhere at all in "The Sun and the Fish" is this "I" discernible.

In her play between objective and subjective experience, Woolf demonstrates the paradox of subjectivity with a plural rather than singular model of the subject. The figure of the crowd raises questions about subjectivity and plurality: is the crowd composed of many different subjects, or is it one homogeneous subject? A hierarchized model of subjectivity, in which one subject subsumes all others (as objects), results in the crowd as one amorphous subject. Individual subject/herd object. A model of differentiated subjectivity changes subject/object to intersubjective relations within the crowd. I will argue that in Woolf's handling, later in the story, of light as the traditional metaphor of subjectivity, she uses colour as an indication of plural subjectivity, and she decentres the notion of one light by the creation of multiple points of enlightenment.

"The Sun and the Fish" does not follow Woolf's diary entry in its account of personal companions or particular events on the train journey; instead it emphasizes that the train (more appropriately "our" train) is one of several:

Trains like ours were starting all over England at that very moment to see the dawn. All noses were pointing north. When for a moment we halted in the depths of the country, there were the pale yellow lights of motor cars also pointing north. There was no sleep, no fixity in England that night. All were on the roads; all were travelling north. All were thinking of the dawn. As the night wore on, the sky, which was the object of so many million thoughts, assumed greater substance and prominence than usual. The consciousness of the whitish soft canopy above us increased in weight as the hours passed. (CDB, p.194)

This plurality of trains and cars in some ways suggests a plurality of subjects, yet their common purpose seems to unite them as one large subject; and if the "pale lights of the motor cars" are registers of these many points of consciousness, they seem to be moving towards subsumption in the larger light of dawn ("All were thinking of the dawn") as if it were one large consciousness. Compare this with Mr Ramsay's thoughts on the tradition of enlightenment: "His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger light still." (*TL*, p.59) The power of this unifying telos of light is contrasted with its traditional foil - the chaotic darkness of night ("There was ... no fixity in England that night"). Here Woolf also inserts a sense of national destiny into the common purpose of witnessing the dawn, but this does not suggest that the story itself promotes patriotism or nationalistic pride; for it is clear that everything associated with the security of this dawn light is to be thrown into question by the eclipse.

The effect of the common consciousness upon its main object, the sky, is startling: as attention to it increases it seems to become more and more reified ("assumed greater substance"). Even more subtly, this palpableness is transferred to consciousness itself. The last sentence of the passage must be read very carefully ("The consciousness of the whitish soft canopy above us increased in weight as the hours passed"): the cloud canopy does not gain weight, but "the consciousness of" it does. The construction is ambiguous enough to see a transference of consciousness from people to the clouds themselves. The cloud is both the subject and object of consciousness, and its fluctuating status between solidity and air, between evanescence and palpableness,

reflects a fluctuating subjectivity. Woolf explains that usual subject/object relations have indeed been altered:

When in chill early morning we were turned out on a Yorkshire roadside, our senses had orientated themselves differently from usual. We were no longer in the same relation to people, houses, and trees; we were related to the whole world. We had come, not to lodge in the bedroom of an inn; we were come for a few hours of disembodied intercourse with the sky. (CDB, p.194)

It seems that subject/object relations have been abandoned altogether ("we were no longer in relation to people, houses, and trees"), in favour of purely subjective ones ("disembodied intercourse with the sky"). On approaching the observation site, "we" forget material surroundings, mundane relationships, bodies, and the object world. The subjects of Woolf's story no longer need define themselves against an object world because they are about to commune with the ultimate (symbol of) subjectivity. In terms of metaphor construction, it is as if as tenors they no longer require their usual earthly vehicles - "people, houses, and trees" - because they are about to define themselves somewhat differently in relation to the sky.

"People, houses, and trees" are fundamental metaphors; and they are metaphors of metaphor. "House" suggests the standard figure of metaphor:¹ the subject as tenant of the object, the house as space to be occupied. It is worth noting that "Woman" is traditionally read as house or room - a space or gap to be filled.² Woolf's search for "A Room of One's Own" may be seen as the feminist search for a metaphor which does not, by the very nature of its construction, exclude the feminine. "People"

¹ See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, translated by Maria Jolas (New York, 1964); Derrida, "White Mythology", *Margins of Philosophy*.

² See Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1985); Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word. Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York and Oxford, 1987).

suggests the metaphor of personification, also of interest to feminism since the female form has been an archetypal vehicle for personification. "Tree" suggests the idea of naturalized (and naturalizing) metaphors which disguise evidence of their own artificial construction. Again this is of interest to feminism since "Woman" is traditionally a "natural" metaphor.

"We had come, not to lodge in the bedroom of an inn" makes somewhat melodramatic reference to the happy neglect of sleeping arrangements: normal bodily requirements are flouted. After a night's vigil they will greet the dawn. By avoiding residence at an inn they also, in another sense, avoid entering into the usual power relations of metaphor. The inn also suggests the economic exchange inherent in such power relations, and thus emphasizes the object or vehicle as a commodity. The group's relationship to the sky is very different from its relationship to the bedroom! The term "lodge" contrasts sharply with the term "intercourse". They anticipate, then, a sublime experience.

The tone here is not entirely serious, but the contrasts are nevertheless worth exploring. This "disembodied intercourse with the sky" implies perhaps sublime communication between people and sky, where the sky is understood as another (higher!) form of consciousness. The hyperbolic diction seems to parody the religious connotations of this, but it in no sense lessens the air of strange excitement. They are after all, anticipating a momentous event in the heavens. It is of interest as to whether or not the relationship between people and sky is to be seen as ultimately hierarchized: that is, whether or not the sky is more than literally *higher* than the people. If the sky is taken as the harbinger of a higher consciousness it subsumes the subjective consciousness of those below. On the other hand, it may

turn out to be merely an object after all, onto which the people project their subjective and collective fantasies. We might also read this "disembodied intercourse" as a transcendental experience in which human subjectivity is translated into communion with a higher noumenal order. Given the tenets of the "amusing game" introducing Woolf's story, however, we might in the end view this "disembodied intercourse" ironically as an already thwarted possibility: the game infers that intercourse can never be disembodied.

Abruptly leaving off from this grandiloquent moment of expectation, the third paragraph of Woolf's story dramatically shifts in tone to set a new scene. The landscape through which the travellers move to reach their final assembly point is now described. This passage is strongly reminiscent of the diary entry, but also differs from it in significant ways. For example, the story makes no clear indication of the transfer from train to omnibus or from omnibus to foot, as the diary does; nor does it mention the castle or other features in the landscape recorded in the diary. It does, however, recall the paleness:

Everything was very pale. The river was pale and the fields, brimming with grasses and tasselled flowers which should have been red, had no colour in them, but lay there whispering and waving round colourless farmhouses. (CDB, pp.194-195)

The paleness of the early morning scene is here emphasized even more than in the diary, almost to the point of dogmatism: "Everything was very pale". Woolf ascribes this paleness and colourlessness to the river, the fields, the flowers and the farmhouses, just as she does in the diary. But she omits any reference to the lights she notices in the landscape: there is earlier mention of "the pale yellow lights of motor cars" but these are no longer described as "burning". The light

"burning" from the castle window has also disappeared along with the castle itself. In fact the word "burn" does not appear at all in the story version. It is even extinguished from the description of the grasses and tasselled plants with which "all the fields were aburn" in the diary account. In the story the fields are instead "brimming with grasses and tasselled flowers" and they are "whispering and waving". "Brimming" suggests water rather than fire; and "lay there whispering and wavering" suggests passivity rather than smouldering energy. Like a painter, organizing colour planes, Woolf has homogenized and distilled a complex picture of the landscape into a simple, almost monolithic, paleness. There are no lights or textures to disrupt this anaemic vista, nothing to distract the eye. One tone prevails: "Everything was very pale".

The story continues to follow quite closely the diary entry, with subtle differences. The adaptations to the description of farms glimpsed by the travellers are of particular interest. The diary and story versions follow respectively:

Pale & grey too were the little uncompromising Yorkshire farms. As we passed one, the farmer, & his wife & sister came out, all tightly & tidily dressed in black, as if they were going to church. At another ugly square farm, two women were looking out of the upper windows. These had white blinds drawn down half across them. (*D*, III, p.142)

Now the farmhouse door would open, and out would step to join the procession the farmer and his family in their Sunday clothes, neat, dark and silent as if they were going up hill to church; or sometimes women merely leant on the window sills of the upper rooms watching the procession pass with amused contempt, it appeared - they have come such hundreds of miles, and for what? they seemed to say - in complete silence. We had an odd sense of keeping an appointment with an actor of such vast proportions that he would come silently and be everywhere. (*CDB*, p.195)

The differences between these two passages are of significance for an understanding of Woolf's narrative design in "The Sun and the Fish". One notable difference is in the way Woolf generalizes for the story the singular and specific observations of the diary. For example, in the diary she has a farmer and his wife and sister emerging from "one" of the "uncompromising Yorkshire farms". In the story this is related as a recurrent event: "Now the farmhouse door would open, and out would step". Similarly, in the diary Woolf remembers seeing "At another ... farm two women ... looking out of the upper windows"; and this is transformed in the story into something intermittently glimpsed: "sometimes women merely leant on the window sills of upper rooms".

These women are particularly interesting. In the diary they are described as "looking out", but in the story they are "watching the procession pass with amused contempt". In both accounts they appear in some sort of opposition to the farmer and family, and to the visitors, but it is only in the story that they are explicitly hostile. In the diary the "white blinds" of their windows contrast with the neat "black" attire of the farmer's family, but the quaint piety of this family is not openly ridiculed by the women. A similar sort of description of the family - "as if they were going to church" - is retained in the story, but the distinctive use of "black" and "white" is not.

It seems, from these differences, that Woolf has taken out of her landscape all points of light and bright colour which, in the diary version, had the effect of punctuating the land with alternative points of illumination (and consciousness) to the light in the sky. In removing them Woolf is tidying up her picture into more uniformly defined areas of light and shade - and

paleness. We can no longer be distracted by these points of brightness and energy from our anticipation of the main light above. As we saw above, even the "pale lights" of the cars have been schematized into this anticipatory scene.

The importance of the main light is emphasized by the closing sentence: "We had an odd sense of keeping an appointment with an actor of such vast proportions that he would come silently and be everywhere." Just as with the portrayal of the pious locals joining the "procession" as if it were a religious one, there is here a strong sense of dressing the occasion in outmoded rhetoric: religious vocabulary is applied to a now rationally understood event. The "odd sense" comes from the tension between old and new attitudes. The omniscient, omnipresent (and masculine) God of Christianity is mockingly referred to as "an actor of ... vast proportions". The scientific explanation of the solar system informs the "sense of keeping an appointment", in that the moments of sunrise and eclipse have been scientifically calculated and predicted. The idea of an appointment also suggests an agreement between subjects; but the peculiarity (and humour) of this "sense" lies with the inherent contradiction in having an appointment (at a particular time in a particular place) with something omniscient, eternal, and omnipresent - or with something whose appearance is as inevitable and nonscient as clockwork. There is a similar paradox at work in the wearing of church clothes to witness an event celebrated and anticipated for its scientific significance - its confirmation of rational laws. It is in this ironical context, let us note, that Woolf describes the sun as a male actor of vast proportions.

Comparison of the fourth paragraph's opening passage, in "The Sun and the Fish", with its corresponding passage in

the diary entry, reveals further evidence of Woolf's revision of the landscape to exclude any mention of points of light in the land. She does, of course, omit other things from the account, such as the incident where "The driver once got out & put a small stone behind our wheel" (*D*, III, p.142), but it is her handling of information about light which is of greatest interest.

We got out, & found ourselves very high, on a moor, boggy, heathery, with butts for grouse shooting. There were grass tracks here & there, & people had already taken up positions. So we joined them, walking out to what seemed the highest point looking out over Richmond. One light burnt down there. Vales & moors stretched, slope after slope, round us. It was like Haworth country. But over Richmond, where the sun was rising, was a soft grey cloud. We could see by a gold spot where the sun was. But it was early yet. We had to wait, stamping to keep warm. Ray had wrapped herself in the blue striped blanket off a double bed. She looked incredibly vast & bedroomish. Saxon looked very old. Leonard kept looking at his watch. Four great red setters came leaping over the moor. (*D*, III, pp.142-143)

By the time we were at the meeting place, on a high fell where the hills stretched their limbs out over the flowing brown moorland below, we had put on too - though we were cold and with our feet stood in red bog water were likely to be still colder, though some of us were squatted on mackintoshes among cups and plates, eating, and others were fantastically accoutred and none were at their best - still we had put on a certain dignity. Rather, perhaps, we had put off the little badges and signs of individuality. We were strung out against the sky in outline and had the look of statues standing prominent on the ridge of the world. We were very, very old; we were men and women of the primeval world come to salute the dawn. So the worshippers at Stonehenge must have looked among tussocks of grass and boulders of rock. Suddenly, from the motor car of some Yorkshire squire, there bounded four large, lean, red dogs, hounds of the ancient world, hunting dogs, they seemed, leaping with their noses close to the ground on the track of boar or deer. Meanwhile the sun was rising. A cloud glowed as a white shade glows when the light is slowly turned up behind it. (*CDB*, p.195)

The narrative sequence has been altered considerably: most notably, the comparison to Stonehenge now appears before the sun is seen "rising". This complies with Woolf's parenthetical comment in the diary, "(this idea came more vividly with the pale light though;)" (*D*, III, p.143)³ This difference arises, then, directly out of a narrative instruction in the first text. It makes a considerable difference symbolically to place the piece describing druidic (though she no longer uses the word) sentiments before sun-rise rather than after. As we noted of the diary entry, Woolf seems ultimately to be resisting such sentiments, so it makes sense to restore the sequence of thought to a position of pre-enlightenment (which is just what we might take the period before sun-rise to be). In the story, then, the references to Stonehenge grow out of the description of the people on the hillside before dawn, whereas in the diary they occur when Woolf describes those anxious moments when the sun "had sailed fast into cloud again". In both cases the sun is not in view. The story restores the comment to its proper context.

Comparing the opening landscape descriptions of each passage shows the story version to be more concise than the diary. It condenses the latter's visual information into a simple coherent (intimately sexual, perhaps) image. Again, Woolf has extinguished the light mentioned in the diary account: the story does not mention the valley below at this point, and there is no reference to the diary observation that "One light burnt down there". Nor is there mention of "Haworth country".

The most remarkable adaption is in the way Woolf's story has the land and people merging together. Whereas the diary account clearly distinguishes land and people (the

³ Quoted and discussed above.

people have individual names, and their individual activities are recorded); the story, on the other hand, personifies the land ("we were at the meeting place, on a high fell where the hills stretched their limbs out over the flowing brown moorland below"), and shows the people to have relinquished "the little badges and signs of individuality". The people are intimately enclosed by the land. Indeed, their meeting place on a hill, from whose mound limbs stretch, conjures up an image of public intimacy in its possible likeness to the *mons Veneris*. (The reference to the Brontës' "Haworth country" is perhaps distilled into this feminine mythopoeic landscape.)

Woolf's striking use of parentheses reinforces the sense of the land's embracing the people. Inside the dashes appears an impersonal and generalized account of the human activity; outside, the inclusive "we" parallels the land in "put[ting] on a certain dignity". This generalized set of humanity seems to be more closely connected to the land than the individuals in the diary entry, since they have "feet stood in red bog water". The personification of the land as sensually feminine encourages this "red bog water" to be interpreted as, perhaps, menstrual fluid. The scene has taken on surrealist dimensions: here are swarms of people tramping the highest point of a terrain described as if it were an enormous vulva, awaiting the arrival of "an actor of such vast proportions that he would come silently and be everywhere".

There may also be something threatening in this image of feminine expectation, as if the land were thrusting this hill forward as a challenge to the great actor, the sun.⁴

⁴ I am suggesting this possible delineation of feminine terrain, then, as in keeping with a feminist project of illuminating what Woolf terms, *GR*, p.82, the "dark country" of feminine experience; a

The sheer giganticism makes the human activity irrelevant, and the land may be seen in a posture, not of submission, but of anticipation. There may be an air of feminine sexual assertion, then, in the hills' stretching of limbs. Whatever the details of such an interpretation, however, the feminization of the landscape makes more explicit the sexual connotations of the earlier description of the sun as masculine. The assigning of the masculine gender to the sun is in itself a significant departure from the diary account. Collapsed into this description, too, is the sense of the travellers themselves at last stretching their own limbs after the long journey and organizing themselves for the solemnity of the occasion.

Directly after this comes the reference to Stonehenge, and the loss of individuality is stressed. The ancient sense of interconnectedness between humanity and land is emphasized by the graduation of imagery from people to statues to boulders. In their anticipation of the sun's arrival these people seem to be devolving back to the "men and women of the primeval world". Woolf's narrative style suggests that this analogy is not entirely serious. As with the clothes of the farmer's family, there is an awareness that this is parody: "Rather, perhaps ... we ... had the look of So the worshippers of Stonehenge must have looked". The intrusion of modern technology in the form of a motor car jolts us back into the twentieth century.

Whereas the diary states simply that "Four great red setters came leaping over the moor", the story not only has them bounding from a car, but also calls them "hounds of the ancient world", thus undoing the effects of the car by resurrecting the analogy with ancient times.

project comparable to Woolf's injunction to women writers, AROO, p.135, to "illumine your own soul".

Woolf's hyperbole ("We were very, very old; we were men and women come to salute the dawn. ... Suddenly ... there bounded four large, lean, red dogs, hounds of the ancient world") suggests a gleeful camping up of the experience rather more than a sombre evocation of ancient customs. The dogs are associated with both the ancient world and a feudalism which has not altogether died out ("squire"). Their noses lead us back to the dominant image in this passage - "the ground". The squire in his motor car reminds us that the patriarchy of land-based feudalism survives into the modern era of capitalism.

The arrival of the squire's dogs, in the story, is immediately followed by the rising of the sun. The dogs seem to be a symbolic composition of the hounds of hell and the four horsemen of the Apocalypse - after whose appearance, according to "The Revelation of St. John the Divine", "the sun became black as sackcloth of hair".⁵ In the diary the dogs are mentioned twice: first, after the activities of Woolf's companions are described, where there follows some bizarre comments about other animals ("There were sheep feeding behind us. Vita had tried to buy a guinea pig - Quentin advised a savage - so she observed the animals from time to time.") (*D*, III, p.143); and second, when the clouds momentarily obscure the sun, and Woolf contrasts the indifference of the sheep ("they showed no fear") and the "setters racing round" with the dignity of the people, who are then likened to druids. These various bestial images are distilled, in the story, into the single image of the squire's dogs running and hunting and generally dominating the land. Their actions herald the arrival of the sun, and suggest that the sun also will lord it over the land.

⁵ Revelation 5.12.

A sense of hierarchy is inferred in this sequence of events: at the top is the sun (or God), below which is the squire, then his dogs, and at the bottom is the land, described in terms suggestive of feminine sexuality. The sun is the absolute subject, the land the absolute object. There are clear indications of "'the' couple man/woman" in the opposition sun/land. The sun has already been referred to as "he", and the land as feminine.

Woolf's revision of her diary account enforces a strict design onto her description of the scene. In the story, in compliance with the schematization of sky and land, all references to independent sources of light on the land have disappeared. The diary account shows that Woolf was certainly struck by the presence of these lights and by the "burning" quality of the land's colours. She refers again to these images at the moment of the eclipse: "Down in the valley it was an extraordinary scrumble of red & black; there was the one light burning" (see the introductory quotation). Yet this compelling vision is missing from the story. Non-solar light and bright colours do, nevertheless, resurface at the end of the story, but in entirely different contexts, as we shall see.

The diary entry describes the sun as a "gold spot" behind "soft grey cloud", and the story recounts this as: "A cloud glowed as a white shade glows when the light is turned up behind it". The cloud is emphasized as a veil over the sun. Woolf then draws attention, in the story, to the sun-light as the source of colour for the landscape: "Golden wedge-shaped streamers fell from it and marked the trees in the valley green and the villages blue brown". (CDB, p.195) From behind a screen of cloud the sun dispenses colour - and life. Interestingly, the trees are not mentioned at all in the diary account.

This is an unusual and important instance of Woolf's addition to, rather than simplification of, the landscape as described in her diary.

The story follows the diary in contrasting the sky behind the observers with the sky in front of them, and develops the image of the sun as a "gold spot" showing its power to burn through its halo of cloud:

In the sky behind us there swam white islands in pale blue lakes. The sky was open and free there, but in front of us a soft snowbank had massed itself. Yet, as we looked, we saw it proving worn and thin in patches. The gold momentarily increased, melting the whiteness to a fiery gauze, and this grew frailer and frailer till, for one instant, we saw the sun in full splendour. Then there was a pause, a moment of suspense, like that which precedes a race. The starter held his watch in his hand, counting the seconds. Now they were off. (CDB, pp.195-196)

No reference is made to the red and black cloud or to the light in the valley, which in the diary might be taken as counter-points to the light and cloud above. The tone of the remaining colour - "blue" (of the sky behind) - has been subdued: it is now "pale blue". Woolf has also inverted the description of the cloud in the sky behind: in the diary she describes "blue spaces in the cloud" but in the story this becomes "white islands in pale blue lakes". This suggests that the blue areas are surrounded by cloud. The paleness of this blue also suggests less of a contrast with the cloud than in the diary account. This again homogenizes the imagery - this time to highlight the conflict between sun and cloud. When the sky is described in the story as "open and free", this does not imply that the sky is altogether free of cloud, but rather that there is free *movement* of cloud - the operative word being "swam".

The sense of looseness and freedom is contrasted with the static and impenetrable nature of the cloud amassed in

front of the observers and veiling the sun. The sense of opposition between sun and cloud is achieved by a sense of agency lent to them: the cloud "masse[s] itself" to block the sun, and the sun retaliates by "melting" away the cloud to a state of frailty. This develops into the terminology of open competition between them ("Now they were off"). The starter's watch and the race between sun and cloud are, of course, tricks of narrative which effectively dramatize the spectators' anxiety and excitement at the approaching moment of the eclipse, but they also have wider significance. That the starter's watch is held in a man's hand, for example, serves as reminder of the precise, scientific measurement of the event by a predominantly male corps of astronomers. The event is framed, then, within the terms of masculine reason and scientific enquiry.

CHAPTER VI

THE CHASING OF THE SUN AND THE VICTORY OF THE COLOURS

6.1 The race

The account of the race between sun, cloud and clock, in the story's fifth paragraph, seems inspired by Andrew Marvell: "Thus, though we cannot make our sun/ Stand still, yet we will make him run."¹ Woolf describes the sun as if "he" were being hunted down like an animal for sport, and in this respect, the story seems to be evolving a mythopoeic resonance. The "Yorkshire squire" and his "ancient world, hunting dogs" have already supplied hunting connotations. The following passage continues them:

The sun had to race through the clouds and to reach the goal, which was a thin transparency to the right, before the sacred seconds were up. He started. The clouds flung every obstacle in his way. They clung, they impeded. He dashed through them. He could be felt, flashing and flying when he was invisible. His speed was tremendous. Here he was out and bright; now he was under and lost. But always one felt him flying and thrusting through the murk to his goal. For one second he emerged and showed himself to us through our glasses, a hollowed sun, a crescent sun. Finally, he went under for his last effort. Now he was completely blotted out. The moments passed. Watches were held in hand after hand. The sacred twenty-four seconds were begun. Unless he could win through before the last one was over, he was lost. Still one felt him tearing and racing behind the clouds to win free; but the clouds held him. They spread; they thickened; they slackened; they muffled his speed. Of the twenty-four seconds only five remained, and still he was obscured. And, as the fatal seconds passed, and we realized that the sun was being defeated, had now, indeed lost the race, all the colour began to go from the moor. (CDB, p.196)

The intense repetition of "he", "him", and "his", leaves no doubt that the sun is here masculine. The excessive underlining of the sun's maleness prompts us to look for

¹ Andrew Marvell, "To His Coy Mistress", lines 45-46, *Complete Poems*, edited by George deF. Lord (London, 1984), p.25.

something we might read as female. Ancient mythology supplies a variety of possibilities, but first we might note the sexually charged violence inherent in Woolf's description of the sun's demise, as well as the less than impartial involvement of the observers: "he could be felt ... always one felt him flying and thrusting ... one felt him tearing and racing". The lurid sensationalism is rather peculiar in a description of clouds moving across the sun. The observers seem to be *in at the kill*, to follow the hunting metaphor. The verb "felt" provides the hinge of the ambiguity here: on the one hand, it means merely that those watching can detect the change of temperature as the clouds move across and away from the sun; on the other hand, this physical sensation involves the observers allegorically in the hunt - they actually feel "him" struggle.

6.2 Mythological chase and renewal

James George Frazer reveals some of the ancient precedents implicit in Woolf's description of the sun's flight.

In these northern maskers we see kings, whose dress of bark and leaves, along with the hut of green boughs and the fir-trees under which they hold their court, proclaim them unmistakably as, like their Italian counterpart, Kings of the Wood. Like him they die a violent death, but like him they may escape from it for a time by their bodily strength and agility; for in several of these northern customs the flight and pursuit of the king is a prominent part of the ceremony, and in one case at least if the king can outrun his pursuers he retains his life and his office for another year. ... In every one of these instances the life of the god-man is prolonged on the condition of his shewing, in a severe physical contest of fight or flight, that his bodily strength is not decayed, and that, therefore, the violent death,

which sooner or later is inevitable, may for the present be postponed.²

The parallels between the pursuit of the king and the pursuit of the sun suggest that Woolf invests the "sacred twenty-four seconds" of her chase with a mythopoeic significance, which allows us to read the whole event of the solar eclipse as a ritual testing and reaffirmation of masculine sovereignty and subjectivity. The sun's recovery, then, would parallel the reassertion of the masculine. Given such an interpretation, perhaps we might read Woolf's insertion into the landscape of "the trees in the valley green" as a presage of the "Sacred Wood". This has some interesting implications for our readings of the opposition between masculine and feminine set up in the story so far; and we might wonder whether Woolf's account of the eclipse ultimately leaves everything back in place, thus reaffirming masculine sovereignty. For the moments leading up to the eclipse, the conventional story pattern is played out. Two stories from classical mythology, also with some bearing upon this passage, demonstrate the gender opposition inherent in this tale of the sun's flight. Actaeon and Orpheus both die the victims of horrific acts of feminine vengeance, and both their fates seem to be related to the cults described by Frazer.

Robert Graves identifies Actaeon as "a sacred King of the pre-Hellenic stag cult, torn to pieces at the end of his reign of fifty months, namely a Great Year; his co-king or tanist, reigning for the remainder". Orpheus is a "sacred king [who] was struck by a thunderbolt - that is, killed with a double-axe - in an oak grove at the summer-solstice, and then dismembered by the Maenads of the bull cult, like Zagreus [Dionysus] ... or of the stag cult,

² James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: Part Three: The Dying God*, vol.4 (London, 1911) pp.212-213.

like Actaeon".³ Actaeon's offence was against Artemis/Diana, the Triple Moon-goddess, sister of Apollo, whom he accidentally surprised naked in her ritual bath, while he was out hunting. She changed him into a stag, and he was torn to pieces by his own hunting hounds. Ovid, in his famous account of this story, goes into graphic and gory detail.

Well, indeed, might he wish to be absent, but he is here; and well might he wish to see, not to feel, the fierce doings of his own hounds. They throng him on every side and, plunging their muzzles in his flesh, mangle their master under the deceiving form of the deer. Nor, as they say, till he had been done to death by many wounds, was the wrath of the quiver-bearing goddess appeased.⁴

Woolf's description of the clouds flocking the sun is suggestive of a pack of hounds overcoming some poor victim ("They spread; they thickened; they slackened; they muffled his speed"); but whereas Ovid communicates the victim's experiences quite closely and sympathetically ("well might he wish to see, not to feel"), Woolf gives the pursuers' feelings ("He could be felt", and so on), perhaps suggesting a certain relish in the sun's defeat, a perverse thrill in the chase. Perhaps we can detect some feminine pleasure in the sun's demise after all.

Orpheus's offence was against Dionysus whom he neglected in favour of devotion to Apollo. He was pursued and torn

³ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1962), vol.1, sec. 22.1, p.85; *ibid.*, sec. 28.2, p.114.

⁴ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, III.247-252, translated by Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1926), vol.1, pp.141, 143. Miller's translation of:

vellet abesse quidem, sed adest; velletque videre,
non etiam sentire canum fera facta suorum.
undique circumstant, mersisque in corpore rostris
dilacerant falsi dominum sub imagine cervi,
nec nisi finita per plurima vulnera vita
ira pharetratae fertur satiata Dianae.

to pieces by the Thracian women (Maenads or Bacchantae), and his singing head floated out to Lesbos.

First away went the multitudinous birds still spellbound by the singer's voice, with the snakes and the train of beasts, the glory of Orpheus' audience, harried by the Maenads; then these turned bloody hands against Orpheus and flocked around like birds when they see the bird of night wandering in the daylight; and as when in the amphitheatre in the early morning of the spectacle the doomed stag is the prey of dogs. ... These savage women caught up and, first tearing in pieces the oxen who threatened them with their horns, they rushed back to slay the bard; and, as he stretched out his suppliant hands, uttering words then, but never before, unheeded, and moving them not a whit by his voice, the impious women struck him down.⁵

This story positions the feminine in even closer association with the bestial and the bodily. The male hero is not the victim merely of a goddess's wrath which causes his transformation into a beast and his death by pursuing beasts, but he actually suffers, untransformed, almost the same fate, this time torn apart by women. Woolf's insistence upon the maleness of the sun in the context of such a chase, may suggest readings which identify as female his pursuers. Yet, it seems, at no point does Woolf's story explicitly refer to anything as "she" in opposition to this "he". There are, however, feminine images of opposition embedded quite subtly in

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, XI.20-26, 37-43, vol. 2, pp.121, 123.

Miller's translation of:

ac primum attonitas etiamnum voce canentis
 innumeras volucres anguesque agmenque ferarum
 maenades Orphei titulum rapuere triumphii;
 inde cruentatis vertuntur in Orphea dextris
 et coeunt ut aves, si quando luce vagantem
 noctis avem cernunt, structoque utrimque theatro
 ceu matutina cervus periturus harena
 praeda canum est
 ... quae postquam rapuere ferae cornuque minaces
 divulgare boves, ad vatis fata recurrunt
 tendentemque manus et in illo tempore primum
 inrita dicentem nec quicquam voce moventem
 sacrilegae perimunt, perque os, pro Iuppiter! illud
 auditum saxis intellectumque ferarum
 sensibus in ventos anima exhalata recessit.

the narrative: the "amused contempt" of the women at the farm windows, and the feminine qualities ascribed to the land.

An Orphic reading of the demise of the sun in Woolf's text supplies an interpretation of the sun as symbolic of the soul, or divine intellect, fleeing the constraints of the body, commonly regarded as evil. The feminine images in this part of Woolf's story may suggest dark chthonic cults, and the Dionysian in pursuit of the Apollonian. The couple man/woman within the opposition light/dark is maintained here just as firmly. To celebrate these qualities as positive is not to escape the dominant hierarchy, for as Lloyd warns any "strengths and virtues" ascribed to the feminine "are strengths that derive from exclusion".⁶

The renewal of masculine sovereignty through its endurance of violent assault by feminine forces is surely not to be the outcome of Woolf's eclipse story. Woolf elsewhere makes parodic and subversive use of this imagery in a metaphor for fiction: "if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured."⁷ The recommendation of shocking violence towards a female figure personifying certain values is also adopted by Woolf against her target, "the Angel of the House":

I turned upon her and caught her by the throat. I did my best to kill her. ... Had I not killed her she would have killed me. She would have plucked the heart out of my writing. For, as I found, directly I put pen to paper, you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be

⁶ Lloyd, *The Man of Reason. 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (London, 1984), p.106.

⁷ Woolf, "Modern Fiction", CR, p.195.

the truth about human relations, morality, sex. And all these questions, according to the Angel of the House, cannot be dealt with freely and openly by women ...⁸

Clearly Woolf is not recommending violence for the sake of vigorous renewal, although the Angel of the House does not go away so easily: "She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality. She was always creeping back when I thought I had despatched her." (*DM*, p.153) It is also clear that both figures (of fiction and the Angel) are not real. Woolf, at the same time as recommending the renewal of fiction by the violent disruption of tradition, manages both to attack the notion of the feminine as personification and assert a feminine sovereignty by inverting the gender associations of mythic renewal of the masculine by violence.⁹

6.3 Women and darkness

Given the parallels to an Actaeon or Orpheus-like death in Woolf's eclipse story, it is worth noting how Classical Greek culture understood such oppositions, and how they inform the stories that Woolf seems to echo.

Greek societies, male-ordered, generally assigned to women ritual presidency over the transitional experiences, dying and birth, which are perceived as passages into and out of darkness. Dying is 'going into the dark', being born is 'coming into the light', as an image often doing double service for the body's emergence from the womb and passage into the grave In male perception, a supposed female aptitude for monitoring passage out of or into darkness is linked with a supposed female aptitude for making contact with what is polluting. In Greek as in some other cultures, concepts of the sacred are interwoven with concepts of pollution: *hagnos* or *hagios*, 'sacred', is cognate with *agos*,

⁸ Woolf, "Professions for Women", *DM*, p.151.

⁹ See, Denise Marshall, "Slaying the Angel and the Patriarch: The Grinning Woolf", *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 1-3 (1988) 149-177.

'pollution'.... Aspects of female biology are also perceived as polluting to men.... As in some periods of medieval European culture women's supposed aptness for handling the more polluting and 'darker' aspects of divinity is interdependent on their biological and cultural associations with what comes into and what comes out of darkness, whether the darkness be that of the underworld or of the female body.¹⁰

Woolf's reference to the "sacred seconds" before the eclipse might also suggest this ancient sense of sacred darkness. Frazer tells us of the popular belief that during an eclipse the air is infected, poisoned. He notes that "an eclipse is particularly poisonous when it happens on a Wednesday" - the day of Woolf's eclipse!¹¹ He also notes:

A Cambodian maiden at puberty is said to "enter into the shade". During her retirement ... she has to observe a number of rules But this state of seclusion is discontinued during eclipses; at such times she goes forth and pays her devotions to the monster who is supposed to cause eclipses by catching the heavenly bodies between his teeth. This permission to ... appear abroad during an eclipse seems to shew how literally the injunction is interpreted which forbids maidens entering on womanhood to look upon the sun.¹²

We may surmise, then, strong cultural traditions in the almost institutionalized ascendancy of feminine and bestial forces at times of eclipse. Darkness and chaos, however temporary, are the province of women, and women must be carefully controlled. Padel comments on Maenadism as it is presented in classical literature:

[Euripides'] *Bacchae* provides magnificent if ambiguous evidence for the ways in which male Athenian fantasies might respond to women escaping from confinement into the wilds. The play combines a picture of women who are 'out of their minds' with a picture of women out of their proper place within home and city; and it links both to

¹⁰ Ruth Padel, "Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons", *Images of Women in Antiquity*, edited by Averil Cameron and Amelie Kuhrt (London and Sydney, 1983), pp.5-6.

¹¹ Frazer, *The Golden Bough: Part Seven: Balder the Beautiful*, vol.10 (London, 1913) p.162.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.70.

the tearing apart of an individual king, the collapse of a royal palace, and the exile and fragmentation of the founding royal family (*Bacchae*, 633, 1350-63). It establishes women's potentially peaceful physical relation with savage nature through their reproductive functions - the maenads suckle the young of wild animals - but shows male order, and an individual male, destroyed through this relationship, and through the women's relationship with a god who 'drives them out of the house in madness' (*Bacchae*, 33).... Aeschylus showed the maenads tearing apart Orpheus, who is, in a sense, the archetypal author of order (in that music, in the Greek tradition, was an image of balance and order) and wielder of human power to tame animal nature: women here tear to pieces a man who makes, as Pentheus attempts to maintain, an image of order.¹³

6.4 Woolf and the classical sun

Woolf was familiar with the *Bacchae*¹⁴ and with all the major works of classical Greek literature, as her paper "On Not Knowing Greek" reveals.¹⁵ Here she contrasts the English landscape with the Greek and emphasizes the essentially sun-lit quality of the latter, to which the former can never approximate: "It is the climate that is impossible. If we try to think of Sophocles here, we must annihilate the smoke and the damp and the thick wet mists. We must sharpen the lines of the hills. We must imagine a beauty of stone and earth rather than of woods and greenery. With warmth and sunshine and months of brilliant, fine weather, life of course is instantly changed". (*CR*, pp.40-41) This sunshine is an integral part of the drama, as Woolf understands it: "They were speaking to an enormous audience rayed round them on one of those brilliant southern days when the sun is so hot and yet the air so exciting". (*CR*, p.42) She speaks of the directness, the "sharpness and compression" (*CR*,

¹³ Padel, p.7.

¹⁴ Aeschylus' *Bassarae* or *Women of the Fawn-Skin* is lost.

¹⁵ Woolf, "On Not Knowing Greek", *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), pp.39-59.

p.45) of these plays performed under the naked glare of the sun. The English landscape and weather may be very different, but nevertheless English culture has its roots in the Greek: "the stable, the permanent, the original human being is to be found there. ... These are the originals, Chaucer's the varieties of the human species". (CR, p.44)

Woolf uses the differences in climate as an analogy for the loss of literary directness; it is as if the "thick wet mists" of England have clouded over the Greeks' sun. Centuries of lesser imitations have obscured the splendour of the originals and turned them into "the greatest bores and the most demoralising companions in the world. The plays of Addison, Voltaire, and a host of others are there to prove it". (CR, p.45) In order to feel the benefit of the sun we must "encounter them in the Greek":

A fragment of their speech broken off would, we feel, colour oceans and oceans of the respectable drama. Here we meet them before their emotions have been worn into uniformity. Here we listen to the nightingale whose song echoes through English literature singing in her own Greek tongue. For the first time Orpheus with his lute makes men and beasts follow him. Their voices ring out clear and sharp; we see the hairy, tawny bodies at play in the sunlight among the trees, not posed gracefully on granite plinths in the pale corridors of the British Museum. ... It is to the Greeks that we turn when we are sick of the vagueness, of the confusion, of the Christianity and its consolations, of our own age. (CR, pp.45, 59)

Woolf read Greek for two and a half years in preparation for this essay,¹⁶ and even made her own translation of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*;¹⁷ so by the time of the eclipse she was certainly *au fait* with the direct heat of the classical literary sun, and certainly capable of reading

¹⁶ Silver, *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks*, p.101.

¹⁷ See Woolf, *D*, II (3rd Dec 1922), p.215; Silver, p.125; now in the Berg Collection.

(and writing) such analogies into the landscape. The story informing the *Bacchae* warns of the fatal danger of encountering unmediated the heat of heavenly light (and, indeed, of attempting *disembodied* intercourse). It is the story of the mother of Dionysus, Semele, consumed by Zeus's flames in conceiving their son.¹⁸

Woolf herself worked from Robert Yelverton Tyrrell's 1892 edition of Euripides' *Bacchae*,¹⁹ and it is worth noting some of his introductory observations, which we might connect to our discussion of rationalism and mysticism in Woolf's work. Tyrrell comments on "the remarkable spirit of speculative contentment ... which pervades the play", and which means that "it has sometimes been regarded as a Palinode on the part of the aged Euripides, or recantation of the advanced views found in his earlier plays. It is supposed that, feeling the approach of old age, he here preaches the worship of those gods whom he had despised in his prime, and defends those superstitions which he had in his youth assailed".²⁰ This is of particular relevance to the "vast obeisance" of Woolf's diary account of the eclipse, and to the

¹⁸ See, Arthur S. Way, *Euripides* (London, 1919), vol. 3, p.3: "Semele the daughter of Cadmus, a mortal bride of Zeus, was persuaded by Hera to pray the God to promise her with an oath to grant her whatsoever she would. And, when he had consented, she asked that he would appear to her in all the splendour of his godhead, even as he visited Hera. Then Zeus, not of his will, but constrained by his oath, appeared to her amidst intolerable light and flashings of heaven's lightening, whereby her mortal body was consumed. But the God snatched her unborn babe from the flames, and hid him in a cleft of his thigh, till the days were accomplished wherein he should be born. And so the child Dionysus sprang from the thigh of Zeus, and was hidden from the jealous malice of Hera till he was grown. Then did he set forth in victorious march through all the earth, bestowing upon men the gift of the vine, and planting his worship everywhere. But the sisters of Semele scoffed at the story of the heavenly bridegroom, and mocked at the worship of Dionysus. And when Cadmus was now old, Pentheus his grandson, reigned in his stead, and he too defied the Wine-giver, saying that he was no god, and that none should ever worship him."

¹⁹ See Silver, p.56.

²⁰ R.Y. Tyrrell, ed., *Bacchae* (London, 1892), pp.xxiii-xxiv.

rather different version she gives in the story. Woolf, as noted above, seems at times to verge on the mystical in her diary description yet always pulls back to a rationalistic account; and in the story she plays off the outmoded religious vocabulary of the locals' dress, for example, against the language of scientific calculation and expectation. From this we might gather that she concurs with Conrad in asserting a rationalism capable of embracing experiences of a "mystical" nature, and that her writing shows the tension to which this embrace is occasionally stretched and tested. Tyrrell's counter to the Palinodic interpretations of Euripides is therefore of interest: he argues that on both rationalism and religion *The Bacchae* is consistent with Euripides' other and earlier plays.

We have not in the *Bacchae* any change in the point of view from which Euripides regards the old gods of the heathen mythology. As Aphrodite is no mere personal goddess, but a great factor in the order of the world, and a source of happiness and joy; so Dionysus is not only the god of wine, but a higher personification of passion in religion, and joy in life; and the Hippolytus as well as the *Bacchae* teaches that we should not neglect these sources of joy, enthusiasm [sic], and passion, as for instance in v. 107 ... "we should not neglect to make use of the privileges which the gods give us".²¹

In the *Symposium*, Plato suggests a similarly positive interpretation of the passions and actually connects them with the life of the intellect: "'He who, ascending from these earthly things under the influence of true love,'" Diotima informs Socrates, "'begins to perceive that beauty, is not far from the end. And the true order of going, or being led by another, to the things of love, is to begin from the beauties of earth and mount upwards for the sake of that other beauty'".²² In *Philebus* Socrates asks "Is there not an absurdity in arguing that there is

²¹ Ibid., pp.xxiv-xxv.

²² Plato, *Symposium* 211b, *The Dialogues of Plato*, translated by Benjamin Jowett, vol.2 (Great Britain, 1970, p.225).

nothing good or noble in the body, or in anything else, but that good is in the soul only ...?"²³ Such a model of reason opens up possibilities for criticism of male rationality as dangerously lacking a bodily dimension. The assignment of the bodily to the 'feminine', we might conclude, is a symptom of this false reason. Lloyd demonstrates the paths through philosophy this strand of thought has taken, and notes that the "divided-soul model, when it is later brought into conjunction with male-female symbolism, produces much more complex relationships between femininity and Reason than the alignments of femaleness and matter, maleness and Reason".²⁴ The "genderization of the ideals [of rationality]", however, has ensured the exclusion of the feminine from "past ideals of Reason as the sovereign human character trait".²⁵

Tyrrell points out that the *Bacchae* is not Euripides' only play which "reprobates ... *rationalism, das vernunftelnende princip*", or in which "overwiseness, and 'too great refinements' ... are condemned". He fully acknowledges that "in truth the Bacchic worship may be described as the negation of rationality, and as passionate sympathy with nature.... and its condemnation of overwiseness, may serve as a fair statement of the moral purport of the play."²⁶ This is not to suggest that the play itself therefore constitutes a total rejection of rationalism. Tyrrell provides a helpful delineation of Euripides' rationalism, pertinent to Woolf's own position.

While the Sophists as a class apply rationalism to the received facts of belief themselves, or leave their moral deformities untouched, recognising in them neither ethical import nor instruments of regeneration, Euripides

²³ Philebus 55b, Jowett, vol.3, p.102.

²⁴ Lloyd, p.22

²⁵ Ibid., p.37.

²⁶ Tyrrell, pp.xxv-xxvi.

and Sokrates, on the other hand, accept these facts, but in conformity with this basis endeavour to raise and deepen popular views. This standpoint is ... found in his earlier as well as his later plays; for instance in Bacch. 1341-1346, where we have Tiresias' answer to the charge of immorality which Pentheus brings against the Bacchic orgies. The uneducated man would have defended the immorality incurred in the service of the god; the Sophist would have uprooted the belief which entailed unchastity: Euripides does neither, he leaves the belief untouched, and shows that unchastity is not its necessary concomitant.²⁷

Euripides' particular brand of rationalism lies in his undertaking of raising and deepening popular views. Woolf's writing shows a similar project in her continuous engagement with, adjustment and adaptation of common views. This does not mean that she concurs with patriarchy, for example, but that she appropriates its vocabulary for her feminist opposition to it. Thus in the context of the eclipse, she does not banish druidical interpretations altogether, as a militant rationalist or scientist might, but instead acknowledges and adapts them to her own model of rationalism. The Maenads, it must be noted, represent a very difficult challenge to this model. If feminism is to reclaim reason, it must come to terms with its legacy of a masculine rationality, transcending and excluding an always (and already) feminized principle of bodily "enthusiasm". In her story of the eclipse, Woolf successfully responds to this challenge by her sophisticated manipulation of light, dark, and colour.

²⁷ Tyrrell,, pp.xxviii-xxx. He continues: " It is the neglect of this distinction between the Sophistic and Euripidean point of view which has fostered the opinion that the Bacchae is a recoil from the *Aufklärung* of his earlier works ... whereas in truth the rationalism which he condemns in the Bacchae is the rationalism of the Sophic stand-point, and that he condemns in the Medea and the Hippolytus, written thirty years before; and the rationalism of his earlier works is the Sokrato-Euripidean rationalism of which clear traces may be found in the Bacchae, the work of the poet's extreme age."

If the mortal flesh of woman is overcome, in the story of Semele, by a masculine and divine light, then the story of the Bacchae and the occurrence of the solar eclipse suggest the opposite state of affairs. According to Frazer, eclipses are attributed in some cultures to a monster biting or attacking the sun;²⁸ and "When the sun and moon were in eclipse, the Tahitians supposed that the luminaries were in the act of copulation".²⁹ In such interpretations the shadow obliterating the sun represents the physical and sexual overcoming by something feminine and bestial, of the masculine, metaphysical, spiritual, or intellectual.

6.5 The colours

In "The Sun and the Fish" Woolf has so far described not the actual eclipse, but the obfuscation of the sun by clouds, and the beginning of the eclipse as discerned behind the cloud cover. At some point the eclipsing shadow of the moon, the umbra, takes over from the clouds in the pursuit of the sun (but the moon itself is not mentioned). It is as if the clouds have finally caught "him" so that the shadow might finish "him" off. The shadow has a much more dramatic effect than the clouds. It too is obscured by the cloud cover, yet its effects upon the landscape are clearly visible to the observers. Most notable is the draining away of colour, suggesting the loss of the victim's lifeblood at the moment of the kill. But if the sun is the victim, the land itself appears to be the corpse:

... all the colour began to go from the moor. The blue turned to purple; the white became livid as at the approach of a violent but windless storm. Pink faces went green, and it became colder than ever. This was the

²⁸ Frazer, vol. 1, p.311; vol.10, pp.70, 162.

²⁹ Ibid., vol., 4, p.73.

defeat of the sun, then, and this was all, so we thought, turning in disappointment from the dull cloud blanket in front of us to the moors behind. They were livid, they were purple; but suddenly one became aware that something more was about to happen; something unexpected, awful, unavoidable. The shadow growing darker and darker over the moor was like the heeling over of a boat, which instead of righting itself at the critical moment, turns a little further and then a little further on its side; and suddenly capsizes. So the light turned and heeled over and went out. This was the end. The flesh and blood of the world was dead; only the skeleton was left. It hung beneath us, a frail shell; brown; dead; withered. (CDB, pp.196-197)

The most startling difference between this and the diary account is the range of colours mentioned. The diary describes the fading of colour when the eclipse begins, and the only colours mentioned are the blue of the sky behind the observers, and the "scrumble of red & black" of the clouds and the valley. In the story, however, Woolf introduces a very different palette: "The blue turned purple; the white became livid.... Pink faces went green ... the moors were purple". First we have blue, white, and pink; and then these colours turn to purple, (a "livid") white, and green. Purple, white, and green, then, are the colours Woolf selects to accompany "the defeat of the sun". Purple, white and green have a very special significance for feminists, and most certainly for feminists of Woolf's time.

The best known suffrage colours are the purple, white and green of the WSPU [the Women's Social and Political Union]. These were chosen in May 1908 in preparation for the Hyde Park demonstration on 21 June.... White was for purity, green for hope and purple for dignity Purple was sometimes given as 'loyalty' or 'courage' and green as 'youth' or 'regeneration'.³⁰

These colours became indelibly linked with the militant Women's Social and Political Union in particular and "the

³⁰ Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (London, 1987), p.265. Tickner quotes from Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, "The Purple, White and Green", *Programme, Prince's Skating Rink Exhibition* (London, 1909).

cause" in general.³¹ They were by no means the only colours of feminism, but they became by far the most famous. The colours were first thought of by Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence in preparation for the "Woman's Sunday" rally of 21 June 1908. They "were not selected until the middle of May, but according to Sylvia Pankhurst had 'achieved a nation-wide familiarity before the month was out'. By the 21st they were marked indelibly and politically on the public mind: to see them was to be reminded of the WSPU and its campaign; they were its tricolour, its regimental colours".³² Pethick-Lawrence describes the intended impact and particular symbolism of the colours. She proclaims the purple, white and green as "a new language of which the words are so simple that their meaning can be understood by the most uninstructed and most idle of passers-by in the street".³³ It is precisely this "new language" of feminist colours that Woolf seems to articulate here in her revised account of the eclipse, and to take up elsewhere in her work; and this feminist language of colours, I suggest, she locks onto a literary sense of Post-Impressionist colourism.³⁴ Pethick-Lawrence's particular gloss on each colour is worth noting:

Purple as everyone knows is the royal colour. It stands for the royal blood that flows in the veins of every

³¹ See illustrations I and II.

³² Tickner, p.94.

³³ Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence, "The Purple, White and Green", *Programme*, Prince's Skating Rink Exhibition (London, 1909); quoted by Tickner, *ibid.*.

³⁴ It might be appropriate to recall here that my argument assumes Woolf's account of the eclipse colours in "The Sun and the Fish" to be a reworking of her diary account, and not a fresh attempt to recall the event at a year's distance. Of course, it may be argued that she is merely reporting what she saw, but I suggest that the revisions I have been closely examining do betray a careful attention to the gendering of her terms. In any case, my interpretation is not based solely on the detection of suffrage colours, which if present (as I strongly suspect) may confirm it, but is developed from careful examination of Woolf's engagement of colour in relation to light and shade.



THE

SUFFRAGETTE



EDITED BY
 CHRISTABEL
 PANKHURST.

1^D

WEEKLY.

H.M. Dallas.

suffragette, the instinct of freedom and dignity ...
 white stands for purity in private and public life ...
 green is the colour of hope and the emblem of spring.³⁵

Lisa Tickner points out that the meaning of the colours was not fixed, and shifted according to context.

White stood for purity 'in public as well as private life'. Green stood for hope, signifying that the "green fire" of a new spring tide has kindled life in a movement apparently dead'. Purple stood for dignity, 'for the growing sense on the part of the womanhood of the world, of that self-reverence and self-respect which renders acquiescence to political subjection impossible and gives determination to women's claim for freedom'. Purple was sometimes glossed as 'loyalty' or 'courage' in the press, and green as 'youth' or 'regeneration'. So long as the concepts were positive the exact niceties of the symbolism were less important than the decorative impact of the colours and their effect in unifying the cause.³⁶

Tickner rightly stresses the general sense of the positive and unifying effects of these colours. Pethick-Lawrence's particular definition of the green as "the 'green fire' of a new spring tide" has significance for Woolf's special aesthetic attention in "The Sun and the Fish". This fire stands as an alternative source of enlightenment to that of the sun: a fire of the land, of the body, an orgiastic fire even. We might read Woolf's diary account of "the fields aburn with June grasses" with this in mind. It is important to emphasize the sense of "regeneration" which all these colours are said to bring, and the idea that with them feminists were repainting, reinventing, and restructuring the world anew.

A recent exhibition,³⁷ celebrating the enormous popularity of these colours, demonstrates their massive

³⁵ Pethick-Lawrence, editorial, *Votes For Women*, 1908; quoted by Diane Atkinson, *Suffragettes in the Purple, White and Green*, London 1906-14, Museum of London (London, 1992), p.15.

³⁶ Tickner, p.294.

³⁷ Museum of London, *Suffragettes in the Purple, White and Green*, London 1906-14, (September 1992-June 1993).

impact on the business world, which "quickly became aware of the purchasing power of middle-class suffragettes", and produced a wide range of merchandise bearing the colours: "the suffragettes ... turned fashion and consumerism to brilliant political advantage."³⁸ The exhibition confirms the lasting impact of the purple, white and green on public consciousness; and it may not be unreasonable to suppose that when "The Sun and the Fish" appeared in 1928, in the year of the full enfranchisement of women, the suffragette colours would not have been forgotten.³⁹

Woolf's (perhaps playful) introduction of potentially suffrage colours at the moment of eclipse suggests a feminist interpretation of the event.⁴⁰ The sun's masculine subjectivity may now be defined against the militant feminism of the suffrage tricolour, where previously "he" was read in opposition to a subordinate feminine/feminized landscape.⁴¹ We may note an historical precedent to this idea in the "Women's Coronation Procession" of 1911 where suffragists engaged in a colourful "counter-hegemonic" pageantry in contrast to official celebrations of renewed male sovereignty.⁴²

The victory over the sun does not incur the deconstruction of the opposition light/dark. The victorious element is not the darkness, or the shadow,

³⁸ Atkinson, *Suffragettes in the Purple, White and Green*.

³⁹ In May 1928 the House of Lords passed the Bill extending the franchise to include all women over the age of twenty-one. This was known as the "Flapper vote", since the suffrage victory of 1918 had only extended the franchise to women over the age of thirty. See, Roger Fulford, *Votes for Women, The Story of a Struggle* (London, 1957), p.306.

⁴⁰ Chapter 14 of this thesis (on *The Waves*) discusses Woolf's possible references to the pictorial symbolism of suffrage colours in her 1931 essay, "Memories of a Working Women's Guild".

⁴¹ These factors suggest that whether or not the colours are specifically suffragist, they may still suggest a prismatic feminist intervention.

⁴² Tickner, p.57.

which Woolf still retains as ominous, but the colours, which are actually refracted light. The shadow, when it comes, is still "something unexpected, awful, unavoidable", and the light's extinction is still seen as "the end".

The colours' appearance at this moment in Woolf's story of the eclipse may not be accidental, especially if we consider the feminist context of its first publication.⁴³ Interestingly, the name of Lady Rhondda, the founder and editor *Time and Tide*, crops up in Woolf's diary where she records a conversation with Molly Hamilton.

Lady R. who is a good able superficial woman, had psychologised her divorce proceedings all the time, which was boring Molly said; & Lady R. is a feminist, & Molly is not. But the Lady Rs. ought to be feminists, I said; & you must encourage them, for if the rich women will do it we neednt; & its the feminists who will drain off this black blood of bitterness which is poisoning us all.⁴⁴

These views on the role of feminists are highly pertinent to Woolf's feminist account of the eclipse. She adapts for a feminist project traditional notions of women's special relationship with darkness and pollution, using the imagery of a sinister menstrual flow: feminists are to "drain off this black blood of bitterness which is poisoning us all". Coincidentally, Lady Rhondda identifies in her essay for the Hogarth Press, her eponymous "leisured women" as the universal source of poison: "It is the women in the home, the leisured and semi-leisured women, who constitute a positive danger,

⁴³ "The Sun and the Fish", was first published in (and possibly commissioned by) the feminist magazine, *Time and Tide*, in February 1928, as noted above. As a playful gesture to her editor, Woolf's inclusion of the colours may still be taken seriously. After all, readers still take seriously her feminist classic, *A Room of One's Own* which is not without humour or playfulness. For discussion of the devastating power of Woolf's comedy, see, Marshall, "Slaying the Angel and the Patriarch: The Grinning Woolf", *Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 15 1-3 (1988) 149-177.

⁴⁴ Woolf, February 1922, *D*, II, p.167.

who do, in fact, act as a focus of poison to the whole of society."⁴⁵ These views on "leisured women" coincide with those made popular by Thorstein Veblen, who identifies the pernicious role capitalism has marked out for women:

the wife, who was at the outset the drudge and chattel of the man, both in fact and in theory - the producer of goods for him to consume - has become the ceremonial consumer of goods which he produces. But she still quite unmistakably remains his chattel in theory; for the habitual rendering of vicarious leisure and consumption is the abiding mark of the unfree servant.⁴⁶

Veblen reminds us that even women who are "a focus of poison", and who are guilty of complicity with patriarchy, are still its victims.

It is not clear whether Woolf's "us all" speaks of all society, or of all women, not just feminists. We can read this imagery, nevertheless, into Woolf's account of the eclipse, where the "scrumble of black & red" has been drawn off and replaced by the suffrage tricolour. This also fits with the myths about poisonous air at times of eclipse, noted above. There is, then, an analogy between this image, associated by Woolf with Lady Rhondda, and the image of colour draining from the cloud and moor in the story written by Woolf for Rhondda's magazine. Feminism, we may conclude, is something which purges "black blood", and therefore is to be regarded, in view of its positive and bright colours, as a source of enlightenment. This reading may be upheld by the subsequent horror, in the story, at the arrival of the engulfing shadow. Woolf's recommendation to "encourage ... the rich women" as active feminists suggests a strategy of political agitation from the top of the social scale down and it echoes Rhondda's own agenda,

⁴⁵ Rhondda, *Leisured Women*, pp.56-57.

⁴⁶ Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York, 1899, 1912; 1963), p.69.

noted earlier, to influence the political élite, "the inner group, the keystone people who ultimately directed [the] multitude". This is alarming in its implications of leaving intact the structure of the *status quo* and all other social injustices than those to women; but as a temporary measure, Woolf implies, it is temptingly expedient. This idea of attacking patriarchy at its highest level fits very neatly with the story of the eclipse, where the sun may be read as the pinnacle emblem of patriarchy, the metaphor of male reason and subjectivity. To disarm patriarchy at the top, then, is to eliminate it (and perhaps therefore the *status quo*) entirely.

The suffragette tricolour may provide a link to another feminist connected with Woolf's experience of the eclipse: Ray Strachey. As noted above, Ray Strachey was among Woolf's companions to witness the eclipse. We might read her presence as being abstracted into this feminist reference, given that Woolf erases all references to the individuals comprising the common "we" observing the eclipse. Such a connection would suggest strong feminist allegiances already at the scene, and not just the retrospective imposition of a feminist slant. In so far as the tricolour has come to stand for feminism and women's suffrage in general, this connection stands; but if specific reference is being made to the WSPU and Lady Rhondda's brand of feminism, then Ray Strachey may not fit so readily with such associations.

Two observations by Strachey illustrate this point. The first is her description of the violent tactics favoured by the militant activists. Strachey herself was a law-abiding suffragist so her account is not altogether sympathetic.

The plan of committing technical assaults was accordingly adopted, and Mrs Pankhurst herself led the way by striking Inspector Jarvis upon the face at the door of the House of Commons. Her victim perfectly understood why she did this, and admitted it as he arrested her; but from the Press a howl of indignation arose. Screaming, scratching, biting, kicking and yelling were attributed to the militants, and a flood of generalities about the nature of the female sex filled leading articles, where for the most part it was now maintained that women had proved themselves to be for ever unfitted to vote. The militants paid no attention to this, and a policy of stone-throwing followed, in which shop fronts in Regent Street, as well as public buildings, were attacked.⁴⁷

The militants are shown to court cheerfully their reputation as Maenads, whereas the suffragists see such actions as self-defeating and as playing into the hands of the enemy. "It seemed to many people" continues Strachey, "that the militants made a sort of inverted appeal to the privileges of sex. ... They felt that the suffragettes nicely symbolised the absurdity of the whole ideal, and each manifestation of incomplete rowdyism gave them fresh joy".⁴⁸ Such behaviour, it seems, merely complies with chauvinist stereotypes of wild Bacchanalian women. But on the other hand, it kept the cause right in the centre of the public arena.

Strachey's other observation concerns the suffrage demonstrations, beginning with the "Mud March" of February 1907, which was "so called because of the mud, slush and fog through which 3000 women trudged from Hyde Park Corner to Exeter Hall".⁴⁹ Strachey emphasizes the marvellous spectacle of these marches.

These years saw the first open-air Demonstration, the Mud March of 1907, and also the elaborate and beautiful processions which followed it. These demonstrations owed their picturesque and dignified quality to the skilled work of the Artists' League for Women's Suffrage, which had been organised by Mary Lowndes, a member of the

⁴⁷ Strachey, *The Cause*, p.313.

⁴⁸ Strachey, *ibid.*.

⁴⁹ Tickner, p.74.

Committee of the London Society. Under the direction of this League banners and emblems of real beauty were made for the societies all over the country, and when these were skilfully marshalled together in London the effect was something quite new in political demonstrations.⁵⁰

Strachey reminds us of the tremendous visual impact of the suffrage colours on public politics, and also of the central role played by artists in these demonstrations. Strachey credits them with impressive organizational and creative skills, implying them to be the main architects of the events. This context provides a very important key to understanding Woolf's interest in painting techniques and the visual arts. We may no longer accept the aesthetic to be a realm removed from politics. When Woolf talks of repainting, as she does in both diary and story accounts, we may now see a precedent for this creative act in the work of the Artists' League for Women's Suffrage.

Diane Filby Gillespie makes the rare (for Woolf criticism) connection between "the suffrage movement and the avant-garde artists, both of whom challenged the status quo and increasingly aroused public indignation".⁵¹ She does not, however, refer to the suffrage artists themselves or to their creations. Instead she concentrates on the suffrage movement's acts of destruction:

The violent acts of the more militant suffragists, which included the hacking of paintings, coincided with more frequent displays of avant-garde art. The Vorticist writers and painters asked, condescendingly, that the women discriminate in their acts of violence so that they did not "destroy a / Good Picture by Accident," but they commended the militants for their bravery and vitality.⁵²

⁵⁰ Strachey, *Women's Suffrage and Women's Service*, p.21.

⁵¹ Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts*, p.17.

⁵² *Ibid.*; Gillespie quotes from "Our Vortex", *Blast* 1-2 (1914-15), pp.151-52.

This offers a limited perspective. The suffrage banners, the work of the Suffrage Atelier and the Artists' League for Women's Suffrage, testify to the fact that the feminist activists were involved in the arts not just as iconoclasts, destroying art produced by patriarchs, but also as creators of a positive new feminist aesthetic.

The Mud March itself, however, does not provide a straightforward link between Woolf's tricolour and Ray Strachey. Tickner informs us that it was "the first open-air demonstration the *non-militants* had ever held".⁵³ Therefore the banners described by Strachey did not carry the purple, white, and green of the WSPU, which in any case were not thought of until the following year. The predominant colours on the Mud March were the red and white of the NUWSS. By 1909 these, "the colours of the greatest society - the law-abiding, non party society",⁵⁴ were also transformed into a tricolour - red, white and green. But this was not the only alternative to the purple, white and green, as Tickner reveals in her carefully researched Appendix on Suffrage Colours. Every shade of suffragist (and even anti-suffragist) opinion had its own set of colours. For example:

The colours of the Artists' Suffrage League were blue and silver; of the Suffrage Atelier, blue, orange and black; of the Women's Conservative Union, blue, white and gold; of the Actresses' Franchise League, pink and green; of the Writers' Suffrage League, black, white and gold; of the Church League, white and gold; and of Sylvia Pankhurst's East London Federation, purple, white, green and red. The colours of the National League for Opposing Women's Suffrage were white, pink and black.⁵⁵

The suffrage movement was well aware, furthermore, and indeed made use of, the traditional gender associations

⁵³ Tickner, p.74 (my italics).

⁵⁴ *The Common Cause*, 25 November 1909, p.433.

⁵⁵ Tickner, p.265. My reading of Woolf draws on the feminist import of colourism in general, as well as on the particular political significance of purple, white and green.

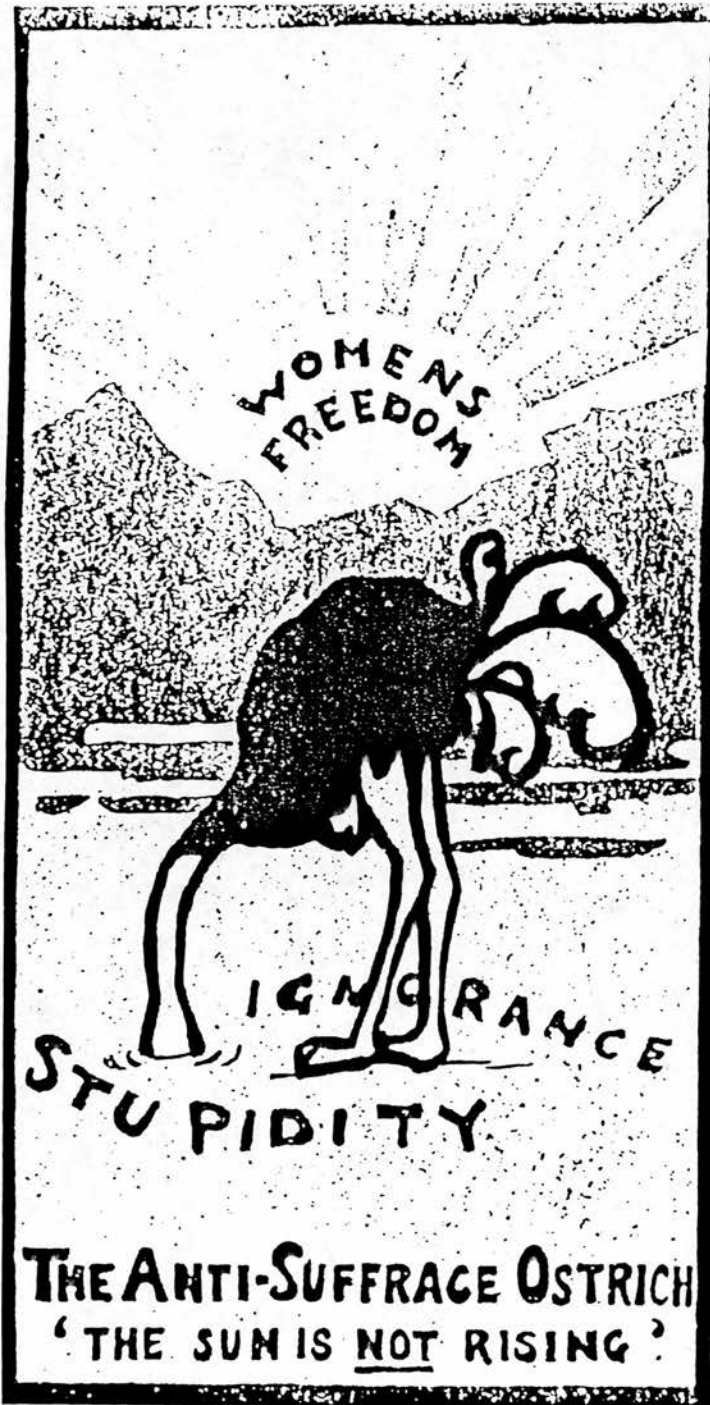
of the imagery of light and shade, which this new language of colour subverts. The Suffrage Atelier Broadsheet (1913), for example, shows a poster design implementing traditional chiaroscuro. The left side of the picture shows a man seated in a chair, labelled "government", illuminated by a lamp held by another man. Around its halo is written "suffrage". The right side of the picture shows a group of desolate women, labelled "sweated labour", lurking in the shadow cast by the men's light, behind the seat of government. The light of patriarchy keeps women in darkness, outside the luminous realm of citizenship. Beneath the picture is the legend: "IN THE SHADOW".⁵⁶

In contrast to this, is the suffrage cartoon, "The Anti-Suffrage Ostrich", which takes over the image of the sun as a symbol of women's suffrage. In the foreground is an ostrich with its head buried in the ground marked "ignorance" and "stupidity". Behind it is the sun rising with the words "women's freedom" emblazoned on it. The caption reads: "The sun is not rising".⁵⁷ Woolf's colonization of the sun with suffrage colours is very much in keeping with this image. It is in fact a common motif in suffrage iconography: the sense of a new dawn with the rise of women's rights fits perfectly. See, for example, Ernestine Mills's postcard of 1910, lampooning "The New Mrs Partington", who was a leading anti-suffragist. It depicts her as she "hopelessly tries to sweep back the advancing tide of the demand by Liberal women, medical women, taxpayers, etc. for the vote: 'Somehow the tide keeps rising!'"⁵⁸ The sun rising over

⁵⁶ The Suffrage Atelier Broadsheet (1913), Museum of London; Tickner, p.22.

⁵⁷ "The anti-suffrage ostrich", *Votes for Women*, Living History Fact Pact, No. 1, edited by Diane Atkinson (Huntingdon, 1992), item 22; see illustration III.

⁵⁸ Ernestine Mills, "The New Mrs Partington", c.1910; Atkinson, *Suffragettes in the Purple, White and Green*, exhibit 118, p.71; see illustration IV.



The anti suffrage ostrich



THE NEW MRS PARTINGTON (OF THE ANTI SUFFRAGE SOCIETY)
 "SOMEHOW THE TIDE KEEPS RISING!"

EDW. S. MILLS

this suffragette ocean is emblazoned with "votes for women". Woolf's analogous use of a feminist sun in her key solar story, "The Sun and the Fish", might also suggest a reading of the goddess/woman's hold on the sun in *The Waves* as a similar icon of feminism.

Given Ray Strachey's hostility to the suffragettes, and given the rainbow of alternative suffrage colours, it would perhaps be a mistake to connect her name specifically with the purple, white and green of the WSPU. On the other hand, since these colours were the best known and most instantly recognizable, they may also transcend their immediate associations with militant suffragettes like Lady Rhondda, to embrace all shades of suffragism. We might now read Woolf's story of the eclipse as a feminist allegory; but at the same time Woolf's use of these colours must be considered very carefully. It may make sense to read the tricolour, since it appears at the point of the sun's violent defeat, as specifically referring to the militant tendency. This renders pertinent Woolf's comment on the function of Lady Rhondda's brand of feminism as a necessary (but not permanent) detoxicant. Once upper class militant feminism has purged society of "this black blood of bitterness", the way is clear for other forms of feminism to flourish. Ray Strachey's position is not neglected or countered in "The Sun and the Fish"; it is still in attendance, but the moment of triumph over the "sun" seems to belong primarily to the suffragettes.

CHAPTER VII

ELEGIACS: CAPSIZING LIGHT AND RETURNING COLOUR

The moment of triumph, however, was for many feminists hollow. Woolf's account registers a sense of anti-climax which also came with the franchise: "This was the defeat of the sun, then, and this was all, so we thought, turning in disappointment from the dull cloud blanket in front of us to the moors behind". (CDB, p.196) The final achievement of the franchise was, indeed, for many women, of little importance compared to the gains they had already made during the period of the Great War:

many women who lived through that period saw the War itself as overriding their interest in women's suffrage. With the War came the opportunity for them to achieve what they had struggled for: entry into what had been seen before as male centres of power.¹

Citizenship, then, had already been seized by women by the time it was actually granted them. Woolf records exactly these sentiments when she marks the historic moment in her diary on Friday 11 January 1918: "Another sedentary day, which must however be entered for the sake of recording that the Lords have passed the Suffrage Bill. I don't feel much more important - perhaps slightly so. It's like a knighthood; might be useful to impress people one despises. But there are other aspects of it naturally". (D, I, p.104)² Woolf's remarks about Lady Rhondda, however, come four years after this historic moment, suggesting that Woolf did not see the feminist battle as won, not only because full enfranchisement was yet to happen. The twenties was a period when women were being urged to relinquish their recent gains in the

¹ Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness* (London, 1990), p.14.

² Compare *N&D*, p.176: "'It'll be such a great day,' said Mrs. Seal, with a toss of her locks. 'A great day, not only for us but for civilization.'"

public sphere and return to domestic duties. It was still a man's world. The sun was still masculine.

7.1 Priapic light

Indeed, in some literary circles the sun was positively priapic, as revealed in another piece of fiction to emerge in 1928.

"Let me see you!"

He dropped the shirt and stood still, looking towards her. The sun through the low window sent a beam that lit up his thighs and slim belly, and the erect phallus rising darkish and hot-looking from the little cloud of vivid gold-red hair. She was startled and afraid.³

D.H. Lawrence's achievement here, we might say, is to invest the Apollonian sun of the intellect, the transcendental spirit, with the Dionysian sexual body. He inscribes the object in the subject. While such a manoeuvre may be interpreted as liberational, here it seems merely libertine, and is certainly not liberational for women. Kate Millett memorably sums up his anti-feminist handiwork:

Lady Chatterley's Lover is a quasi-religious tract recounting the salvation of one modern woman (the rest are irredeemably "plastic" and "celluloid") through the offices of the author's personal cult, "the mystery of the phallus." This passage, a revelation of the sacrament itself, is properly the novel's very holy of holies - a transfiguration scene with atmospheric clouds and lightning, and a pentecostal sunbeam (the sun is phallic to Lawrence's apprehension) illuminating the ascension of the deity "thick and arching" before the reverent eyes of the faithful.⁴

³ D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928); see Washington State University Catalogue, V/s VIII 5: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, 1928, 1st ed. limited to 1000 copies. Copy no. 578 signed D.H. Lawrence, privately printed Florence.

⁴ Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London, 1972), p.238.

Lawrence, it seems, is not content with the chiaroscuro of Genesis which divides light from dark, man from woman, spirit from body, subject from object; he must appropriate the object, the body, the darkness for the masculine too. Elsewhere, Lawrence is anxious to defend the body from the ravages of the Renaissance light of reason, to which he is most hostile:

Since the Renaissance there has been the striving for the Light, and the escape from the Flesh, from the Body, the Object.... In painting, the Spirit, the Word, the Love, all that was represented by John, has appeared as light. Light is the constant symbol of Christ in the New Testament. It is light, actual sunlight or the luminous quality of day which has infused more and more into the defined body, fusing away the outline, absolving the concrete reality, making a marriage, an embrace between the two things, light and object."⁵

Lawrence does see the body, however, as that "which connects us directly to the female",⁶ whereas "the pure male is himself almost an abstraction, almost bodiless".⁷

"The erect phallus rising darkish" is a Nietzschean gesture of bodily imperialism, encompassing both ends of the spectrum, light and dark, and asserting the physical. The woman is displaced altogether, a "startled" onlooker to a Narcissus, the masculine subject reflecting on the masculine object. The sense of immanent masculinity in both halves of traditional binary oppositions is not at odds with the biblical model, if we take into account Ruth Padel's observation that such oppositions are designated by masculine perception in the first place.

Given this intensely physical, masculine resonance to the image of the sun, feminism might understandably seek to banish it altogether from the vocabulary of "the new

⁵ D.H. Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, edited by Bruce Steel (Cambridge, 1983), p.82.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.71.

language". Woolf's strategy in "The Sun and the Fish", after this moment of eclipse, is indeed to banish the word, yet she retains positive associations for "the light". After "the defeat of the sun" is announced, the account of the eclipse does not use the word "sun" again (nor, therefore, its masculine pun), although it does almost appear in the entirely different context of the story's final paragraph.

Woolf next describes the disappearance and re-emergence of "the light", which is at no point signalled by the masculine pronoun. This change of vocabulary is highly noticeable: up to the eclipse the sun is persistently personified as male; afterwards all gender associations have been erased from "the light". If Woolf's strategy were a feminine version of D.H. Lawrence's, this would be the moment at which to inscribe "the sun" with the valorized female body, instead of the male. She does not do this. Even the suffragette tricolour is not permanent, for "suddenly one became aware that something more was about to happen; something unexpected, awful, unavoidable".

What happens next is the capsizing in tandem of light and dark: "The shadow growing darker and darker over the moor was like the heeling over of a boat, which, instead of righting itself at the critical moment, turns a little further and then a little further on its side; and suddenly capsizes. So the light turned and heeled over and went out." Here shadow and light are inextricably linked. The defeat of the sun and the appearance of the tricolour have initiated a chain reaction. The diary entry's brief statement, "the light sank & sank", is turned dramatically in the story into a full-blown simile of a sailing, or rather sinking, boat. Woolf's insertion of this boat image right at the moment of the eclipse, speaks significantly both to recent feminist events and

to the literary canon. The image may be connected to the artistic "spectacle" of the suffrage movement, and to the tradition of pastoral elegy.

7.2 Handicapped

In February 1909 the Artists' Suffrage League held a competition for "the best design for a poster, suitable for elections"⁸. Duncan Grant who was later to live with Vanessa, and who first met Virginia Stephen with Vanessa and Clive Bell in 1907,⁹ was the winner of the competition (jointly with W.F. Winters) with his entry entitled "Handicapped" which, according to Tickner, "remains one of the most successful and striking of suffrage designs".¹⁰ It may also be used as a gloss to the image of the boat in Woolf's eclipse sequence. The poster depicts, above the legend "HANDICAPPED", a sturdy young woman rowing a boat in a very rough sea; behind her on the horizon is the Palace of Westminster; above her, gliding along the crest of a towering wave is a young man languishing in a sailing boat, powered by wind-inflated sails on whose canvas is boldly written "VOTES".¹¹ Grant's source of inspiration is of further interest:

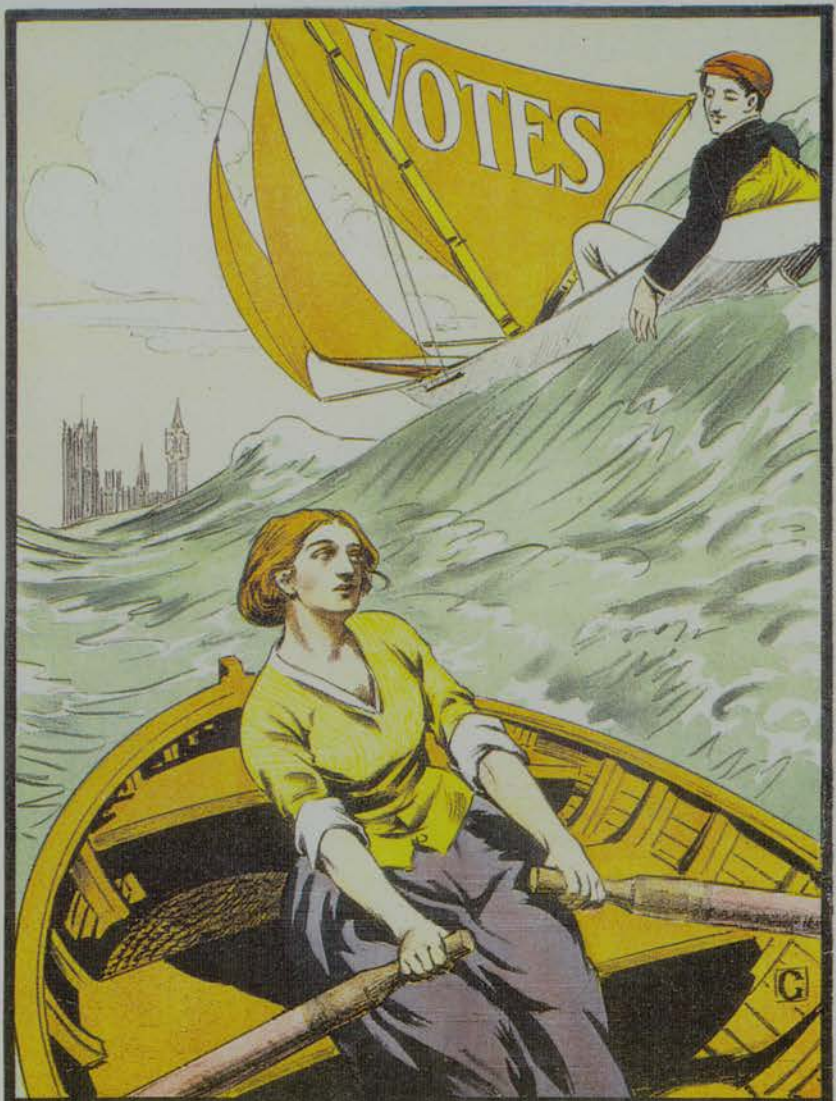
The theme of 'Handicapped' - described in the *Common Cause* as featuring 'a stalwart young women of the Grace Darling type' - seems to have been proposed by the League's secretary, Barbara Forbes. On the strength of a satisfactory submission in the 1907 competition Grant was encouraged to send in again, and with some diffidence ('good ones are hard to find') Barbara Forbes suggested the subject: 'A man in a sailing boat, (the sail represents the Vote). A woman with only oars - out in the sea of Labour.' A caption to underline the moral - 'Britons why handicap the weaker vessel' - was to run

⁸ *Votes For Women*, 18 February 1909, p.365; Tickner, p.16.

⁹ Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell* (London, 1983), p.65.

¹⁰ Tickner, p.18.

¹¹ See Tickner, colour plate 1; and illustration V.



HANDICAPPED!

CARL HENTSCHEL. L^{td} 102, 103 & 104 FLEET ST. E.C.

PUBLISHED BY THE ARTISTS' SUFFRAGE LEAGUE

below, but must have seemed redundant and was never used.¹²

If Woolf's narrative of the eclipse makes use of the suffrage tricolour, possibly it may also refer to this other famous suffrage allegory. Whether the connection is deliberate or not, Grant's poster provides helpful evidence of the kind of metaphorical currency in feminist and suffrage circles. It may make sense of the boating simile in "The Sun and the Fish": once universal suffrage is achieved, after the defeat of the patriarchal sun, both vessels (man's and woman's) sink because both are now inappropriate expressions of the new power and gender relations. But before we allow them to go under, it is important to understand in greater detail how these relations are delineated in Grant's poster.

The poster presents a clear analysis of gender and power structures in the opposition of man and woman. Not only does the image of two separate boats indicate the discrimination between the sexes (the man has something denied to the woman); but it also demonstrates that while the man has merely to guide his boat, the woman has first to generate the power for hers. On further consideration, we might note that the man's sails harness the natural power of the wind, whereas the woman's boat is powered by her own labour; and from this we might also read a division of labour - the woman's status is that of labourer, and the man's that of overlord. This patriarchal model regards women as natural resources rather than as fellow citizens; they may be seen as an invisible energy source like the wind. Grant's allegory, then, although it represents man and woman in different boats, also suggests that the woman is in a sense carrying the man. The redundant caption may have cast her ironically as the "weaker vessel", but in the final

¹² Tickner, p.18.

version of the poster she is without doubt a figure of strength, about to overcome her own exploitation.

The boat's vehicular qualities make it a metaphor of metaphor itself. We may interpret the man as tenor of his vehicle, whereas the woman is associated with the vehicular power of hers, and is therefore in a sense both tenor and vehicle. There is then an air of feminist heroism in this Grace Darling type woman of strength and direction. The main purpose of the woman's determined labour with the oars is, of course, the achievement of citizenship - her destination is parliament. She seems an awe-inspiring paragon of virtuous hard work and self-sufficiency. The man, on the other hand, somewhat decadently relies on the service of others. This implies that although the woman requires the assistance of a sail like his (the vote), she may not necessarily behave like him when she gets it. His yacht (together with his implied aristocratic way of life) is being overtaken by the steady toil of a labouring woman. Her labour gives her the right to vote. This may be understood as a war of class as well as gender. The point is underlined by the other winning suffrage poster, "Votes for Workers", by W.F. Winters.¹³

7.3 Light capsizing

The capsizing of the light is "something unexpected, awful, unavoidable", whereas "the defeat of the sun" itself is not explicitly lamented in the same way, and in fact seems rather disappointing. The welcome, but anti-climactic, defeat of the sun results in the horrific sinking of the light. The loss of light brings the moment of death: "This was the end. The flesh and blood

¹³ Tickner, p.18.

of the world was dead; only the skeleton was left. It hung beneath us, a frail shell; brown; dead; withered." Although, in isolation, this bears conventional interpretations of the parallel demise of sun and earth as the death of both spirit and flesh, careful analysis of Woolf's imagery, in its specific context, suggests she may offer a new set of oppositions. Whereas before the eclipse, the sun was in opposition to the land, following traditional images of the mind/body split; after it the light is actually identified as "flesh and blood" itself and is contrasted instead with "the skeleton". Instead of taking the death of the "flesh and blood of the world", then, as a consequence of the loss of light, it is possible to read it as a statement of equivalence: the light is "flesh and blood".

Light here is living, palpable material; no longer regarded as a remote force acting upon the land, it seems integral to earthly existence - part of it. There is an image from the poetry of Guillaume Apollinaire that also expresses this new bodily interpretation of light: "La fenêtre s'ouvre comme une orange/ Le beau fruit de la lumière" ["The window opens like an orange/ The beautiful fruit of light"].¹⁴ Woolf similarly gives the light a sturdiness and structural quality, which one might have expected to belong to the skeleton. The skeleton, however, is "a frail shell; brown; dead; withered." The loss of light has resulted in the dehydration of the world; it has been drained of essential fluids. It is as if Apollinaire's orange has "withered" and died. Again this confirms the palpableness of Woolf's light. Light and colour, not skeletal lines, apparently give form. Woolf's description of the recovery of light after the eclipse also emphasizes its physical vigour.

¹⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire, "Les Fenêtres" (1912), *Calligrammes, Poèmes de la paix et de la guerre (1913-1916)*, (Gallimard, 1925), p.26.

Then, with some trifling movement, this profound obeisance of the light, this stooping down and abasement of all splendour was over. Lightly, on the other side of the world, up it rose; it sprang up as if the one movement, after a second's tremendous pause, completed the other, and the light which had died here rose again elsewhere. Never was there such a sense of rejuvenescence and recovery. All the convalescences and respites of life seemed rolled into one. (CDB, p.197)

The diary version of this moment has a very different emphasis. There Woolf first describes the colours' re-emergence, heralding the return of the light: "the cloud took colour on itself again, only a sparky aetherial colour & so the light came back". In the story this sequence is reversed; the light's return precedes the description of colour. This passage may be read as a parody of the Christian resurrection. Mark Hussey, claims that this passage (from "an eccentric essay") "demonstrates the enormous scope the eclipse had in Woolf's imagination as she appropriates Christian terminology for cosmic significance".¹⁵ This is to miss some of its subtleties. Although terms such as "rose again", "rejuvenescence and recovery" support such a reading, it is undercut by Woolf's references to the elastic qualities of light. Unlike Christ, the light does not actually die: it experiences "profound obeisance ... stooping down and abasement" from which condition it springs back. It has been compressed but never extinguished. Its resurrection is physical and mechanical, not spiritual or other-worldly. We might note, for example, how the word "aetherial", present in the diary account, is missing from the lexis of the story.

¹⁵ Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World. The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus, 1986), p.166. Hussey is one of the few critics to comment on "The Sun and the Fish" (and then only in a footnote).

7.4 Black Friday

The Christian resonance is, of course, heightened by the context of the solar eclipse itself, which is traditionally offered as explanation of the sky's darkening at the moment of Christ's death on the cross. Good Friday is, for this reason, sometimes called "Black Friday". But this phrase was itself appropriated by the suffrage movement in 1910, when a demonstration ended in the violent assault of most of its participants at the hands of the police. On 18 November 1910 (the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition had opened ten days earlier on 8 November 1910), Suffragettes massed to demonstrate at Westminster against the loss of the Conciliation Bill (proposing the enfranchisement of a narrow category of women) because of the crisis in Parliament, and the imminent fall of the Asquith government.

They were met with unprecedented violence and indecent assault. The police were apparently "reluctant to make arrests" and "used instead a variety of means to force the women back: women were kicked, their arms were twisted, their noses were punched, their breasts were gripped, and knees were thrust between their legs. After six hours of struggle, 115 women and four men had been arrested. On the following day, the charges against most of those arrested were withdrawn".¹⁶ H.N. Brailsford and Dr Jessie Murray who collected depositions from many of the victims,¹⁷ conclude: "The action of which the most frequent complaint is made is variously described as

¹⁶ Andrew Rosen, *Rise Up, Women! The Militant Campaign of the Women's Social and Political Union 1903-1914* (London and Boston, 1974), pp.138-139. See also Antonia Raeburn, *The Militant Suffragettes* (London, 1973), pp.152-156; Tickner, p.121.

¹⁷ H.N. Brailsford and Dr J. Murray, *The Treatment of the Women's Deputations by the Metropolitan Police, A Copy of Evidence Collected by Dr Jessie Murray and Mr H.N. Brailsford, and forwarded to the Home Office by the Conciliation Committee for Woman Suffrage, in support of its Demand for a Public Inquiry* (London, 1911).

twisting round, pinching, screwing, nipping or wringing the breast. This was often done in the most public way so as to inflict the utmost humiliation. Not only was it an offence against decency; it caused in many cases intense pain. ... The language used by some of the police while performing this action proves that it was consciously sensual."¹⁸ A testimony by a "young woman" suggests that this suffrage demonstration was remembered not for the colours of the suffrage banners, but for the colours of bruised flesh: "I was also pummelled on the chest, and my breast was clutched by one constable from the front. As a consequence, three days later I had to receive medical attention ... as my breasts were much discoloured and very painful."¹⁹

Ada Wright recalls "the humiliation" she underwent in being "continually tripped up by the police and thrown to the ground": "the next morning I found I had been photographed lying on the ground where I had been flung, and the photograph occupied the front page of the *Daily Mirror*. As soon as this became known to the Government, an order to have the picture suppressed was sent to the office of the newspaper, but they could not suppress the copies which had been sold. There were headlines: BLACK FRIDAY."²⁰ As well as its origins in the story of Christ, "Black Friday", then, also has a specifically feminist significance for the context in which Woolf first published "The Sun and the Fish".

¹⁸ Ibid., p.9; Rosen, p.139.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp.8-9; Rosen, p.139.

²⁰ Antonia Raeburn, pp.154, 155.

7.5 Elegy

Woolf retains for the story the term "obeisance", but removes the diary entry's connotations of this as a personal and individual experience.²¹ The story asserts the universal magnificence of light as "all splendour". This seems to support my earlier intertextual reading of the diary's use of "obeisance" in relation to *The Prelude*, since Woolf appears to have added another key word from the passage quoted: "splendour". Wordsworth's "auxiliar light", we remember, "on the setting sun/ Bestowed new splendour". This may be a reference to Christ, but Woolf signals as illusory any sense of this spectacle as a unifying symbol of rebirth, Christian or otherwise: "All the convalescences and respites of life seemed rolled into one".²²

There is a strong elegiac tone to this section of "The Sun and the Fish", most evident at this moment when the mourning for the lost light is transformed into joy at its reappearance. This complies with the sense of consolation that Christian elegies in particular approach "when the elegist suddenly realizes that death in this world is the entry to a higher life".²³

Weep no more, woeful shepherds, weep no more,
 For Lycidas, your sorrow, is not dead,
 Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor;
 So sinks the day-star in the ocean bed,
 And yet anon repairs his drooping head,
 And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled ore
 Flames in the forehead of the morning sky:
 So Lycidas sunk low, but mounted high,
 Through the dear might of him that walked the waves;
 Where other groves and other streams along,
 With nectar pure his oozy locks he laves,

²¹ The diary has: "I had very strongly the feeling as the light went out of some vast obeisance".

²² My italics.

²³ M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, Third Edition (New York, 1971), p.46. Abrams is commenting on Milton's *Lycidas*, lines 165-185.

And hears the unexpressive nuptial song
 In the blest kingdoms meek of joy and love.
 ... Now, Lycidas, the shepherds weep no more;
 Henceforth thou art the Genius of the shore,
 In thy large recompense, and shalt be good
 To all that wander in that perilous flood.²⁴

Woolf, from childhood on, was certainly familiar with Milton's poetry. Her father, Leslie Stephen, frequently recited Milton's poetry to his children.²⁵ Rachel Vinrace, we recall, falls fatally ill listening to a reading of Milton's *Comus*, in spite of Terence Hewet's claims that Milton can "withstand the power of the sun". (VO, p.398) In an early story, it is observed that there is "a soul of beauty that rises unchristened over the words of Milton as it rises over the Bay of Marathon yonder".²⁶ There are other discourses apart from the dominant Christian one to be recovered from his work. Woolf, furthermore, relates that when she was "waved back" from an Oxbridge college library, one of the manuscripts she hoped to examine was Milton's *Lycidas*.²⁷ This is an account in microcosm of women's exclusion from

²⁴ John Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 165-185, *The Poems of John Milton*, edited by John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York, 1978), pp.252-253.

²⁵ Leslie Stephen "always recited Milton's *Ode on the Nativity* on Christmas Night"; see Dorothy Brewster, *Virginia Woolf* (New York, 1962), p.97; see Washington State University, V/s I 61.

²⁶ Woolf, "A Dialogue upon Mount Pentelicus", *Times Literary Supplement*, 11 September 1987, p.979; CSF, p.66.

²⁷ See Woolf, AROO, p.11: "Lamb then came to Oxbridge perhaps a hundred years ago. Certainly he wrote an essay - the name escapes me - about the manuscript of one of Milton's poems which he saw here. It was *Lycidas* perhaps, and Lamb wrote how it shocked him to think it possible that any word in *Lycidas* could have been different from what it is. To think of Milton changing the words in that poem seemed to him a sort of sacrilege. This led me to remember what I could of *Lycidas* and to amuse myself with guessing which word it could have been that Milton had altered, and why. It then occurred to me that the very manuscript itself which Lamb had looked at was only a few hundred yards away, so that one could follow Lamb's footsteps across the quadrangle to that famous library where the treasure is kept." See Charles Lamb, "Oxford in the Vacation", *London Magazine* II X (October, 1820) 365-369; *The Works of Charles and Mary Lamb*, edited by E.V. Lucas (London, 1903), II, 309-311; Woolf, *Women & Fiction. The Manuscript Versions of A Room of One's Own*, transcribed and edited by S.P. Rosenbaum (Oxford, 1992), p.204.

the canon and from literary debate. A woman well versed in the male tradition, who has a sound acquaintance with *Lycidas*, the lynch pin of English elegy, and who wants to find out more, is denied access to the poem's manuscript by the academic patriarchy. Woolf later records:

"discussing [with William Butler Yeats and Walter De La Mare] what poems we could come back to unsated, I said *Lycidas*."²⁸

It is well known that Woolf came to consider her novels as elegies,²⁹ yet critical attention to this term has not prompted rigorous or sustained pastoral-elegiac readings of her work. Most critics have been content instead to allow loose definitions of elegy and rather vague personal and biographical interpretations to dominate. It is as if no more can be expected of Woolf. Her essays and fiction, however, show her to be well acquainted with the tradition of pastoral elegy and to be capable of both subtle and spectacular management of it. Pastoral elegy, moreover, is a highly appropriate genre in which to work out a new poetics, and is therefore ripe for feminist occupation. At the time of the eclipse, we might note, Woolf had just published *To the Lighthouse*, the novel whose formulation first prompted her to think explicitly in terms of elegy.³⁰

Woolf directly links elegy with a solar eclipse in "Sympathy".³¹ The narrator (mistakenly, it transpires) enters an elegiac reverie upon reading in a newspaper of the death of a friend's husband. Her first reaction is to imagine an encounter with the widow in a pastoral setting, but she soon tires of the fantasy:

²⁸ Woolf, 8 November 1930, *D*, III, p.330.

²⁹ See *D*, III, p.34.

³⁰ See *D*, III, pp.18-19.

³¹ For discussion of date see Chapter 2.

But it's all fancy. I'm not in the room with her, nor out in the wood. I'm here in London, standing by the window, holding *The Times*. But how death has changed everything! - as, in an eclipse of the sun, the colours go out, and the trees look thin as paper and livid while the shadow passes. The chill little breeze is perceptible and the roar of the traffic sounds across a gulf. Then, a moment later, distances are bridged, sounds merged; and as I look the trees though still pale, become sentinel and guardian; the sky arranges its tender background; and all remote as if exalted to the summit of a mountain in the dawn. Death has done it; death lies behind the leaves and houses and the smoke, wavering up, composing them into something still in its tranquillity before it has taken on any of the disguises of life. (CSF, pp.109-110)

This is in keeping with the idea of the solar eclipse as symbolic of the death of a male subject. The loss of colour from the landscape is also in keeping with Woolf's description in "The Sun and the Fish". There is also a sense of elegiac recovery in the story, since in its final twist, the narrator realises that she has mistaken her friend's father-in-law for her husband who is not dead after all: "O don't tell me he lives still! O why did you deceive me?" (CSF, p.111). There is, then, no sense of celebration at Humphry's recovery. In fact, a cancelled passage in the draft betrays the narrator's great disappointment:

Do you mean to tell me that Humphry is alive after all ... and I've wasted all this; death never was behind the tree; and I'm to dine with you, with years and years in which to ask questions about the furniture. Humphry you ought to have died! (CSF, p.299)

In *The Waves* Woolf also links the death of the subject ("the world seen without a self") with the image of the solar eclipse; and this will be explored in my final chapter.

Significantly, the setting sun, personified as male, is Milton's simile for the demise of Lycidas, and its

reappearance at dawn signifies his rebirth in heaven. Christ's resurrection is also implicit, not only because of the pun on "sun", but also because of his agency in Lycidas's recovery: "Through the dear might of him that walked the waves". The reference to walking on water is a reverse image of the sun's sinking "in the ocean bed". The closing lines of the poem connect the sun not only with the dead Lycidas, and again with the figure of Christ, but also with "the uncouth swain" who has brought us the lament.

Thus sang the uncouth swain to the oaks and rills,
 While the still morn went out with sandals gray;
 He touched the tender stops of various quills,
 With eager thought warbling his Doric lay:
 And now the sun had stretched out all the hills,
 And now was dropped into the western bay;
 At last he rose, and twitched his mantle blue:
 Tomorrow to fresh woods, and pastures new.³²

The subject of the sentence, "At last he rose", seems to include Lycidas, Christ, and "the uncouth swain", as well as the sun. On setting, "he" has dominion over the land: "And now the sun had stretched out all the hills". This may imply both that the sun stretched himself out over the hills, and that the sun actually stretched out the hills. Either way, in compliance with the fixed oppositions of patriarchy, if the sun is masculine, we might assume the subordinate femininity of the hills. We also might detect another echo from Milton in Woolf's earlier description of the meeting place: "where the hills stretched their limbs out over the flowing moorland below". This intertextual connection may reinforce the feminine sexuality of Woolf's hills, noted above, as all the more rebellious, or complicit, depending on whether we interpret them as submissive or assertive.

³² Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 186-193, *The Poems of John Milton*, pp.253-254.

Woolf's story, I suggest, departs from this Christian model of elegiac consolation, but it does appear to fit with many other aspects of pastoral elegy. Obviously its concern is not the death of a shepherd or poet, but it does deal with the untimely, if momentary, death of the sun and its light. We might relate this to "primitive laments for the death of Thammuz, Adonis, or other vegetational deities who died in autumn to be reborn in the spring".³³ The convention that "all nature joins in mourning the ... death",³⁴ has connotations of Orpheus's death in particular, which we might see in the land's draining of colour in Woolf's story. The convention of "a procession of appropriate mourners"³⁵ might also be echoed in Woolf's sombre procession of onlookers. These similarities may confirm an abstraction of elegiac qualities in Woolf's description of the eclipse. The movement of eclipse from light to darkness to light again, itself may describe the mood shift inherent in the structure of pastoral elegy. The phases of darkness and light fit the progression from untimely loss (light to dark) to lyric consolation in the after life (dark to light).

Woolf's sense of lyric consolation, however, comes not from the realization that "death in this world is entry to a higher life", in the sense of a transcendence of the material world; but instead, it comes from a stunning and unique "sense of rejuvenescence and recovery" in the world itself, which has been invigorated rather than transcended. This is also an important departure from the narratives examined earlier, providing parallels between the death of the sun and the death of "the King of the Wood". Whereas these myths suggest that his

³³ M.H.Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, p.45.

³⁴ See Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 37-39, *The Poems of John Milton*, p.243.

³⁵ Abrams, p.45. See Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 88-111, *The Poems of John Milton*, pp.246-248.

pursuit and even defeat (since revival follows) serve to reassert and strengthen the power of the king, Woolf's story, on the contrary, has the victim (the sun) remain defeated, returning only in transfigured form (the light) to rejuvenate and integrate with the (landscape) elements associated with his pursuers. "His" sovereignty, then, is not reasserted, but subsumed into feminine elements.

This is where the intervention of the suffragette tricolour is important. It coincides with the emergence of a new, bodily sense of light as "beautiful fruit". Woolf is here refiguring the metaphor of the sun and light, previously the province of a transcendent, self-reflexive masculine sovereignty, for feminism. It is transformed by militant feminist action into a metaphor for integrated and pluralized subjectivity. Woolf's innovation here, furthermore, fits with the transformational tradition of pastoral elegy itself. Elegy may be concerned with more than just remembering the dead.

It is no accident that Milton brings into *Lycidas* the archetypal poet-minstrel, Orpheus. The death of the poet cannot but bring to mind the poetic purpose and the future death of that other poet who is now writing. Thus 'Milton' (that is, perhaps, the 'swain' spokesman) contemplates a similar memorial -

*So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favour my destin'd Urn -
(Lycidas 19-20)*

and Shelley is one 'who another's fate now wept his own' (*Adonais* 300). Again ... it may well be that Gray or his speaker, hitherto 'mindful of the unhonoured dead', proceeds to envisage for himself a suitably reticent 'Epitaph'.³⁶

Elegy also moves beyond such intimations of the poet's own mortality to a full blown appraisal of his art.

³⁶ Eric Smith, *By Mourning Tongues. Studies in English Elegy* (Suffolk, 1977), p.110.

From the turning of the attention of the mourner from the person he has loved to his own abandoned and possible future state stems the custom in these poems to scrutinise the whole nature and value of poetic art in general and as it is, or will be, practised by the spokesman himself. If it may be a study of amatory or political problems in a sort of laboratory, a 'little academe', isolated from irrelevant aspects of reality, pastoral is also frequently a study of poetic art and its purpose.³⁷

Pastoral elegy traditionally gives space for one poet, in mourning the death of another, to pronounce not only on public and private affairs, but also on art. Woolf's feminist adjustments to this convention, and her departures from its masculine norms, are still within the transformational province of the genre. It is not that there have never been women elegists, for indeed, there is a strong tradition of mothers' elegies on dead children; but there seem to be no woman's equivalent in the canon to Milton's *Lycidas*, Gray's *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*, Shelley's *Adonais*, Arnold's *Thyrsis*, and Tennyson's *In Memoriam*.

Lycidas has relevance for "The Sun and the Fish" because of another, specific, connection. It provides an interesting gloss on the "boat" simile at the heart of Woolf's account of the eclipse. The mention of a boat at the moment of eclipse may well recall the poem's most enigmatic lines:

It was that fatal and perfidious bark,
Built in the eclipse, and rigged with curses dark,
That sunk so low that sacred head of thine.³⁸

To refer Woolf's "boat" to Milton's "perfidious bark", however, is perhaps to toss it out of the frying pan and into the fire, since three centuries of scholarship have failed to find critical consensus on the meaning of the

³⁷ Ibid., p.111.

³⁸ Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 100-102, *The Poems of John Milton*, pp.246-247.

latter. Edward King, the man mourned in Milton's elegy, perished at sea; so these lines suggest primarily that his death is due, not to the natural cause of the storm, but to the ill fortune of his boat because it was "built in the eclipse". Virgil, Shakespeare, and Milton himself, for example, furnish us with many precedents to the idea of eclipses as bad omens.³⁹

Many commentators have exercised their imaginations as to how in fact the boat might feasibly be "built in the eclipse". In contrast to the literalism of some interpretations,⁴⁰ there is a figurative one which seems appropriate to Woolf's reference: "Literally the line suggests that King's ship was foredoomed to sink by malign supernatural influences. Figuratively, there is perhaps an oblique allusion in *bark* to King's natural body, and in *eclipse* and *curses*, to the Fall and its consequences - the chief consequence being the subjection (which King's death illustrates) of the realm of nature to change and death".⁴¹ The most fruitful interpretations, for Woolf's allusion, lie at this figurative level: M. Lloyd "takes man as 'the mortal bark' who since Adam's fall has been under the curse of sin and mortality";⁴² and this might be considered for

³⁹ Virgil, *Georgics* I. 464-8; Shakespeare, *Lear* I. 2. 112-13, *Hamlet*, I. 1. 118-20, *Othello* V. 2. 99-101; Milton, *The Works of John Milton*, vol. 10: *History of Britain*, edited by G.P. Krapp (New York, 1932) p.169; see A.S.P. Woodhouse and D. Bush, editors, *A Variorum Commentary on The Poems of John Milton*, vol. 2, *The Minor English Poems Part Two* (London, 1972), pp.669-670.

⁴⁰ See Woodhouse and Bush, p.670: One theory, G.G.L., "Milton: 'Built in the eclipse'", *Notes and Queries*, 179 (1940), p.9, is that "eclipse must mean the eight days of the moon's waning or the *interlunium* ... as no ship could be built in the short time of an eclipse"; another, T.O. Mabbott, "Milton: 'Built in the eclipse'", *Notes and Queries*, 179 (1940), pp.141-142, is that "the allusion is purely astrological: some part of the work was done in an eclipse and brought ill luck to the vessel".

⁴¹ M. Mack, *Milton* (New York, 1950); Woodhouse and Bush, *ibid.*, p.670.

⁴² Michael Lloyd, "The Fatal Bark", *Modern Language Notes* 75, (1960) pp.103-8; Woodhouse and Bush, *ibid.*.

its gender implications with regard to Woolf's feminist adaption of the reference.

It is Eve - the woman - who as the "weaker vessel" is blamed for succumbing to the serpent Satan, and who represents the sins of the flesh. She is therefore, as the vehicle which conveys humanity into the finite world, most closely linked to mortality. If the "perfidious bark" is feminine, it may be in direct opposition to the (masculine) sun whose eclipse provides the occasion for her construction. The story of the eclipse at the crucifixion bears out this reading. The death of the eternal god made mortal implies the momentary loss of the permanent light. The resurrection, and the return of the sun, confirm the light as eternal.

Woolf's story perhaps reverses this pattern: Her "boat" is not "built" but sinks "in the eclipse", and with it may sink the notions of original sin and its attendant "perfidious" gender implications. The (masculine) sun does not reappear after the eclipse; and the light which is reborn is not eternal. The sinking of the boat signals, not the removal of mortality from the earth, but its introduction as a quality which extends to the light of the sun itself. For Woolf, then, "the beautiful fruit of light" is not everlasting. It is fragile.

Yet, at first, so light and frail and strange the colour was, sprinkled rainbow-like in a hoop of colour, that it seemed as if the earth could never live decked out in such frail tints. It hung beneath us, like a cage, like a hoop, like a globe of glass. It might be blown out; it might be stove in. But steadily and surely our relief broadened and our confidence established itself as the great paint-brush washed in woods dark on the valley, and massed hills blue above them. The world became more and more solid; it became populous; it became a place where an infinite number of farmhouses, of villages, of railway lines have lodgement; until the whole fabric of civilisation was modelled and moulded. But still the memory endured that the earth we stand on is made of colour; colour can be blown out; then we stand on a dead

leaf; and we who tread the earth securely now have seen it dead. (CDB, p.197)

The recovery of the light is followed by the re-emergence of colour. As we noted, this sequence is an orderly version of the diary account where the return of the colour is described before the return of light. Whereas the diary describes the colour's emergence as sporadic (it is first seen on the cloud, and then "astonishingly lightly & quickly & beautifully in the valley & over the hills"), the story has a more graceful progression of colour emanating in a circular movement. This resembles Woolf's "luminous halo". It is "sprinkled" in "a hoop of colour", expressions which suggest its delicacy and its strength respectively. The diary's "glittering & aetheriality" is not repeated. "Glittering" perhaps does not fit with the surer sense of colour as a hoop (however "frail" its "tints" it has structure). "Aetheriality" does not fit because it seems to signal an otherworldly, transcendent quality, eliminated from the story account.

The colour's delicate bubble-like quality transforms into a more solid prospect "as the great paint-brush washed in woods dark on the valley, and massed hills blue above them". This is the equivalent of Milton's "fresh woods and pastures new". Woolf remarks in her diary that they were "all new colours". She notes them as "here blue, & there brown". In the story she mentions the "rainbow-like ... hoop of colour" but only specifies the "blue" of the hills. The blue of the sky before the eclipse has reappeared afterwards as the colour of the "massed hills". The earth has taken on the qualities of the heavens. As the "great paint-brush" creates the world anew, Woolf lists the emergence of "farmhouses ... villages ... railway lines". She does not talk now of rebirth or re-emergence, but of the world of things being fabricated for the first time ("became solid ... have lodgement ... was modelled and moulded").

The paradoxical hyperbole of "an infinite number" suggests that the earth now contains those qualities previously assigned to the after-life. It conjures the idea of the infinite potential inherent in the mundane; of the material as the seat of imagination. "Lodgement" has an air of the temporary: on a larger scale things may change drastically but humanity relies on a very delicately balanced state of affairs, poised above "a cage ... a hoop ... a globe of glass".

The image of a hanging cage is reminiscent of the final resting place of the Sibyl of Cumae who in being granted by Apollo eternal life, forgot to ask also for eternal youth, as the epigraph to T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* records. She withers away to nothing and lives out eternity in a cage: "For once I myself saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae hanging in a cage, and when the boys said to her 'Sibyl, what do you want?' she replied 'I want to die'".⁴³

Woolf's boast in the diary, at the culmination of the eclipse, "Our greatness had been apparent too", is missing from the story. Instead, she chooses to end the latter's description of the eclipse with a eulogy to colour: "But still the memory endured that the earth we stand on is made of colour".⁴⁴ In my final chapter I

⁴³ Petronius, *Satyricon*, quoted in original Latin by T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (1922), *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London, 1969), p.59.

⁴⁴ Jean Alexander, *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Port Washington, 1974), pp.13-14, comparing this passage to elements of "The Moment: Summer's Night", concludes: "significant form and organic form in both senses are absent when detail and color are lost. Organic form is not outline; it arises from within and is the total being.... Literally, then, the earth we stand on, as intelligent beings, is made of color." Part Two of this thesis will address the relation of significant form to color. See also *M*, pp.9, 12: "Then the sense of the light sinking back into darkness seems to be gently putting out with a sponge the colour of one's own eyes.... The trees are growing heavier, blacker; no order is

will discuss Woolf's later, and differently encoded, version of this passage in *The Waves* where Bernard asks "How then, does the light return to the world after the eclipse of the sun?" (*W*, p.313)

Proudfit finds the passage (as she does of the whole of "The Sun and the Fish") a mystical testimony to a "reality" beyond this life:

The spectators know, having outlived the world, that beneath all the appearance of colour endowed by light is a mere skeleton, a mere fragile shape. The description of the eclipse is carefully designed by Mrs. Woolf to express this moment when all the spectators become one in their realization, when they together see the reality beneath appearance.⁴⁵

Although affirming a sense of intersubjectivity, this reading does not take into account Woolf's depiction of colour itself as contributive to it or as constituting structure, but instead interprets it only as "appearance" behind which true "reality" lies; nor does Proudfit take into account the feminist significance of the colours.

In arguing for a suffragist reading I do not seek to reduce Woolf's final statement, or indeed the story itself, to this one aspect since I have tried to show how the piece also goes beyond it. Woolf simultaneously seems to offer a celebration of the material and historical moment: the glorious, if sometimes fearful, non-transcendence of this life. But that moment, we are reminded, may also be of special historical significance for women. The manipulation of gender-related vocabulary traced in the story up to now would seem to support this point. The "whole fabric of civilization" has been "modelled and moulded" by women's coming to sovereignty. The landscape, the order of things, the naturalized

perceptible.... nothing can be seen. We can only see ourselves as outlines, cadaverous, sculpturesque..."

⁴⁵ Proudfit, p.199.

status quo, have all been shown to be constructed. This order has been eclipsed, and a new world created. But, as Woolf's warning testifies, this is no time to take the world for granted.

CHAPTER VIII

THE DEATH OF THE SUN AND THE RETURN OF THE FISH

8.1 Degeneration

It is one thing to eclipse solar light and reclaim its imagery for feminism, but it is quite another to have it permanently dead. The death of the sun was a prospect which had fully exercised the minds of the nineteenth century, and its attendant theories of entropy and devolution still held currency in the first decades of the twentieth. Max Nordau's work on western cultural decline, *Degeneration*, for example, was highly influential on reactionary aesthetic opinion.¹ In his dedication he outlines his fears about the prospect of current, unhealthy, artistic trends eroding western culture:

Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists. These, however, manifest the same mental characteristics, and ... the same somatic features, as the members of the above-mentioned anthropological family, who satisfy their unhealthy impulses with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead of with pen and pencil.

Some among these degenerates in literature, music, and painting have in recent years come into extraordinary prominence, and are revered by numerous admirers as creators of a new art, and heralds of the coming centuries.... They exert a disturbing and corrupting influence on the views of a whole generation.²

Nordau's prognosis is that the current aberrations will not flourish. He predicts:

The hysteria of the present day will not last.... The feeble, the degenerate, will perish; the strong will

¹ Max Nordau, *Degeneration*, translated from the second edition of the German work (London, 1895); Nordau, incidentally, is author of a novel about the marriage between a German royal and an American businessman, entitled *Morganatic*, translated by Elizabeth Lee (London, 1904).

² Nordau, *Degeneration*, pp.vii - viii.

adapt themselves to the acquisition of civilizations, or will subordinate them to their own organic capacity. The aberrations of art have no future. They will disappear when civilized humanity shall have triumphed over its exhausted condition.³

Nordau refines his proto-fascist opinions to a full-blown thesis on art and degeneration in *On Art and Artists*,⁴ which, as we will see, influenced early detractors of Post-Impressionism in Britain.

Oswald Spengler, another source of degeneracy theories, furthermore, links the decline of civilization to the rise in women's liberation, the use of contraceptives, and women's neglect of familial and domestic duties.

The primary woman, the peasant woman, is *mother*. The whole vocation towards which she has yearned from childhood is included in that one word. But now emerges the Ibsen woman, the comrade, the heroine of a whole megalopolitan literature from Northern drama to Parisian novel. Instead of children, she has soul-conflicts; marriage is a craft-art for the achievement of 'mutual understanding'. It is all the same whether the case against children is the American lady's who would not miss a season for anything, or the Parisienne's who fears that her lover would leave her, or an Ibsen heroine's who 'belongs to herself' - they all belong to themselves and they are all unfruitful.⁵

In May 1929 we find Woolf speaking of Spengler with apparent familiarity.⁶ Whether or not she actually read his works, she can hardly have avoided hearing accounts of his ideas, since they were so popular. Spengler's description of the ensuing destruction of "civilization" shows the process occurring from the top of the social and political hierarchy downwards:

³ Ibid., p.550.

⁴ Nordau, *On Art and Artists*, translated by W.F. Harvey (London, 1907).

⁵ Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, Volume II, *Perspectives of World-History*, (originally published in German 1922), translated by Charles Francis Atkinson (London, 1928), p.105.

⁶ Woolf, *D*, III, p.224; *L*, IV, p.56. Leonard Woolf owned first editions of both Spengler volumes: see Washington State University, V/s VI 14.

The whole pyramid of cultural man vanishes. It crumbles from the summit, first the world-cities, then the provincial forms, and finally the land itself, whose best blood has incontinently poured into the towns, merely to bolster them awhile. At last, only the primitive blood remains, alive, but robbed of its strongest and most promising elements.⁷

This is a negative interpretation of the feminist strategies recommended by Lady Rhondda, approved by Woolf, and inscribed into her account of the solar eclipse. The land draining of blood is also in keeping with this account.

For Spengler, woman is outside life, a Cosmic force; and man, "the master", is active in life: "The man *makes* History, the woman *is* History."⁸ Spengler not only sees men as animal-like, "emancipated from ... servitude" he sees women as, not even bestial, but "plant-like" and "cultureless". The feminine is passively in the sway of the solar - "flowers at the eventide ... one after the other, they close in the setting sun" - and something to be consumed and excreted by "animal and human species".⁹ The feminine is not therefore really human. The decline of civilization (the death of the sun) is effected by the feminine's refusal to comply with this vision, by woman's decision to "belong to herself".

Gillian Beer, in her investigation of the solar debate, observes

Many Victorians, including Darwin himself, were disturbed by the apparent contradiction between the 'progressive' implications of evolutionary theory and the emphasis in the physics of Helmholtz and Thomson on the ageing of the

⁷ Spengler, *Perspectives of World-History*, *ibid.*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.327.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.327-328.

sun, which would eventually make the world too cold for life.¹⁰

Interestingly, the sun in this context is often personified as masculine.¹¹ Beer draws attention to the "Müllerian monomania" dominating Victorian thought. The mythographer Max Müller was notorious for his thorough obsession with solar mythology: "People wonder why so much of the old mythology, the daily talk, of the Aryans, was solar: - what else could it have been?"¹²

Müller's observations have some bearing on Woolf's treatment of the sun and the eclipse. He refers to the sun as mythologically symbolic of masculine sovereignty. "The character of *Yama*," for example,

such as we might find in the last book of the Rig-Veda, might well have been suggested by the setting sun, personified as the leader of the human race, as himself mortal, yet as king, as the ruler of the departed, as worshipped with the fathers, similar to the immortality enjoyed by the gods themselves.¹³

The sun is the pinnacle image of patriarchal authority. Solar rhythm - the repeated cycle of darkness and light - is for Müller the foundation of all mythology.

I look upon sunrise and sunset, on the daily return of day and night, on the battle between the light and darkness, on the whole solar drama in all its details

¹⁰ Gillian Beer, "'The Death of the Sun': Victorian Solar Physics and Solar Myth", *The Sun is God. Painting, Literature and Mythology in the Nineteenth Century*, edited by J.B. Bullen (Oxford, 1989), p.159.

¹¹ See, for example, William Thomson, "On a Universal Tendency in Nature to the Dissipation of Mechanical Energy", *Philosophical Magazine*, 4 (1852), p.306; Beer, p.162: "most probably the sun was sensibly hotter a million years ago than he is now." See also, Richard A. Proctor, "Suns in Flames", *Myths and Marvels of Astronomy*, new edition (London, 1876), p.190; Beer, p.163: arguing the other way, he assures that "the sun will continue steadily to discharge his duties as fire, light, and life of the solar system."

¹² Max Müller, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion* (London, 1878), p.278; quoted by Beer, p.164.

¹³ Max Müller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, Second Series (London, 1864), p.516.

that is acted every day, every month, every year, in heaven and in earth, as the principal subject of early mythology.¹⁴

The regularity of solar movement, "immortal, i.e. unfading, as compared with the feeble and decaying race of man",¹⁵ is precisely what gives it primacy for Müller, who is less impressed by the irregular and unpredictable movements of the clouds, the "subjects" or "enemies" of the "immortal bright beings":

It is the sky that gathers the clouds, it is the sky that thunders, it is the sky that rains, and the battle that takes place between the dark clouds and the bright sun, which for a time is covered by them, is but an irregular repetition of that more momentous struggle which takes place every day between the darkness of the night and the refreshing light of the morning.¹⁶

Müller's preference for solar regularity leads him to side with "the solar theory" of mythology, against "the meteoric theory" which:

looks upon clouds and storms and other convulsive aspects of nature as causing the deepest and most lasting impression on the minds of those early observers who had ceased to wonder at the regular movements of the heavenly bodies, and could only perceive a divine presence in the great strong wind, the earthquake, or the fire.¹⁷

Woolf's account of the eclipse falls in with meteoric theories, in its depiction of the sun's flight from the clouds. In his discussion of proto-zoroastrian theories of mythology, furthermore, Müller cites interpretations of the sun as male and the cloud vapour as female. He quotes from his rival theorist, Professor Khun:

'After the storm is over, and the darkness which hid the single cloud had vanished, Savitar (the sun) embraces once more the goddess, the cloud, who has assumed the shape of a horse running away. He shines, still hidden,

¹⁴ Ibid., p.518.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.518.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp.518-19.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.520.

fiery and with golden arm, and thus begets *Agni*, fire; he lastly tears the wedding veil, and *Indra*, the blue sky is born.¹⁸

Woolf's story, as we have noted, handles this elemental imagery in a similar way. Müller himself is highly dismissive of the effectiveness of such imagery.

I cannot imagine that men, standing on a level with our shepherds, should have conversed among themselves of a dark storm-cloud soaring in space, and producing by a marriage with light, or with the sun, the first human beings, or should have called the blue sky the son of the cloud because the sky appears when the storm-cloud has been either embraced or destroyed by the sun.¹⁹

Just as he favours steady, predictable solar rhythms above the inconstancy of meteoric conditions, Müller likewise sees human nature as unchanging: the "men" of ancient times he envisions "standing on a level with our shepherds". The human subject is always and already masculine for Müller. He promotes a set unchanging masculine hegemony against the threatening chaos of a feminine meteorology. Beer suggests that Müller's "solar mythography was so powerful because it gave expression to covert dreads then current",²⁰ namely the death of the sun and the end of the world. Müller offers a reassuring vision of the solar. If the imminent decline of civilization, symbolized by solar death, is linked to the rise of feminism, the discreet gender associations in Müller's rhetoric may also provide reassurance for the patriarchal status quo.

In her nightmare vision of the world without the sun, Frances Power Cobbe, describes a sense of horror very like Woolf's at the moment of solar eclipse:

It was totally dark, but I was sure that I was in the midst of an immense crowd. We were all gazing upward

18 Müller, p.523.

19 Ibid., p.524.

20 Beer, p.164.

into the murky sky and a sense of some fearful calamity was over us, so that no one spoke aloud. Suddenly overhead appeared through a rift in the black heavens, a branch of stars which I recognised as the belt and sword of Orion. Then went forth a cry of despair from all our hearts! We knew, though no one said, that these stars proved it was not a cloud or mist which, as we had somehow believed, was causing the darkness. No; the air was clear; it was high noon, and *the sun had not risen!* That was the tremendous reason why we beheld the skies. The sun would never rise again!²¹

This uncanny presage of the scene of Woolf's solar eclipse, cannot be as reassuringly explained by science. Yet there are less obvious parallels to draw: the glimpse of the stars allowed by the sun's absence reminds us that other points of enlightenment are now available. Cobbe's rhetoric suggests a horror at the loss of the unifying solar light, perhaps representative of Christianity, and the further horror of recognizing the starlight of Orion's belt, perhaps symbolic of an unwanted return to the pagan pre-Christian universe. In the context of the 1927 solar eclipse, we might remember that the event allowed scientists to make calculations about the stars made visible at the moment of total eclipse. As Cobbe's dream illustrates, such a sight could only be interpreted negatively by the Victorians. Their fears about solar death dovetail with anxieties about a world bereft of the certitudes of Christianity, where the old order is crumbling, and patriarchy is under threat. In the context of Woolf's fiction, however, to glimpse the stars is usually a positive experience. We might consider in particular Katherine Hilbery's secret nocturnal life as a mathematician:

It was only at night, indeed, that she felt secure enough from surprise to concentrate her mind to the utmost.

Perhaps the unwomanly nature of the science made her instinctively wish to conceal her love of it. But the more profound reason was that in her mind mathematics was directly opposed to literature. She would not have cared

²¹ Frances Power Cobbe, *Darwinism in Morals and Other Essays* (London, 1872), p.343; quoted by Beer, p.165.

to confess how infinitely she preferred the exactitude, the star-like impersonality, of figures to the confusion, agitation, and vagueness of the finest prose. (N&D, p.40)

During the conventionally chaotic darkness of night she pursues rationality and precision, which are further asserted as feminine qualities by the invocation of the planets - not as examples of mystic forces, but as mathematically chartable points of reference in the night sky. Hence "the star-like impersonality of figures."

Katherine's joy of things rational is used subversively throughout *Night and Day*, and most effectively in love scenes as, for example, when Denham announces to her that he is "a person who feels" as he pours out his plans for their life together:

She listened to all this, so that she could have passed an examination in it by the time Waterloo Bridge was in sight; and yet she was no more listening to it than she was counting the paving-stones at her feet. She was feeling happier than she had felt in her life. If Denham could have seen how visibly books of algebraic symbols, pages all speckled with dots and dashes and twisted bars, came before her eyes as they trod the Embankment, his secret joy in her attention might have been dispersed.... all the time she was in fancy looking up through a telescope at white shadow-cleft disks which were other worlds, until she felt herself possessed of two bodies, one walking by the river with Denham, the other concentrated to a silver globe aloft in the fine blue space above the scum of vapours that was covering the visible world. She looked at the sky once, and saw that no star was keen enough to pierce the flight of watery clouds now coursing rapidly before the west wind.... that her condition was due to him, or to anything that he had said, she had no consciousness at all. (N&D, pp.316-17)

Katherine is conscious of the night sky, while Denham is associated with the more mundane "paving stones at her feet." The clouds of this world obscure her vision of other world, and we are implicitly reminded that daylight, and by association the solar light of masculinity, prevents these other worlds being visible at all. Woolf celebrates the sun-free night sky for its

liberating and rational potential for women. She shows the "dark country" of feminine experience to be luminous, rational, and chartable. If the light of the man's world is regarded as obscuring Katherine's true self, then it is certainly with irony that one reads of Denham's sudden realization "that he had never seen her in the daylight before." (N&D, p.246)

The contrasting Victorian gloom at the prospect of solar death was not entirely undissipated: "The discovery of radioactivity relieved anxieties about the imminent death of the sun - but the happy end of that story was to prove the start of another more terrifying one with which we are all-too familiar. Thermodynamics both distances Huxley's 'universal winter' by replenishing the sun's heat, and brings it nearer by nuclear fission."²² Yet if the discovery of radioactivity offers a mixed blessing, Darwin's renewed interest in "the least Apollonian of creatures", the earthworm, is put forward by Beer as an (unconscious) "counter to the solar myth", and one which enjoyed "immense and immediate popularity".²³

8.2 Worm, python, dragon, fish

"Worms have played a more important part in the history of the world than most persons would at first suppose"²⁴ claims Darwin:

When we behold a wide, turf-covered expanse, we should remember that its smoothness, on which much of its beauty depends is mainly due to all the inequalities having been slowly levelled by worms. ... It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so

²² Beer, p.175.

²³ Ibid., p.180.

²⁴ Charles Darwin, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould, Through the Action of Worms, with Observations on their Habits* (London, 1881), p.305.

important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly creatures.²⁵

Worms are even responsible for levelling the toppled stones of the ancient site of solar worship itself, Stonehenge:

At Stonehenge, some of the outer Druidical stones are now prostrate, having fallen at a remote but unknown period; and these have become buried to a moderate depth in the ground. They are surrounded by sloping borders of turf, on which recent [worm] castings were seen.²⁶

Beer alerts us to Leslie Stephen's wry remarks on Darwin's "kindly feelings for worms" compared with "Swift's inspection of social vermin" which is "always edged with contempt."²⁷ She refers us to Andrew Lang's explanation of the "function of Darwin's worm" as in keeping with the Apollonian sungod's association with the mouse. This "conjunction of the lowest and highest", Lang suggests, "may have the function of warding off threats to stability by a fictional alliance of most and least powerful":

'All sentient beings are doomed to complete annihilation after such long-continued slow progress', [Darwin] wrote of the cooling sun. But the obscure worm allows him an image, at once matter-of-fact and newly dignified, for the unchanging Saturnian world hidden away from the controversies of physics ...²⁸

Neither the mouse nor Darwin's motivations need concern us. What is important is the reading touched upon but left undeveloped by Beer: the nature of Apollo's traditional enemy.

²⁵ Ibid., p.313.

²⁶ Ibid., p.155.

²⁷ Leslie Stephen, *Swift*, English Men of Letters Series (London, 1882), p.200; quoted by Beer, p.178; Woolf's research for her essay "Swift's Journal to Stella", *TLS* 24 September 1925, began with this book by her father: see Silver, p.50.

²⁸ Andrew Lang, *Custom and Myth* (London, 1885), p.103; quoted by Beer, pp.178-179.

"Every god has his enemy. . . . Apollo's enemy was the great dragon Python, whom he had to fight and kill before he could establish his temple and oracle at Delphi."²⁹ So Joseph Fontenrose begins his comprehensive guide to the many permutations of the Apollo/Python myth (from, for example, Perseus and Andromeda to St. George and the Dragon).³⁰ Significantly, the python was female in the earliest accounts of this conflict:

In the Homeric Hymn to Apollo we find the earliest known record of Apollo's combat with a dragon at Delphi. Soon after his birth on Delos, Apollo crossed the sea and wandered over the mainland, looking for a good place to establish an oracular shrine. . . . So Apollo went on to Parnassos, and there on the site of Delphi he laid the foundations of his great temple It is not clear from the Hymn whether or not this work was completed when Apollo fought a she-dragon (*drakaina*) beside a spring and killed her with an arrow from his bow. But it is likely that Apollo encountered her while he was at work on the foundations not more than a few hundred yards from her spring.³¹

The acclaimed source of Western lyric poetry, then, is founded on the destruction of this she-dragon, who, in her association with Hera's opposition to Athena, represents a femininity alien to that approved by (and approving of) patriarchy.

She was a monstrous creature, huge and savage, guilty of terrible violence against the people and the flocks of the land. To meet her meant death to any man. She had, moreover, been nurse to Typhaon, Hera's monstrous child, whom the queen of the gods had borne in anger at Zeus, because he had brought forth Athena from his head, and had had no need of her, his wedded wife. Deciding to equal Zeus's feat by producing a child without male help, Hera succeeded, but the child she bore was the monstrous Typhaon, like neither to gods nor to mortal men. She turned him over to the Delphinian *drakaina*, an evil to evil.³²

²⁹ Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959), p.1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.515ff..

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp.13-14.

³² *Ibid.*, p.14.

Athena, we remember, made the crucial judgement in favour of patrilineal primacy when she sanctioned Orestes' vengeance on his mother, Clytemnestra, for the murder of her husband, and his father, Agamemnon. Athena puts this above Clytemnestra's avenging the sacrifice by Agamemnon of her daughter, Iphigenia. Motherless Athena, born out of Zeus's head, then, has no loyalty to feminine bonds. Fontenrose reminds us that the Homeric Hymn supplies "our first notice of the etymology that derives the place name Pytho from the rotting of the serpent's corpse". In this Hymn the "female serpent is given no name ... but is called Delphyne in later literature. Nor was she the guardian of Ge's or Themis's oracular shrine, since the Hymn knows of no shrine at Delphi before Apollo founded his."³³ The previously feminine associations of Apollo's shrine are erased so that Apollo appears to be founding a shrine for the first time, not displacing one he opposes. In later accounts the serpent/dragon is sometimes described as male,³⁴ but it is primarily seen as female.

If the dominant tradition of poetry is constructed on the grave of the feminine, this presents problems for women writers. How are they to write in a form founded on their own displacement and destruction? The act of inscription, of illumination, may be simultaneously an act of (self) erasure and occlusion. One solution is to resurrect the drakaina as a positive source for women's writing. Woolf may playfully be making modified allusion to this in *Mrs Dalloway* where she describes "the voice of no age or sex, the voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth", yet it is the voice of "the battered woman" (*Mrs D*, p.123):

As the ancient song bubbled up opposite Regent's Park Tube Station, still the earth seemed green and flowery; still, though it issued from so rude a mouth, a mere hole

³³ Ibid..

³⁴ Ibid., p.15.

in the earth, muddy too, matted with root fibres and tangled grasses, still the old bubbling burbling song, soaking through the knotted roots of infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure, streamed away in rivulets over the pavement and all along the Marylebone Road, and down towards Euston, fertilising, leaving a damp stain. (*Mrs D*, p.124)

Not only may this connote the pre-Apollonian Pythian spring or shrine, a source of feminine inspiration; but its imagery might also bear connections with the modern suffrage movement. The muddy trail of the woman's voice weaving through London streets may suggest the famous "Mud March", and other suffrage marches, we looked at earlier. (Interestingly, Ethel Smyth, whose close friendship with Woolf began in 1930,³⁵ wrote a suffrage marching song, "March of the Women", and dedicated it to the WSPU in 1911.)³⁶

Darwin's worm, then seems to have more in common with Apollo's ancient enemy, the python, than with his weak ally, the mouse.³⁷ If the Victorians declared the sun to be mortal, it suggests in mythological terms that the Apollonian victory over the Python has been reversed. There is to be no transcendence to a higher Apollonian state, but instead a return to the earth, to the corporeal worms. Darwin's elevation of the earthworm, then, might be read as "a counter to solar myth" because it constitutes the rehabilitation (and domestication) of the Python as a force for social good. It is no longer occluded by enlightened civilization, but is embraced by it. A version of Darwin's earthworm which brings out its original associations with the feminine would be useful to the feminist cause.

³⁵ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf. A Biography*, vol.2 (London, 1972), p.153.

³⁶ Ethel Smyth, "The March of the Women" (London, 1911); see illustration VI.

³⁷ Indeed, Beer, p.179, herself notes that "in 1850, turning away from the dragon or serpent, Landor had written an 'Ode to the Worm'".

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In some versions of the myth the Python is associated with fish or fish-goddesses,³⁸ so Woolf's eponymous sun and fish readily fit into the Apollo/Python model. We might find in the Darwinian earthworm, furthermore, parallels with the constituency of women (and) workers undermining the foundations of (solar) patriarchy in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

8.3 Suns and fishes

Woolf, herself, makes clear opposition between the sun and a womanly fish in her story, "The Shooting Party",³⁹ which concerns the household of a "Squire" who busies himself with the sport of pheasant shooting "out on the King's Ride". He strongly resembles the Yorkshire Squire in "The Sun and the Fish". Inside his house, his sister, Miss Antonia, observes the play of sunlight upon his coat of arms:

Now and then a ripple, like a reptile, ran under the carpet. On the carpet lay panels of green and yellow, where the sun rested, and then the sun moved and pointed a finger as if in the mockery at the hole in the carpet and stopped. And then on it went, the sun's feeble but impartial finger, and lay upon the coat of arms over the fireplace - gently illumined the shield; the pendant grapes; the mermaid; and the spears. Miss Antonia looked up as the light strengthened. Vast lands, so they said, the old people had owned - her forefathers - the Rashleighs. Over there. Up the Amazons. Freebooter. Voyagers. Sacks of emeralds. Nosing round the islands. Taking captives. Maidens. There she was, all scales from the tail to the waist. Miss Antonia grinned. Down struck the finger of the sun and her eye went with it. Now it rested on a silver frame; on a photograph; on an egg-shaped baldish head; on a lip that stuck out under the moustache; and the name 'Edward' written with a flourish beneath.

'The King...' Miss Antonia muttered (CSF, p.255)

³⁸ Fontenrose, p.231.

³⁹ "The Shooting Party", *Harper's Bazaar* (March 1938), pp.72, 100, 102; CSF, pp.254-260.

The sunlight offers patriarchal blessing upon the shield's testimony to the plundering imperialism of the Squire's ancestors. The mermaid is amongst the representations of the vanquished, and the booty, expropriated in their conquests of the Americas. The portrait of King Edward sanctions the scene. Miss Antonia seems to be a complicit victim of this order. But this order, it transpires, is hardly secure. The house is falling to pieces. Miss Antonia and the ancient Miss Rashleigh drink to the demise of the men at the hands of women:

'It was a day like this, d'you remember?' said old Miss Rashleigh, fingering her glass. 'They brought him home...a bullet through his heart. A bramble, so they said. Tripped. Caught his foot....' She chuckled as she sipped her wine.

'And John...' said Miss Antonia. 'The mare, they said, put her foot in a hole. Died in the field. The hunt rode over him. He came home, too, on a shutter....' They sipped again.

'Remember Lily?' said old Miss Rashleigh. 'A bad'un.' She shook her head. 'Riding with a scarlet tassel on her cane....'

'Rotten at the heart!' cried Miss Antonia. 'Remember the Colonel's letter? "Your son rode as if he had twenty devils in him - charged at the head of his men."... Then one white devil - ah hah!' She sipped again.

'The men of our house...' began Miss Rashleigh. She raised her glass. She held it high, as if she toasted the mermaid carved in plaster on the fireplace. She paused. The guns were barking. Something cracked in the woodwork. Or was it a rat running behind the plaster? (CSF, p.258)⁴⁰

The downfall of the men starts with a bramble, then a mare, then a woman, which shows the feminine principle progressing from vegetation to animal to (almost) human. The mermaid, the siren luring men to their death, symbolizes this sense of transition (from fish to woman). The hunting dogs, however, are not associated with the feminine, but with the weaponry of the male hunter: "The

⁴⁰ Woolf's ellipses.

guns were barking". The Squire himself is earlier described as having a "hang-dog, purple-stained face". (CSF, p.255) The irate Squire returns from the shoot "cursing the dogs, cursing his sisters, in the voice that sounded so loud yet so weak". He lashes out:

With one lash he curled to the ground the vase of chrysanthemums. Another caught old Miss Rashleigh on the cheek. The old woman staggered backwards. She fell against the mantelpiece. Her stick striking wildly, struck the shield above the fireplace. She fell with a thud upon the ashes. The shield of the Rashleighs crashed from the wall. Under the mermaid, under the spears, she lay buried.

The wind lashed the panes of glass; shots volleyed in the Park and a tree fell. And then King Edward in the silver frame slid, toppled and fell too. (CSF, p.260)

This story amounts to an allegory of the abdication crisis, in which the king's relationship with, and subsequent morganatic marriage to, an American divorcee (the return of the vanquished Americas perhaps) results in his relinquishment of sovereignty. Edward VIII abdicated in December 1936. This is played out in the allegorical terms explored in the eclipse scene of "The Sun and the Fish"; and the images of sun and mermaid dominate.

Beer's essay encapsulates the main concerns of nineteenth century solar consciousness. Fontenrose furnishes the mythopoeic significance of Darwin's return to the worm. We have noted the gender politics inherent in the opposition sun/fish, and we have seen how Woolf tailors her account of the solar eclipse to fit a feminist appropriation of solar mythology (for the celebration of a new world founded on women's sovereignty). Woolf also develops the sun/fish opposition in "The Shooting Party" to examine the crisis of masculine sovereignty surrounding the abdication of Edward VIII. All these elements suggest that, having manipulated the figure of the sun into a positive trope for feminism, Woolf will

now complete her overhaul of patriarchal imagery with a feminist revival of the fish.

8.4 The Aquarium

"But the eye has not done with us yet." Thus Woolf opens the final paragraph of "The Sun and the Fish", where she turns from matters solar to the contrary state of the piscine. In addressing the fish, then, Woolf focuses on the other primary (but negative) element in the founding binary opposition of patriarchy. As with the darkness (with which it is associated), the opportunity arises to redeem this negative and assert it as positive: that is, to valorize the python. Again, Woolf seems to resist the straightforward implementation of such a strategy.

But the eye has not done with us yet. In pursuit of some logic of its own, which we cannot follow immediately, it now presents us with a picture, or generalized impression rather, of London on a hot summer day, when, to judge by the sense of concussion and confusion, the London season is at its height. It takes us a moment to realize, first, the fact that we are in some public gardens, next, from the asphalt and paper bags thrown about, that they must be the Zoological Gardens, and then without further preparation we are presented with a complete and perfect effigy of two lizards. (CDB, p.198)

Woolf zooms in on this scene as on the railway station earlier in the story. She returns us from the moors of Yorkshire to the tamed (asphalted and littered) greenery of metropolitan gardens. This is the site of the other half of the morganatic marriage between sun and fish. We are introduced first to two lizards, then in what follows, to some fish, and finally to human beings and bankers! Before following Woolf's eye further, we might note an earlier description the same scene. Again, this allows us to examine her adaptation of material for the story.

Woolf's observations "on the new aquarium at the London Zoological Gardens, opened to the public on Monday, 7 April 1924" read:

Aesthetically speaking, the new aquarium is undoubtedly the most impressive of all the houses at the zoo. Red fish, blue fish, nightmare fish, dapper fish, fish lean as gimlets, fish round and white as soup plates, ceaselessly gyrate in oblong frames of greenish light in the hushed and darkened apartment hollowed out beneath the Mappin terraces. Scientifically, no doubt, the place is a paradise for the ichthyologist; but the poet might equally celebrate the strange beauty of the broad-leaved water plants trembling in the current, or the sinister procession of self-centred sea-beasts forever circling and seeking perhaps some minute prey, perhaps some explanation of a universe which evidently appears to them of inscrutable mystery. Now they knock the glass with their noses; now they shoot dartlike to the surface; now eddy slowly contemplatively down to the sandy bottom. Some are delicately fringed with a fin that vibrates like an electric fan and propels them on; others wear a mail boldly splashed with a design by a Japanese artist. That crude human egotism which supposes that Nature has wrought her best for those who walk the earth is rebuked at the aquarium. Nature seems to have cared more to tint and adorn the fishes who live unseen at the depths of the sea than to ornament our old, familiar friends, the goat, the hog, the sparrow, and the horse.⁴¹

Woolf celebrates the exotic colours of the fish newly brought into the human realm. This previously "unseen" alien life, brought to the surface from "the depths of the sea", puts the "familiar" world of creatures to shame with its exquisite beauty. As her first words indicate, Woolf presents the scene from an aesthetic point of view; and claiming it from scientific interest for the attention of the poet, she finds the fish "boldly splashed with a design by a Japanese artist." Nature, moreover, personified as a woman, is the artist who "seems to have cared more to tint and adorn the fishes who live unseen at the depths of the sea than to ornament our old, familiar friends".

⁴¹ Woolf, "Aesthetically speaking, the new aquarium ...", *Nation & Athenaeum*, 19 April 1924, p.85; *E*, III, pp.404-405.

Although the fish are an exotic spectacle compared with the norm of "those who walk the earth", they themselves do not remain merely the object of the human gaze. They are autonomous ("self-centred sea-beasts") and intelligent (they move "contemplatively"). Not only do they have basic instincts in "seeking perhaps some prey", they are also philosophically inquisitive: "seeking ... perhaps some explanation of a universe which evidently appears to them of inscrutable mystery". They have the advantages of technology too: "a fin ... like an electric fan ... a mail boldly splashed".

Woolf's attribution to the fish of anthropomorphic qualities has a levelling effect for both sides of the aquarium glass. "Now they knock the glass with their noses" might apply to human spectators as well as fish. Each side sees the other as exotic spectacle, "inscrutable mystery". This light-hearted valorization of the fish, who move in status from spectacle to spectator, observed to observer, object to subject, may be ripe for feminist appropriation. Their bright colours especially make them suitable for just such an appropriation in the context of "The Sun and the Fish", where the suffrage tricolour has already intervened in the solar half of the story. We might even find a resonance from this passage already in the story: "those who walk the earth" is close to the story's "we who tread the earth". Further, we might take "crude human egotism" more narrowly to refer to the arrogant male presumption of masculine supremacy. The fish might be taken as symbolic of the feminine principle returning to dispel such delusions. The world is comprised of more than men.

8.5 Solar ruin and still rapture

Woolf's "amusing game", however, does not oblige us with such a manoeuvre. Having led us to the Zoological Gardens, "the eye" offers a rather different view. In the first place, the piscine phase of "The Sun and the Fish", as we have noted, introduces us not to fish but to "the perfect effigy of two lizards". Lizards, however, are still in keeping with the trope of python and dragon.

After destruction, calm; after ruin, steadfastness - that, perhaps, is the logic of the eye at any rate. One lizard is mounted immobile on the back of another, with only the twinkle of a gold eyelid or the suction of a green flank to show that they are the living flesh, and not made of bronze. All human passion seems furtive and feverish beside this still rapture. (CDB, p.198)

This "still rapture" is not the celebration of the flesh we might expect from the fish side of Woolf's story. Indeed, the first glimpse of the lizards suggests them to be artificial. Woolf explains "the logic of the eye" in organically marrying the "destruction" and "ruin" of the sight of the eclipse to the "calm" and "steadfastness" of this sight. What could be a more heterogeneous couple than a solar eclipse and a pair of static lizards? Yet the lizards, for all their immobility, appear to be in mating position (if not exactly *flagrante delicto!*). This makes a stark contrast to the tumultuous violence noted earlier in the sexual imagery of the clouds and sun. Whereas this heavenly cavorting is not quite beyond the human experience, the "still rapture" of the lizards makes "All human passion seem furtive and feverish". Woolf seems to be defining the sight of the lizards in contrary terms to that of the eclipse.

She continues: "Time seems to have stopped and we are in the presence of immortality. The tumult of the world has

fallen from us like a crumbling cloud." (CDB, p.198) The temporal event of the eclipse is contrasted with the timelessness of fleshly generation. "The tumult of the world" and the "crumbling cloud" remind us of the emotional upheaval involved in witnessing the eclipse. On the other hand, these phrases may also refer to the world immediately outside the enclosed space of the aquarium where "the London season is at its height". The aquarium itself is presented as an arcade of art. The "effigy" of the lizards suggests this, and also fits with Woolf's way of "Aesthetically speaking" established in her earlier piece. "Immortality" and the stopping of time, then, are qualities of the aesthetic. The lizards are almost (but not quite) like the figures on Keats' Grecian Urn: a "Cold Pastoral!".⁴² Woolf's description of the display tanks develops the analogy with an art gallery:

Tanks cut in the level blackness enclose squares of immortality, worlds of settled sunshine, where there is neither rain nor cloud. There the inhabitants perform forever evolutions whose intricacy, because it has no reason, seems the more sublime. Blue and silver armies, keeping a perfect distance for all their arrow-like quickness, shoot first this way, then that. The discipline is perfect, the control absolute; reason there is none. The most majestic of human evolutions seems feeble and fluctuating compared with theirs. (CDB, p.198)

This subaquatic world resembles a military training ground, where troops have been honed to martial perfection. The vocabulary bristles with weaponry, conveying a sinisterly sleek hostility: "armies ... arrow-like ... shoot ... discipline ... control". Gone are the anthropomorphic qualities of reason. These creatures are not contemplative, they are machines of war. There is no trace of rationality: this world "has no reason ... reason there is none". The fish,

⁴² John Keats, "Ode on A Grecian Urn", *Keats Poetical Work*, edited by H.W. Garrod (London, Oxford, New York, 1970), p.210.

introduced into the story as "Blue and silver armies" are seen to occupy the pinnacle of evolutionary progress because, paradoxically, they betray no sign of change or mutation, unlike the "feeble and fluctuating" "human evolutions".

This comparison again pushes human experience into sympathy with the solar phase of the story. Yet it is in this, piscine, context that the word "sun" reappears for the first and only time since the account of the eclipse (after which, we remember, Woolf drops "sun" in favour of "light" and "colour"). It is not the "sun" itself that appears but "worlds of settled sunshine", for the scene is after all indoors. The light in the enclosures mimics sunshine. These sealed, contained, tanks, "squares of immortality" have continuous artificial "sunshine". They admit "neither rain nor cloud". This is very unlike the eclipse scene where the real sunshine is in conflict with clouds, and is seen to be discontinuous, intermittent, and impermanent.

The natural world in the eclipse scene overwhelms the humans momentarily, and it is a world they tread themselves. In the Zoological Gardens "Nature" has been packaged and contained as a spectacle for human curiosity. Its lack of reason makes it "seem the more sublime" yet its constrictions belie sublimity. A comparison of the two states brings to mind Blake's line: "The cistern contains; the fountain overflows".⁴³ The sight of the eclipse is part of a larger experience: it "overflows" and changes; the sight of the fish in their tanks shows life dissected, imitated, frozen, diminished and contained. The former corresponds to a romantic view, the latter is classical.

⁴³ Blake, "Marriage of Heaven and Hell", Plate 8, *Complete Writings*, p.151.

The "worlds of settled sunshine, where there is neither rain nor cloud" are also reminiscent of the Müllerian solar theory of mythology; and may suggest an unchanging masculine hegemony. The fish inhabit an unchanging world of permanent sunshine, bereft of rain and clouds (previously associated with the feminine), but also bereft of reason. It is a pretty dull place:

Each of these worlds too, which measures perhaps four feet by five, is as perfect in its order as in its method. For forests, they have half a dozen bamboo canes; for mountains, sandhills; in the curves and crinkles of a sea-shell lie for them all adventure, all romance. The rise of a bubble, negligible elsewhere, is here an event of the highest importance. The silver bead bores its way up a spiral staircase through the water to burst against the sheet of glass, which seems laid flat across the top. (CDB, p.198)

"The silver bead bores" in more than one way, for this is a life of tedium put before us. There is scorn tinged with pity in Woolf's description of this series of tiny, limited worlds, where everything is smaller than life and recorded in dull measurements. It corresponds to the definition of life Woolf scornfully rejects: "Life is not a series of gig-lamps symmetrically arranged". We have already commented on the post-eclipse scene's similarity to Woolf's "luminous halo". In contrast, these small points of illumination are miniature worlds of small-scale "adventure and romance". Any ripple or movement is contained and defeated: nothing "overflows".

"The rise of a bubble" is, in the aquarium, "an event of the highest importance", yet seen from the vantage point of "elsewhere" - that is, of the world outside the tank, as well as of the eclipse scene - it is "negligible". Its progress is soon flattened. This is a perfect, almost stagnant, world, without surplus or excess, where everything exists solipsistically yet in harmonious

function with its environment. There is no conflict, no reason, no progression.

Nothing exists needlessly. The fish themselves seem to have been shaped deliberately and slipped into the world only to be themselves. They neither work nor weep. In their shape is their reason. For what other purpose except the sufficient one of perfect existence can they have been thus made, some so round, some so thin, some with radiating fins upon their backs, others lined with red electric light, others undulating like white pancakes on a frying pan, some armoured in blue mail, some given prodigious claws, some outrageously fringed with huge whiskers? More care has been spent upon half a dozen fish than upon all the races of men. (CDB, pp.198-99)

The fish, inhabiting a world of dull, meaningless, irrational privilege, constitute a pointless aristocracy in nature: "They neither work nor weep". They are born perfect into the world purely to fulfil a "perfect existence". Gone are the comparisons to works of art (that quality seems to have been transferred to their tanks). Gone also are the references to "Nature" (feminine or otherwise) as their maker. Unlike the lizards', theirs is not a world of "settled sunshine", but rather a world of untroubled waters through which they sleekly move. The fish carry their own luminescence: "radiating fins" suggests both shape and light; and there are "others lined with red electric light". Light is not a source outside them, it is internalized by them: they integrate light into flesh.

The fish are described in increasingly more sinister terms. They are armed and dangerous: "some armoured in blue mail, some given prodigious claws". Finally they are pompous, verging on the decadent: "some outrageously fringed with huge whiskers". At the point when they seem almost to be middle-aged men, we are reminded that, far from it, "More care has been spent upon" these "half a dozen fish than upon all the races of men."

Considering the significance of colour in the eclipse section of the story, we must look carefully at Woolf's handling of colour here. In fact, there appears in this passage a discreet reference to a very different flag to the suffrage tricolour. The colours of the Union Jack are discernible in the ordering of the fishes' colours: "red electric light ... white pancakes ... blue mail". In Woolf's earlier description the order was "red fish, blue fish ... fish round and white".

Perhaps it is this incipient British nationalism that makes these fish sound increasingly like the contents of the Empire's finest gentleman's club! When Woolf reminds us that "more care has been spent upon half a dozen fish than upon all the races of men", she tempts us to see these fish as the pampered male hegemony, the bellicose imperial bores, who define themselves as an élite, sheltered from and above "all the [other] races of men". The use of the passive construction ("more care has been spent") leaves the question of agency open. We have seen that "Nature" is no longer credited with the responsibility of their creation. They are self-made, "slipped into the world only to be themselves". They do not earn their keep for they "neither work nor weep". Yet Woolf calls them fish not men: they are sinister alien creatures, frightening in their autonomy and solipsism. In the closing statement of "The Sun and the Fish" we are asked to compare, and indeed identify, ourselves with these fish.

Under our tweed and silk is nothing but a monotony of pink nakedness. Poets are not transparent to the backbone as these fish are. Bankers have no claws. Kings and Queens themselves have neither ruffs nor frills. In short, if we were to be turned naked into an aquarium - but enough. The eye shuts now. It has shown us a dead world and an immortal fish. (CDB, p.199)

Humanity, it seems, has no natural hierarchy. We are not born with the "badges and signs of individuality", as Woolf says earlier in the story, however rapidly we acquire them. The symbols of authority and sovereignty ("ruffs" and "frills") are not biologically given. Like "our tweed and silk", they are outer trappings, constructed and endowed not by nature but by ourselves. Beneath them is a "monotony of pink nakedness". Evidently only one race is discussed here - the dominant one - and one, privileged, class.

Proudfit misses the satirical edge here, choosing instead to interpret "The Sun and the Fish" as a monument to mysticism: it is an exploration of "an inner reality" and the "emotional significance" of "our sensuous experiences" in which the eclipse scene and the aquarium show how "human nature has stood apart, after fighting the scurry of human, everyday life, and in dignity has for a moment glimpsed the immutable."⁴⁴ This not only ignores the humour of the story, but also leaves unexplored its implicit questioning of "human nature" from a feminist perspective, as well as its feminist context.

Woolf contrasts the dull opacity of human flesh with the transparency of fish flesh, and with its integral luminosity. Humanity has to look outwards for illumination; it has no natural sign of authority. It does not live in a sealed tank, nor in a timeless "world of settled sunshine". All our attributes, evaluations, interests, are socially and artificially constructed, and therefore are changeable. The declaration that "Poets are not transparent to the backbone as these fish are. Bankers have no claws" is a surrealist illustration of this point.

⁴⁴ Proudfit, p.201.

The declaration reminds us that poetry too is not naturally, innately given. It also reminds us of one poet - and one poem - in particular. T.S. Eliot, we remember, was a banker. Woolf was instrumental in helping him to a full time life as a poet. In Eliot's poem of 1917, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", furthermore, we read: "I should have been a pair of ragged claws/ Scuttling across the floors of silent seas."⁴⁵ The Eliotic pose of the subject's desire for (or fate of) oblivion as an object, and the fragmentation of subjectivity is mockingly countered by Woolf. If "Prufrock" tracks the disintegration of the masculine subject at the time of the Great War, "The Sun and the Fish", in its aftermath, constructs a new plural feminist model of subjectivity in the ruins of the old. She ridicules the desire to return to the condition women so recently were escaping (and still endured at the time of Eliot's writing): the condition of the object, the spectacle, the nonsentient, creature of the deep. Having exposed some of its more reactionary implications, she dismisses Eliot's line as ludicrous: "in short, if we were to be turned naked into an aquarium - but enough."

Woolf ends "The Sun and the Fish" with a joke, and a magician's wink: "The eye shuts now. It has shown us a dead world and an immortal fish." The wink of the eye signals the end of the "amusing game" as well as accompanying Woolf's leger de main, and the perpetration of a trick. The wink is also the fleshly, organic, version of the solar eclipse, and the eclipse of the dominant, transcendent, masculine "I".

The solar element in the story, traditionally the masculine province, has been appropriated, with the

⁴⁵ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1917), *The Complete Poems and Plays*, p.15.

assistance of the suffrage tricolour, as a positive feminist trope. The piscine element, traditionally assigned to the feminine, has been adapted to describe the ruling caste of British patriarchy. This latter world is seen to be hopelessly oblivious to the events of a larger scale described in the former, and soon to overtake it. At the same time, its weaponry as well as its pomposity have been assessed. There is surely irony in the final declaration of "a dead world and an immortal fish"; for we have seen the recovery of the "dead world", and the deadness of the "immortal fish". Woolf seems to have kept the hierarchy of sun/fish in place (with some adjustments), but filleted it of the hierarchy of "'the' couple man/woman" traditionally structuring it. In fact light and colour are claimed for woman, and man is made piscine. In mythopoeic terms the original python and Apollo have swapped gender. Woolf was not the first feminist to perform this trick.

The cover of *The Suffragette* ("The Official Organ of the Women's Social and Political Union"), Friday, October 17, 1913, sports a picture of a woman, dressed in armour, presumably in the role of St George (but possibly Joan of Arc, the WSPU's patron saint), who stands in a pool of light. She is wearing the band of the WSPU, and is armed with a sword in right hand and a shield marked "PURITY" in left. She loftily confronts a dragon, on whose collar is marked "INDECENCY". It is dragged out of the darkness towards the woman by a bearded man, carrying in his other hand a flag marked "THE PRESS". Three pairs of male hands assist in pushing the beast, with its talons raised, towards its target. This is an allegory of the disgraceful press treatment of the suffrage movement. The legend below reads: "THE FORCES OF EVIL DENOUNCING THE BEARERS OF LIGHT". *The Suffragette* defines itself as

the organ of enlightenment in a world blackened by patriarchy.⁴⁶

Woolf's reversal of gender roles within the opposition sun/fish is more subtle than this suffrage cartoon's neat, subversive image. Woolf offers us a morganatic marriage between sun and fish in which both partners undergo important surgery before they are wed. The sun is in fact in eclipse; and it is no longer seen as an absolute, remote, unchanging symbol. Most importantly, its power as a symbol of masculine sovereignty has been usurped. Instead Woolf offers us a new trope of light and colour, but one that carries with it the ravaged remains of the old. Within the dominant solar discourse of patriarchy, we might conclude, are the seeds of its own destruction in the form of emergent, oppositional feminist discourses.

In contrast to this world of intermittent illumination and colour, of change and conflict, Woolf shows us the aquarium: a world of uninterrupted "sunshine", of fixed identity, of self-contained, limited, flat and *boring* existence. From the perspective of the aquarium, the scene of the eclipse is one of "destruction" and "ruin", but this is revealed as the perspective of the ruling patriarchy, whose "calm ... steadfastness" and "immortality" have given way to the increasing pressures of the new prismatic feminism. Woolf builds her new mutable, and mortal, model of feminist subjectivity in the ruins of the old masculine solar trope. But this model must be comprehended by means of her "amusing game" which demonstrates that such a vision is achieved, and survives, only by reference to its contrary. Therefore Woolf morganatically marries her trope of solar ruin to its contrary trope - the undesirably sleek, aquatic

⁴⁶ See illustration VII.

"The Suffragette," October 17, 1913.

The

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**THE FORCES OF EVIL DENOUNCING
THE BEARERS OF LIGHT.**

perfection of the piscine. Given Woolf's early preference for the ruins of Stonehenge over the perfection of Salisbury spire, this comes as no surprise.

PART TWO: PRISMATICS

CHAPTER IX

POST-IMPRESSIONISM: THE EXPLOSION OF COLOUR

But the coloured canvasses would not wait until dawn. Blue stepped forward and bowed down and sang a melody with the tones from which he had created the damp depths of his ploughed fields, and the stone of his rocks, the height of his skies, and the glitter of his water. Then came Green, carrying the sap of his cypress trees, the silver of his olives, and the silent wealth of his bushes and grass. Then Orange leapt forward in her garment of fire, raising a shout as she passed through the room. Orange was not alone, Carmine and Geranium Red danced with her. They moved like waves of luminous smoke from licking flames, and sometimes they seemed like large winged butterflies with great patterns on their backs. The floor was covered with the red of the tiles in Arles, and in between shone sapphire and emerald. When they had all come to pay their tribute a fanfare sounded, and Yellow, his black-eyed mistress, entered in her Chinese robe of state. Ten women came with her, the fairest of the Empire, garbed in gentler tones of the same yellow, and stood at her side bearing sunflowers.

His beloved made a deep obeisance before the catafalque and the ten women did likewise. And as they bowed, all the sheaves of wheat in the field, all the flowers and the fruit bowed down likewise, and the sun shed his rays on the cottage in Auvers.

Three days afterwards Vincent was buried in the little cemetery between the corn-fields.¹

So Julius Meier-Graefe closes his biography of Vincent Van Gogh, one of the Post-Impressionist painters, along with Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, and Henri Matisse, to be represented, for the first time in Britain, at Roger Fry's notorious exhibition of 1910, "Manet and the Post-Impressionists".² Meier-Graefe's florid elegy provides a serendipitous, if gaudy, link between our first area of discussion, the eclipse, and our second, Woolf's engagement with Post-Impressionism. Woolf, it seems, was *au fait* with Meier-Graefe's "standard life of van Gogh

¹ Julius Meier-Graefe, *Vincent Van Gogh. A Biographical Study*, Volume Two, translated by John Holroyd Reece (London, 1922), pp.106-107.

² "Manet and the Post-Impressionists", Grafton Gallery, London, 8 November 1910-14 January 1911.

[sic]" since she mentions it in reviewing a later "more modest biography" of the artist.³

Meier-Graefe envisions Van Gogh's death as that of a pagan sun god, illuminated in his final hours by the tributes of the gloriously vibrant colours for which his paintings are famous. Personified as exotic women and likened to butterflies, these colours drain from his canvasses to parade before him. Van Gogh's prismatic celebration of sunflowers, wheatfields, the sun itself (*himself*), and of every colour in the spectrum, is reciprocated by this genuflection at his death.

There are parallels between this passage and Woolf's treatment of the solar eclipse, and there may be potential for feminist adaptation in Meier-Graefe's fantastic rhetoric. Feminine colours may turn feminist, as we have seen, and Van Gogh's handmaidens of colour might be liberated or transformed into suffrage activists. We might also consider in comparison the vision in *Orlando* of a landscape (which echoes Woolf's eclipse description) bringing luminous colour to the previously "dark country" of feminine sexuality.

After an hour or so - the sun was rapidly sinking, the white clouds had turned red, the hills were violet, the woods purple, the valleys black - a trumpet sounded. Orlando leapt to his feet. The shrill sound came from the valley. It came from a dark spot down there; a spot compact and mapped out; a maze; a town, yet girt with walls; it came from the heart of his own great house in the valley, which, dark before, even as he looked and the single trumpet duplicated and reduplicated itself with other shriller sounds, lost its darkness and became pierced with lights. (*O*, p.21)

When day meets night a man (who later becomes a woman) looks down upon a valley in dying sunlight: as the sun

³ Woolf, Unsigned review of *The Tragic Life of Vincent Van Gogh* by Louis Piérard, translated by Herbert Garland (London, 1925), *Nation & Athenaeum*, 9 May 1925, p.182; *E*, IV, p.249.

goes down each item seen is described as a darker colour than the last - from "white clouds" to "valleys black", in shades of red. When blackness is reached instead of nothingness or amorphous obscurity, a trumpet call heralds a new landscape, in which is discerned a "dark spot"; and as eyes adjust, darkness becomes "pierced with lights". The landscape this (still male) figure surveys represents a positive feminine sexuality in the terms of luminous colour, and so already challenges his male gaze (under which traditionally it would be passive and submissive). The subversiveness of this vision becomes more fully apparent in the ambiguous interpretation of the discovery by this man (who is to become a woman) of "his own great house in the valley": as a man he might be considered proprietor of the object (and feminine) world he surveys, but the phrase also anticipates his forthcoming gender change which puts a different emphasis on his (or her) ownership, suggesting not vanquished but autonomous feminine sexuality.

Like Meier-Graefe's colourful handmaidens, this vision of a liberated feminine sexuality is accompanied by a "fanfare". In Woolf's landscape, however, the "shrill sound" of the "trumpet" marks not subservient, but autonomous, feminine pleasure.⁴ Also different is her celebration of a feminine pleasure culminating, after the attentions of various servile men have been noted, in a coded and playful suggestion of orgasm:

Some were small hurrying lights, as if they burnt in empty banqueting-halls made ready to receive guests who had not come; and others dipped and waved and sank and rose, as if held in the hands of troops of serving men, bending, kneeling, rising, receiving, guarding, and escorting with all dignity indoors a great Princess alighting her chariot. Coaches turned and wheeled in the courtyard. Horses tossed their plumes. The Queen had come. (*O*, p.21)

⁴ See also, *O*, pp.126-127, where the sound of trumpets awaken Orlando to his new identity as a woman.

The mounting sense of excitement in the first, long, sentence, suggested by the rhythmic catalogue of participles denoting arousal ("bending, kneeling, rising ..."), contrasts with the explosive and climactic effect of the perfect tenses in the statements following ("turned ... wheeled ... tossed"). The sexual pun in the final report, "The Queen had come", is in keeping with the Elizabethan flavour of the scene.⁵

In this chapter, as well as beginning to explore Woolf's ideas on colour and writing, I want to bring out, as a context to this, the connections to be found in contemporary reviews of Post-Impressionism between the shocking colours of the paintings and the shocking colours of the suffrage movement. This will entail leaving Woolf herself in the background at one stage, but such an excursus is a necessary one in our exploration of less orthodox readings of Post-Impressionism.

9.1 "All great writers are great colourists"

Woolf herself saw a number of Van Gogh's paintings at the historic exhibition, which many critics see as the occasion behind her enigmatic statement that "on or about December 1910 human character changed".⁶ Andrew McNeillie glosses Woolf's date with reference to the Post-Impressionist exhibition and the death of Edward VII,⁷ but in 1910, as I will further explore below, there were other events we might acknowledge as relevant. Woolf's elaboration on her choice of date is worth

⁵ "Come", in this sense may not strictly have been current in the Elizabethan era: but it is dated as before 1650 in *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by R.W. Birchfield (Oxford, 1972), vol. 1, p.583.

⁶ Woolf, "Character in Fiction" ["Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown"], *Criterion*, 2, 8 (July 1924); *E*, III, p.421.

⁷ Andrew McNeillie, *E*, III, p.437.

consideration, not least because she uses a photological turn of phrase to illustrate it.

The shift in human relations, represented in the work of Samuel Butler and Bernard Shaw, Woolf sees symbolized in the figure of "one's cook":

The Victorian cook lived like a leviathan in the lower depths, formidable, silent, obscure, inscrutable; the Georgian cook is a creature of sunshine and fresh air; in and out of the drawing room, now to borrow the *Daily Herald*, now to ask advice about a hat. (*E*, III, p.422)

The imagery of a woman servant emerging leviathan-like from the dark depths of the kitchen into sunlight, fits suggestively with the opposition Woolf goes on to manipulate in "The Sun and the Fish"; and may suggest a shift from women's dark, subliminal, creaturely existence to their luminous and colourful liberation. We might compare it with Mrs. McNab's depiction as "a tropical fish, oaring its way through sun-lanced rocks". (*TL*, p.206) December 1910 may mean for Woolf, then, material improvement for women workers, and the emergence of women from intellectual darkness into enlightenment.⁸ After the cook, Woolf gives a "more solemn instance... of the power of the human race to change": a revised reading of the *Agamemnon*, in which "sympathies" (usually reserved for the patriarchal order sanctioned by Athena) may now be "almost entirely with Clytemnestra" (avenger of her daughter's death). In asking us to "consider the married life of the Carlyles," she returns to the theme of women's domestic servitude, and "the horrible domestic

⁸ Woolf's tone may suggest also a sense of discomfort at the cook's infringement of traditional class demarcations. Her diaries show her own sometimes fraught relations with domestic servants. Yet Woolf's contradictory feelings about class (something we will touch on in Chapter 14 in connection with her "Memories of a Working Women's Guild") may not necessarily undermine the portent of her imagery here; for, as we see below, she includes examples of women from higher up the social order (mythical and historical) as oppressed and servile.

tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time chasing beetles, scouring saucepans, instead of writing books." She spells out this tradition's hierarchized, gendered, relations as she announces its demise:⁹

All human relations have shifted - those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910. (*E*, III, p.422)

The dramatic suffrage events of 1910 provide a political (and artistic) context for such change, and the Post-Impressionist exhibition, "a shock to most people",¹⁰ its aesthetic reflection and articulation.

Woolf was aware of possible literary analogies to Post-Impressionism.¹¹ Arnold Bennett makes such a challenge in his (at the time, almost uniquely) favourable review of "Manet and the Post-Impressionists".¹² Woolf later reviews his comments:

⁹ Significantly, in scratching an allusion to Freud in a draft of "Character in Fiction", Woolf rejects the psychoanalytical dimension of this change. See, transcript of Woolf's "heavily revised typescript 'Character in Fiction'", *E*, III, p.504.

¹⁰ Woolf, "The Post-Impressionists", review of *The Post-Impressionists* by C. Lewis Hind (London, 1911), *Nation* (14 October 1911); *E*, I, p.379.

¹¹ Roger Fry encouraged literary and other artistic manifestations of Post-Impressionism. See Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London, 1940), pp.180, 183.

¹² "Jacob Tonson" [Arnold Bennett], "Neo-Impressionism and Literature", *The New Age*, 8 December 1910; Bennett, *Books and Persons. Being comments on a past epoch 1908-1911* (London, 1917), pp.284-285: "Noting in myself that a regular contemplation of these pictures inspires a weariness of all other pictures that are not absolutely first rate, giving them a disconcerting affinity to the tops of chocolate-boxes or to 'art' photographs, I have permitted myself to suspect that supposing some writer were to come along and do in words what these men have done in paint, I might conceivably be disgusted with nearly the whole of modern fiction, and I might have to begin again. This awkward experience will in all probability not happen to me, but it might happen to a writer younger than me. At any rate it is a fine thought. The average

These new pictures, he says, have wearied him of other pictures; is it not possible that some writer will come along and do in words what these men have done in paint? And suppose that happens, and Mr Bennett has to admit that he has been concerning himself unduly with inessentials, that he has been worrying himself to achieve infantile realisms? He will admit it, we are sure; and that he can ask himself such a question seems to us certain proof that he is what he claims to be - a 'creative artist'.¹³

Woolf takes up Bennett's gauntlet, I suggest, and effects some feminist literary innovations, analogous to Post-Impressionism, and based primarily on the use of colour. McNeillie notes not only that this review "appeared in the same month as that in which Woolf published her experimental story 'The Mark on the Wall' and, probably, shortly before she began to write *Kew Gardens*."¹⁴

Both these works were illustrated by her sister Vanessa Bell. *Kew Gardens*, furthermore, is a vivid celebration of colour. Colours in this story are almost the language of flowers, and are closely connected to the wafts of human conversation drifting past the flower beds which are the main focus of the story.

From the oval-shaped flower-bed there rose perhaps a hundred stalks spreading into heart-shaped or tongue-shaped leaves half way up and unfurling at the tip red or blue or yellow petals marked with spots of colour raised upon the surface; and from the red, blue or yellow gloom of the throat emerged a straight bar, rough with gold dust and slightly clubbed at the end. The petals were

critic always calls me, both in praise and dispraise, 'photographic'; and I always rebut the epithet with disdain, because in the sense meant by the average critic I am not photographic. But supposing I were? Supposing a young writer turned up and forced me, and some of my contemporaries - us who fancy ourselves a bit - to admit that we had been concerning ourselves unduly with inessentials, that we had been worrying ourselves to achieve infantile realisms? Well, that day would be a great and disturbing day - for us."

¹³ Woolf, "Books and Persons", *Times Literary Supplement*, 5 July 1917, p.319; Woolf, *E*, II, p.130.

¹⁴ McNeillie, *E* II, p.132.

voluminous enough to be stirred by the summer breeze, and when they moved, the red, blue and yellow lights passed one over the other, staining an inch of the brown earth beneath with a spot of the most intricate colour.... Then the breeze stirred rather more briskly overhead and the colour was flashed into the air above, into the eyes of the men and women who walk in Kew Gardens in July.¹⁵

The flowers are like mouths with tongues of colour, which become reference points for the snatches of conversations flitting around them. The story is quilted together with patches of dialogue and description of the natural life. The colours are associated with this sense of the multi-vocal, and human figures likened to butterflies flitting amongst the flowers: "these men and women straggled past the flower-bed with a curiously irregular movement not unlike that of the white and blue butterflies who crossed the turf in zig-zag flights from bed to bed." (*CSF*, p.90)

Woolf's more widely appreciated homage to colour in her essay on Walter Sickert celebrates "the violent rapture of colour"¹⁶ in modern painting, and the correspondence of colours in literature: in effect Woolf gives us a symposium on colour.

Just as dinner was announced, somebody asked: "But when were picture galleries invented?", a question naturally arising, for the discussion about the value of coloured lights had led somebody to say that in the eyes of the motorist red is not a colour but simply a danger signal. We shall very soon lose our sense of colour, another added, exaggerating, of course. Colours are used so much as signals now that they will very soon suggest action merely. (*WS*, pp.5-6)

Questions arise concerning the status of art as a separate or integrated realm of life; and the evaluation of colour as an aesthetic, spiritual or sensuous pleasure, or as an active intervention in the world. As in the final part

¹⁵ Woolf, *Kew Gardens* (London, 1919); *CSF*, p.90.

¹⁶ Woolf, *Walter Sickert. A Conversation* (London, 1934), p.12; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (*WS*).

of "The Sun and the Fish", Woolf turns to the world of creatures for examples of colour as something naturally and fully integrated into existence. This time the creatures are not fish, but insects - forest insects in South America which are "all eye": "Were we once insects like that, too, one of the diners asked; all eye?" (WS pp.7, 8) The response elicited is phrased in terms reminiscent of Woolf's description of the eclipse:

When I first went into Sickert's show, said one of the diners, I became completely and solely an insect - all eye. I flew from colour to colour, from red to blue, from yellow to green. Colours went spirally through my body lighting a flare as a rocket fell through the night and lit up greens and browns, grass and trees, and there in the grass a white bird. Colour warmed, thrilled, chafed, burnt, soothed, fed and finally exhausted me. For though the life of colour is a glorious life it is a short one. Soon the eye can hold no more; it shuts itself in sleep, and if the man who looks for cactuses had come he would only have seen a shrivelled air-ball on a red plush carpet. (WS, p.9)

Colours are in one moment as fleeting as a firework display and in another as physically solid and sustaining as food; as physically stimulating as sex. After a short-lived orgy of indulgence in colour, "the eye can hold no more", and all becomes "shrivelled". This reverie as well as developing the insect and flower imagery of *Kew Gardens*, reverberates with the imagery of Woolf's post-eclipse eulogy to colour and to life's precious transience. If "The Sun and the Fish" closes with the realization of humanity's unintegrated relationship to colour, here Woolf observes that "Ages ago we left the forest and went into the world, and the eye shrivelled and the heart grew, and the liver and intestines and the tongue and the hands and the feet." (WS, p.10) Not only has the course of evolution lessened humanity's visual sense, but humanity itself has moved from passive integration in the world of colour to a more active intervention, as the hands and feet testify.

Nevertheless there is an insect-like quality to the movements of thought and voices in this symposium. Colours serve, like flowers, as nourishing points of reference in this collective meditation. Like *A Room of One's Own*, the text is spoken by several subjects, and speech marks are not used consistently to differentiate between them. Woolf uses colour in close connection with her rendering of multi-vocal subjective (or intersubjective) expression.

Towards the close of *Walter Sickert* Woolf turns to the matter of interartistic analogies: "The novelist is always asking how can I bring the sun on to my page?" (*WS*, p.22) How can words express colour? Woolf formulates a response in terms reminiscent of her "amusing game": "It is a very complex business, the mixing and marrying of words that goes on, probably unconsciously in the poet's mind to feed the reader's eye". But she then strongly equates writing with painting:

All great writers are great colourists, just as they are musicians into the bargain; they always contrive to make their scenes glow and darken and change to the eye. Each of Shakespeare's plays has its dominant colour. And each writer differs of course as a colourist.... (*WS*, pp.23-24)

The best writers are "colourists": although Woolf makes other painterly analogies for writing (such as draughtsmanship and line drawing), it is the element of colour she emphasizes. On one level Woolf uses colouring as a metaphor for the writer's descriptive powers - the only way to have colour in writing is the secondary one of merely naming, although we are shown its considerable power; on another level, this metaphor extends to Woolf's description of the physical act of writing itself: like painting, writing is a process of marking - to write is to paint with words, to create colour. Conversely,

discussing the work of a caricaturist, Woolf elsewhere describes how "the very paint on the canvas begins to distil itself into words - sluggish, slow-dropping words that would, if they could, stain the page with colour; not writers' words."¹⁷

Woolf recommends inter-artistic awareness not only to writers, but to critics too:

The best critics, Dryden, Lamb, Hazlitt, were acutely aware of the mixture of elements, and wrote of literature with music and painting in their minds. Nowadays we are all so specialized that critics keep their brains fixed to the print, which accounts for the starved condition of criticism in our time, and the attenuated and partial manner in which it deals with its subject. (WS, p.24)

Woolf goes on to identify "hybrid artists" - those who cross the boundaries of their own discipline into the other arts. Some artists "bore deeper and deeper into the stuff of their own art; others are always making raids into the lands of others. Sickert it may be is among the hybrids, the raiders." (WS, p.27) Diane Filby Gillespie identifies Woolf herself as a "raider",¹⁸ suggesting that the territory she invades most regularly in her work is that of her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell.

In Gillespie's fascinating account of the long and close professional relationship enjoyed by the sisters, Vanessa Bell emerges as the primary influence from the visual arts upon Woolf's literary aesthetic. Gillespie's dense analysis of this relationship assures her aim: "to shift the emphasis in the ongoing discussion of Virginia Woolf and the visual arts from Roger Fry to Vanessa Bell; to

¹⁷ Woolf, "Pictures and Portraits", *Athenaeum*, 9 January 1920; *E*, III, pp.163-164.

¹⁸ Diane Filby Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts. The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Syracuse, NY, 1988), p.1.

shift the emphasis in the discussions of the sisters from the psychological to the professional and the aesthetic; and, in these contexts, to define and reveal more fully the pervasive role of the visual arts in Woolf's writing."¹⁹

Gillespie's discussion of colour is particularly interesting.²⁰ Persuasively using Woolf's diary entry on the eclipse, the "hoop of colour" passage from "The Sun and the Fish", and the corresponding one in *The Waves*,²¹ to illustrate her point that "Woolf's equation of the world with color is close to the view of modern painters like her sister and like Cézanne",²² she nonetheless misses the possible feminist import of colour in "The Sun and the Fish". Although Gillespie in general emphasizes the aesthetic rather than the feminist dimension of Woolf's work (without connecting them), this in itself benefits the debate on Woolf's feminist aesthetics. She has demonstrated most convincingly the importance of Woolf's professional relationship with her sister, and focused the interartistic debate on the practice and ideas of the woman artist closest to Woolf.

From the platform built by Gillespie, I want to examine Bell's development as a colourist, suggesting Woolf's literary understanding of colour and light as a parallel. This colourist aesthetic dovetails in Woolf's work, I propose, with the feminist aesthetic of the suffrage movement to produce a politicized deployment of colour.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.2.

²⁰ Ibid., pp.277-283.

²¹ Ibid., pp.282-283.

²² Ibid., p.282.

9.2 Orthodox views of Woolf and Post-Impressionism

Mine is not the orthodox route taken by criticism in discussions of Woolf's debt to the visual arts. Gillespie's is a long overdue acknowledgement of the primacy of Vanessa Bell in this debate, not just because Bell was very close to Woolf but also because she was a prominent (British) Post-Impressionist who exhibited in the 1912 show. As a woman artist and a *colourist* Bell is even more exciting.

Orthodox criticism passes over these connections, as until recently it saw Bell herself as merely a lesser, feminine, version of her companion artist Duncan Grant. Instead it has favoured the theories of Roger Fry and Clive Bell as major influences on Woolf's understanding of the visual arts.²³ My argument does not seek to deny

²³ This bias persists even after Gillespie's challenge, as evidenced, for example, by David Seed's recently published essay, "The Vision of the Artist: Painting and Experimentation in the Fiction of Virginia Woolf", *Proceedings of the English Association North 5*, (1990) p.41, in which he concludes that "There can be no doubt that Roger Fry's art-criticism helped Virginia Woolf to formulate her opposition to contemporary realism in fiction". Seed reaches this conclusion, which does not take the orthodox argument any further (but which is not to be disputed entirely), without any reference to Vanessa Bell. See also, for example, Mark Goldman, "Virginia Woolf and the Critic as Reader", *PMLA*, LXXX (June 1965), 275-284; Jan Heinemann, "The Revolt against Language: A Critical Note on Twentieth-Century Irrationalism with Special Reference to the Aesthetico-Philosophical Views of Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell", *Orbis Litterarum* 32 (1977) 212-228; John H. Roberts, "'Vision and Design' in Virginia Woolf", *PMLA*, LXI (1946), 835-847; Jonathan R. Quick, "Virginia Woolf, Roger Fry and Post-Impressionism", *The Massachusetts Review* 26 4 (1985) 547-570; Proudfit, *The Fact and the Vision: Virginia Woolf and Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Aesthetic*, The University of Michigan, Ph.D. (1967); Hershey Julien, *Virginia Woolf: Post-Impressionist Novelist*, The University of New Mexico, Ph.D. (1968), p.32: "For years [Woolf] was under the informal tutelage of Roger Fry, subject to his belief that literature and plastic art share basic principles"; J.K. Johnstone, *The Bloomsbury Group: A Study of E.M. Forster, Lytton Strachey, Virginia Woolf, and Their Circle* (New York, 1954); Robert Kiely, "Jacob's Room and Roger Fry: Two Studies in Still Life", *Modernism Reconsidered*, edited by Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle (Cambridge,

these influences, but to reconsider them contextually from a feminist perspective and in the light of Vanessa Bell's critical reappraisal. The theory most often applied to Woolf is the theory of significant form, actually formulated first by Clive Bell, but close to Fry's theory of pure form:

Woolf's close intellectual relation with Fry (whose biography she was to write) was part of their intimate friendship. His conception of the novel as 'a single perfectly organic aesthetic whole', and his readiness to centre this within the comprehensive theory of Significant Form and the nature of perception itself gave Woolf the confidence to convert it all to her own artistic purposes.²⁴

Woolf's even closer "intellectual relation" and "intimate friendship" with her sister is ignored. Marianna Torgovnick has attempted an analysis of Woolf's professional relationship with Vanessa, but she still discerns Roger Fry as "the thinker who most shaped her views".²⁵ The aesthetic practice of the sisters has been homogenized and subsumed under the rubric of the "Bloomsbury aesthetic", itself largely assembled from the

1983); Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge, 1973).

²⁴ Frank Gloversmith, "Autonomy Theory: Ortega, Roger Fry, Virginia Woolf", *The Theory of Reading*, edited by Frank Gloversmith (Sussex, 1984), pp.159-60. Compare, Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London and New York, 1990), p.93.

²⁵ Marianna Torgovnick, *The Visual Arts, Pictorialism and the Novel: James, Lawrence and Woolf* (Princeton 1985), p.62; David Dowling, *Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf* (London and Basingstoke, 1985), pp.98-99, similarly observes: "[Woolf's] major fiction owes a huge debt to Roger Fry.... Although she occasionally commented on Fry's own paintings, Woolf was far more absorbed in the work of her sister Vanessa, who in turn, through her close personal as well as pedagogical relationship, was heavily influenced by Fry." See also, C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", *Comparative Literature* 41 4 (1989), pp.329, 330: "More than anyone else ... Fry taught Woolf how to look at novels with a painter's eye.... [Woolf's] intense and conflicted relationship with her sister ... also shaped and ... to some extent limited her understanding of painting and of differences between painters' and writers' sensibilities."

theories of Fry and Clive Bell.²⁶ For this reason, in looking at the feminine sources of Woolf's visual aesthetic and their precedents, we must travel the more beaten track as well as chart a newer one. It is the path Fry turns from in his early formulations of Post-Impressionism that Woolf, in sympathy with the work of her sister, seems to follow.

9.3 The Gun Powder Plot

The "Art-Quake of 1910" was "No gradual infiltration, but - bang! an assault along the whole academic front of art."²⁷ This riotous and shocking explosion of colour happened appropriately enough on 5 November.

A date more favourable ... for revealing the existence of a wide-spread plot to destroy the whole fabric of European painting could hardly have been better chosen. On Saturday accordingly the Press was invited to the Grafton Gallery - an admirable substitute for the vaults of Westminster - where the new Guido Fawkes, his colleagues, and alleged predecessors are exhibiting their gunpowder. Mr. Roger Fry, I regret to say, has acted the part of Catesby, while a glance at the names of the honorary committee reveal that more than one member of the Upper House is implicated. It is the way of modern conspiracies; we all join them sooner or later. To-day, which is the private view, it will be decided whether the anticipated explosion is going to take place.²⁸

Before we identify and test the artists' gunpowder, to which Robert Ross (in keeping with most early reviews of the show) acrimoniously refers, it is worth noting the

²⁶ Beverly H. Twitchell, *Cézanne and Formalism in Bloomsbury* (Ann Arbor, 1987), p.188, nevertheless claims that "in Bloomsbury it was Virginia Woolf who most clearly anticipated the ground upon which the formalist 'hegemony' would finally collapse." See Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", p.356.

²⁷ Desmond MacCarthy, "The Art Quake of 1910", *The Listener*, 1 February 1945, p.123.

²⁸ Robert Ross, "The Post-Impressionists at the Grafton: The Twilight of the Idols", *Morning Post*, 7 November 1910, 3; J.B. Bullen (ed.), *Post-Impressionists in England* (London and New York, 1988), p.100.

wider context in which his rhetoric detonates. From the distance of eighty odd years since the exhibition, it is easy enough to appreciate in a general sense the wit in the impresario's choice of date;²⁹ but it was not necessarily the festive associations of the date that would come most prominently to mind in November 1910. At this time people sensed a very real danger of the commemorated event itself being repeated: the government, if not indeed blown up, was in fact to fall. This contemporary aspect should not escape our notice. George Dangerfield memorably sums up 1910's climate of old order decline:

*(Dying! In the streets of London, the last horse-bus clattered towards extinction.... There was talk of wild young people in London, ... of night clubs; of negroid dances. People gazed in horror at the paintings of Gauguin, and listened with delighted alarm to the barbaric measures of Stravinsky. The old order, the old bland world was dying fast...)*³⁰

Ian Dunlop reminds us of this climate's political upheavals:

A constitutional crisis over the power of the House of Lords developed, and in the winter of 1910 Asquith dissolved Parliament and called for a general election. In November, a few days after the opening of the Post-Impressionist exhibition, the Home Secretary, Winston Churchill, ordered the troops in to break up the strike of Welsh miners at Tonypany, an action that was to have lasting effects on labour relations in Britain.

²⁹ Indeed, the art historian, Ian Dunlop, in his canonization of "Manet and the Post-Impressionists" as one of the "Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art", notes that: "The fifth of November is, as all English children know, reserved for the memory of Guy Fawkes and his attempt to blow up the Houses of Parliament with all inside it, including King James I. In the course of time the date has become an excuse for a party, and Guy Fawkes has emerged, if not as a hero, as a kind of patron saint for all those wishing to destroy tradition at one stroke." Dunlop, *The Shock of the New. Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art* (London, 1972), p.120.

³⁰ George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1936), pp. 63-64.

Throughout that year the suffragette movement gained momentum.³¹

We have already noted that "Black Friday" - when police turned to brutal tactics against women demonstrators - came only days after the show opened (18 November 1910), and that Woolf herself attended the two important meetings, leading up to this event, at the Albert Hall which must have coincided with the show's opening.³²

"Vitality and absolute commitment motivated both the Suffragettes and Post-Impressionism", comments Frances Spalding, noting that reports on growing suffragette violence "mingled with those on the Post-Impressionists", as "'Black Friday' set off a programme of window-smashing, picture-slashing, arson and bombs".³³

Dangerfield, having noted, echoing Woolf, that "the Women's Rebellion - the outrageous Suffragette Movement of 1910-14 - was above all things a movement from darkness into light, and from death into life", points out that the "militant suffragettes did not actually become militant until November 1910".³⁴ He reminds us of the "purple bannerettes" carried by the suffragettes, and later "torn and trampled" by their police assailants on "Black Friday".³⁵ At the time of the Post-Impressionist show, then, the suffrage movement was making a massive impact, as well as an equally colourful spectacle, on the streets.³⁶

³¹ Dunlop, p.132.

³² See Woolf, *L, I*, p.438.

³³ Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (London, 1980), p.139. See also, S.K. Tillyard *The Impact of Modernism 1900-1920. Early Modernism and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Edwardian England* (London and New York, 1988), pp.112-13, who, without mentioning the suffrage movement, offers a summary of the "highly charged" "political atmosphere" dominating the press at the time of the first exhibition.

³⁴ Dangerfield, pp. 138, 141.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.152, 153.

³⁶ William C. Wees, *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde* (Manchester, 1972), p.20, points out that the exhibition "might not seem to be like the Suffragette's 'Black Friday' or Carson's opening attacks on Home Rule. As it turned out, however, a Van Gogh, a

J.B. Bullen, moreover, indicates that the exhibition, which "represented an attack on the values of western culture from the ground of art", was received in a climate fearful of imminent decline into anarchy;³⁷ and furnishes ample evidence that it was initially understood as a symptom of the cultural degeneration already prophesied in the work of Nordau, and later addressed by Spengler.³⁸ Before looking at the presentation and (in brief) the content of "Manet and the Post-Impressionists", then, we can gain an insight by surveying the findings of its outraged and hostile recipients.³⁹ The impact of these works on London in 1910 is after all very different to their reception today.⁴⁰

Ebenezer Wake Cook, follower of Nordau and enemy of modernism,⁴¹ was one of the most vitriolic detractors of the Post-Impressionists, who, he claims,

Gauguin, or a Matisse aroused as violent a public reaction as a Lillie Lenton or a Sir Edward Carson. Between 1910 and 1914, labour strife, the Parliament act, screaming suffragettes, and artists' 'maltreatment of the human form divine' seemed, to many people, to be parts of a conspiracy to undermine traditional order and decency."

³⁷ Bullen, p.15. See also Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (London, 1980), p.136ff.

³⁸ See, William Greenslade, *Degeneration, Culture and the Novel 1880-1940* (Cambridge, 1994), pp.129-133.

³⁹ Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London, 1940), pp.162-163, recalls that even after the exhibition closed the tide of reactionary opinion condemning it continued: "[Fry's] hall table was littered with letters. They were still abusing him."

⁴⁰ Woolf herself makes the same point in *Roger Fry: A Biography*, p.153: "It is difficult in 1939, when a great hospital is benefitting from a centenary exhibition of Cézanne's works, and the gallery is daily crowded with devout and submissive worshippers, to realise what violent emotions those pictures excited less than thirty years ago."

⁴¹ Cook's *Anarchism in Art and Chaos in Criticism* (1904) was "an attack on modernism in art modelled on Max Nordau's *Degeneration*"; Bullen, p.118.

present a case for historical, psychological, and pathological analysis, rather than art criticism; the whole show being intentionally made to look like the output of a lunatic asylum, its aim being to shock the bourgeoisie, and make talk, to attain the only success they aimed at, the *succès de scandale*.⁴²

Ross detects "the chicanery of spiritualism, automatic writing, and the narratives of the neuropath",⁴³ and talks of racial degeneracy and inferiority: fearing that artists might "'gauguinise' the European landscape or the Aryan race", he observes that a "later blossom of an unsavoury stock has not only dispersed with chiaroscuro (one of the achievements of Cézanne, I learn) but has dispensed with painting".⁴⁴ Notions of racial impurity associated in the minds of detractors with the paintings of Gauguin, and the insanity of Van Gogh, then, are seen to accompany the abandonment of traditional representation of light and dark: "chiaroscuro".

The source of the evil "plague", it transpires, is "Romanticism". Cook, in a letter to the press, concurs with Ross's diagnosis⁴⁵ of Satanism,⁴⁶ and remarks significantly on Post-Impressionism's precursors who had "a mania for painting flesh with mud, making Eve's fair daughters look unwashed; while others painted it in ghastly greys and greens, as if in the last stages of decomposition." And "These sickening aberrations could never have got a footing" but for the "anti-patriotic campaign in favour of anarchism and ultimate chaos" by the "'Modernity' critics".⁴⁷ Cook's letter appears in

⁴² Ebenezer Wake Cook, "The Post-Impressionists", *Morning Post*, 19 November 1910, 4; Bullen, p.118.

⁴³ Ross, "The Post-Impressionists at the Grafton: The Twilight of the Idols"; Bullen, p.101. Woolf recalls, in *Roger Fry*, p.156, that a Dr. Hyslop "lectured on the exhibition in Roger Fry's presence. He gave his opinion before an audience of artists and craftsmen that the pictures were the work of madmen."

⁴⁴ Ross; Bullen, p.103.

⁴⁵ Ross; Bullen, p.104.

⁴⁶ Cook, "The Post-Impressionists"; Bullen, p.119.

⁴⁷ Cook; Bullen, p.119.

the *Morning Post* the day after "Black Friday".⁴⁸ Consciously or not, he seems to speak both to the exhibition and headline-making suffrage demonstration, his disgust at the mud-besmirched and ghastly-coloured daughters of Eve applicable to both realms.⁴⁹

When reactionary critics are not deriding the primitivism and insanity they see represented on the walls of the Grafton, they are snorting in disbelief at the most obvious symptom to them of such degeneracy: the "barbaric"⁵⁰ colours. Only those "not absolutely colour blind" could disagree with their findings. Most furore is aroused where women, perhaps because of their stereotyping as "Nature", are depicted in exotic and "unnatural" colours. Matisse's *La Femme aux Yeux Verts*, for example, was one of the most reviled images.⁵¹ An anonymous reviewer typically comments on the paint's capacity to effect "a violent bilious headache":

In a typical [Gauguin] hideous brown women, with purple hair and vitriolic faces, squat in the midst of a nightmare landscape of drunken palm trees, crude green grass, vermilion rocks, and numerous glaringly coloured excrescences impossible to identify.... Words are powerless to describe an epileptic landscape by Henri Matisse, quite without form, its kaleidoscopic colour scheme only bearable from the next room.

⁴⁸ Cook, "The Post-Impressionists", *Morning Post*, 19 November 1910. The *Daily Mirror's* headlines were "BLACK FRIDAY." See, Antonia Raeburn, pp.154, 155.

⁴⁹ Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (London, 1980), p.139: "The Suffragettes were attacked for being unfeminine; Post-Impressionism was seen to assault standards of female beauty."

⁵⁰ Ross; Bullen, p.102. See also, Unsigned review, "Paint Run Mad: Post-Impressionism at the Grafton Galleries", *Daily Express*, 9 November 1910, 8; Bullen, p.105: "In the large gallery the eye meets Gauguin's primitive, almost barbaric, studies of Tahitian women - bizarre, morbid, and horrible."

⁵¹ For example, P.G. Konody, "Art Notes: Post-Impressionism at the Grafton Galleries", *Observer*, 13 November 1910, p.9, and the anonymous review in the *Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 1910. See also, Jacqueline V. Falkenheim, *Roger Fry and the Beginnings of Formalist Art Criticism* (Ann Arbor, 1980), p.21; Bullen, p.16. See Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, plate 46, p.135.

A revolution to be successful must presumably revolve; but, undeniably clever as they often are, the catherine-wheel antics of the Post-Impressionists are not likely to wake many responsive chords in British breasts.⁵²

The colours' impact is apparently so overpowering that it obscures the subject-matter of the painting: "vermillion splodges"⁵³ have taken over. It is unclear, however, whether "hideous brown women" refers to the distorted palette of the artist or the women's natural skin colour. Such ambiguity allows a strongly racist interpretation to creep in. Wilfred Scawen Blunt admits (in his diary) to finding the colours themselves attractive, in some cases, but the subjects, where discerned, unsavoury: Gauguin's brightly coloured Tahitian women "are not works of art at all, unless throwing a handful of mud against a wall may be called one. They are works of idleness and impotent stupidity, a pornographic show."⁵⁴ He responds with racialism and misogyny to the subject matter, and with scorn to the technique. The sensuous depiction of "brown people" and "a woman suckling a child"⁵⁵ is considered an outrage to decorum.

Nordau popularized these views when he claimed to be resurrecting the notion of "The Social Mission of Art" in the face of the predominant "theory of art for art's sake: *l'art pour l'art*", but his vision seems more religious than social: "The art of the future will be ... a mighty cathedral, ... the hallowed place wherein mankind will rise again to the childship of God".⁵⁶ Under

⁵² Unsigned review, "Paint Run Mad: Post-Impressionism at the Grafton Galleries", *Daily Express*, 9 November 1910, 8; Bullen, pp.105-106.

⁵³ Ibid..

⁵⁴ Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *My Diaries: being a personal narrative of events, 1888-1914* (London, 1932), entry for 15 November 1910; Bullen, pp.113-114. Woolf also quotes from Blunt's diary entry in *Roger Fry*, p.156.

⁵⁵ Blunt, *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Max Nordau, *On Art and Artists*, translated by W.F. Harvey (London, 1907), p.29.

"Physiognomies in Painting", Nordau assesses Cézanne, in terms which anticipate the main critical response to Post-Impressionism: Cézanne is a revolutionary member of the "rabble", already back in his true lowly station; and his art effects a social revolution which pulls everyone down into the gutter.⁵⁷

Fry himself comments on the social and political impact of "Manet and the Post-Impressionists", confirming its challenge to the "cultured" upper classes, who

felt instinctively that their special culture was one of their social assets. That to be able to speak glibly of Tang and Ming, of Amico di Sandro and Baldovinetti, gave them a social standing and a distinctive cachet.... It was felt that one could only appreciate Amico di Sandro when one had acquired a certain considerable mass of erudition and given a great deal of time and attention, but to admire a Matisse required only a certain sensibility. One could feel fairly sure that one's maid could not rival one in the former case, but might by a mere haphazard gift of Providence surpass one in the second. So that the accusation of revolutionary anarchism was due to a social rather than an aesthetic prejudice.⁵⁸

The idea of "one's maid" conversing on equal terms about art is anathema to Fry's "cultured public". It is reminiscent, however, of Woolf's celebration of the emergence of the leviathan cook into the polite sunlit company of the drawing room. Significantly, both Fry and Woolf identify the figure of a woman worker as the principle threat to the "cultured" élite. They both reflect Dunlop's and Wees's identification of Post-Impressionism with the radical political climate of the period.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp.236-37.

⁵⁸ Fry, "Retrospect", *Vision and Design* (London, 1920), pp.192-93. See, Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p.158.

Reviewers' language was "in keeping with [their] papers' own politics";⁵⁹ and negative comparisons between Post-Impressionism and feminism were not unknown:

The *Westminster Gazette* used a husband and wife dialogue as its format. The husband showed no interest in visiting the show, but the wife was determined to fit it in with her 'non-militant' women's meeting and plays by Bernard Shaw and Shakespeare. The woman it portrayed was, moreover, of a particular cast, as her attitudes revealed. She was interested in suffrage and in Shaw, who was associated with the portrayal of radical women and with socialist politics. But, the *Westminster* hinted, it was a limited and perhaps fashionable radicalism. The woman attended a group which did not advocate militant feminist action, and the safety of Shakespeare tempered the socialism of Shaw.⁶⁰

Connections between suffragism and Post-Impressionism could be interpreted in more or less radical ways. But the connection between Shaw and Post-Impressionism is made by Woolf herself shortly after the show had opened.

I suppose you have been going everywhere - to the Grafton Galleries and the Bernard Shaw play. Now that Clive [Bell] is in the van of aesthetic opinion, I hear a great deal about pictures. I don't think them so good as books. But why all the Duchesses are insulted by the post-impressionists, a modest sample of painters, innocent even of indecency, I can't conceive. However, one mustn't say that they are like other pictures, only better, because that makes everyone angry.⁶¹

Tillyard has surveyed the press for other feminist connections with Post-Impressionism.⁶² But she does not

⁵⁹ Tillyard, p.110.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.102; Tillyard cites 'E.S.', "Post-Impressionism", *Westminster Gazette*, 21 November 1910, p.3. Woolf herself alludes in fiction to anti-suffragism in the press. See *N&D*, p.87, where workers in a suffrage office discuss it: "'We have to remind her sometimes that others have a right to their views even if they differ from our own.... *Punch* has a very funny picture this week, about a Suffragist and an agricultural labourer.'"

⁶¹ Woolf, Letter to Violet Dickinson, 27 November 1910, *L*, I, p.440.

⁶² As well as the *Westminster Gazette*, Tillyard, p.102, notes a sketch in *Punch* and a piece in *Isis*: "In the *Punch* sketch it was a woman who was trying to understand, and a male art critic who was trying to inform. The *Westminster Gazette* suggested that it was women who took an interest in the show. Both papers, despite their

link them to the dramatic and large-scale suffrage upheavals being played out on the streets at the time of the exhibition, nor with the feminist implications in the imminent collapse of government. Instead, she proposes Post-Impressionism's connections with a longer and quieter revolution in women's lives: "A modicum of social and financial emancipation may have contributed to their presence." But, for Tillyard, Post-Impressionism's significance for women lies mainly in its connections with the Arts and Crafts Movement and its roots in the nineteenth century. She does identify in Post-Impressionism, however, a new language for women, whose grounding in the Arts and Crafts Movement, she suggests, put them "in a position to use the language and aesthetic provided to understand Post-Impressionism for themselves".⁶³

Although Tillyard stresses women's involvement with Post-Impressionism as "limited" to the role of audience or patron, and shows they were lampooned for flocking "to the gallery as if it were a fashion house",⁶⁴ she nevertheless confirms that this art represented a new language for women, and that, for these very reasons, men understood it as a threat. Tillyard's interest in women and the Arts and Crafts Movement, however, does not extend to a consideration of its connections with the suffrage artists who played such an important part in the

digs at the follies of the *beau monde*, made it quite clear that there was a large female contingent among the followers of Post-Impressionism. *Isis* was more explicit. 'London', it said, 'for once, has allowed herself to be startled. I found her (she was mainly female) gaping and at a loss for words before the Grafton Post-Impressionists'." She cites "Post-Impressionist Problems", *Punch*, 23 November 1910; and quotes from Desmond Coke, "Our London Letter", *Isis*, 19 November 1910, p.78. Tillyard, pp.102-103, also notes that "underneath the humour these sketches revealed men's shock, anxiety and, perhaps, fear that women were entering an institution that had hitherto been almost exclusively masculine."

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.103.

⁶⁴ Tillyard, p.104; Tillyard quotes a Headline in the *Star*, 9 November 1910, p.2.

feminist demonstrations during the politically volatile period of the first exhibition. Contrary to Tillyard's assessment, the reason for the disappearance of "satirical attacks upon women"⁶⁵ by the time of the 1912 show, I suggest, is that Post-Impressionism was by then sanitized, in some circles, of its initially potent political associations.

The neglect of such obviously fruitful connections between women's involvement in the nineteenth century Arts and Crafts Movement, and the suffrage artists and the political climate of the early twentieth century, casts doubt on Tillyard's reasoning that Post-Impressionism has more in common with the former than the latter. She suggests that art historians have been misled by Dangerfield and his followers who "overestimated the dangers of social upheaval and the degree of crisis in Edwardian Britain. Bloodshed in the cause of political change was very limited and parliament held on firmly to its executive authority."⁶⁶ This assertion diminishes the impact of the new reign of violence meeting not only the striking miners but the women's movement at that time. Tillyard never mentions the infamous "Black Friday", an omission that unsettles her conclusion that her "new historical interpretation" in effect "ruins the notion of Post-Impressionism as a sign of, or element in, social turbulence."⁶⁷ We might more readily conclude that the immediate impact of Post-Impressionism should be summarized in the broad terms of "social turbulence". It is associated in the reviews with romanticism, manifold degeneracy, the revolutionary over-throw of the social and political status quo, suffragism, and riotous colour.

⁶⁵ Tillyard, p.104.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p.113.

⁶⁷ Ibid..

Colour, so offensive to Post-Impressionism's detractors, meets with warm approval in the pages of a feminist journal:

His glowing patches of colour have a marvellous quality of subdued light, as though, indeed, the rays of the sun were truly veiled and controlled by them as they are by passing through the semi-transparent glass of a thirteenth-century church window.... In certain ancient glass a deep flesh-tone of a brown or pinkish brown is used, and this low tone ... has a marvellous effect in harmonising and subduing colours that might in different company have been violent and even offensive.... Gauguin has found the secret in the isles of the Pacific, and, with his wonderful bronze flesh-tones, we find him also in full possession of the glorious glass colours which the old glass-blowers of eight hundred years ago began to make, and which Nature has finished in her own laboratory with water, wind, and the dust of the earth.⁶⁸

The suffrage artist Mary Lowndes does not find Gauguin's colours "violent" or "offensive", as do most reviewers, but harmonized and subdued.⁶⁹ She enjoys his depiction of women's flesh tones, and her window analogy suggests their transformation of solar light. Perhaps it is not only her interest in stained glass, but also her experience as organizer of suffrage colours, that makes Lowndes sympathetic to Gauguin's palette. Indeed, her analogy with glass-blowing might be seen to prefigure Woolf's description of post-eclipse colour as a delicate "globe of glass".

I have stressed the terms of its early reception before looking at Post-Impressionism as it was first theorized, because I want in the next chapter to consider the theories of those who mounted the exhibition with the nature of its public impact already in mind. Rather than

⁶⁸ Mary Lowndes, "Gauguin - A Personal Impression", *The Englishwoman*, 9 (1911), pp.183-84. This is the only suffragist review of the exhibition I have been able to find.

⁶⁹ See, Dunlop, p.146: "Gauguin was a revelation to her, particularly as a colourist, and she felt obliged to rethink her artistic views."

remaining fixed and unchanging, these theories evolved into very different formulations by the time of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition in 1912. By then the tumult surrounding the first exhibition, including its political associations as well as its romantic colourist reputation, had subsided.⁷⁰ Post-Impressionism became the quasi-religion of "Significant Form", a spiritual experience for the initiated - and was mocked as such by its detractors. Yet the *Daily Herald* - incidentally the newspaper Woolf, as an index of change since 1910, finds the cook borrowing - declared of the second exhibition:

The Post-Impressionists are in the company of the Great rebels of the World. In politics the only movements worth considering are Woman Suffrage and Socialism. They are both Post-Impressionist in their desire to scrap old decaying forms and find for themselves a new working ideal.⁷¹

I will arrive at a comparison of Fry's early formulations on Post-Impressionism with his later theoretical developments; arguing that these, along with Clive Bell's more extreme opinions, are not the most appropriate for investigating Woolf's aesthetic. Woolf, on the contrary, stays with the earlier interpretations of Post-Impressionism, and develops an interest in colour closely related to the aesthetic practice of her sister Vanessa who exhibited at the second Post-Impressionist exhibition. My argument centres on colour, which Fry and Clive Bell do not reject as an important factor in Post-Impressionism; but they do come to subsume it in the promotion of "Significant Form", where colour loses the kind of impact and definition commanded in other influential theories about the art. Woolf's literary

⁷⁰ See Bullen, pp.29-31.

⁷¹ Christina Walshe, *Daily Herald*, 25 March 1913; quoted by Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (London, 1980), p.139.

engagement with Post-Impressionism, I will suggest, might be differently read with consideration of colour as independent of significant form. I will be focusing on the reception and theories of Post-Impressionism, and as with this chapter, Woolf herself will not be in the foreground of the next. The excursus is, again, necessary if we are to reappraise Post-Impressionism's relation to Woolf studies.

CHAPTER X

ROMANTIC TO CLASSIC: POST-IMPRESSIONIST THEORIES FROM
1910 TO 1912

On or about *November* 1910, Roger Fry invented the term Post-Impressionism to describe the departure from Impressionism by French-based artists "out of the cul-de-sac into which naturalism had led them". Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh, the most prominently represented in the exhibition, were all, by 1910, "long since dead".¹ A smaller sample of the contemporary work of Fauve and Cubist artists such as Matisse and Picasso was shown to indicate the continuation of this newly acclaimed school. "The whole emphasis was thrown on to the old masters"² and the living were not represented by their most recent, avant-garde, achievements;³ cubism "was the most serious omission."⁴ The exhibition was heavily biased "in favour of 'Expressionism'",⁵ and put forward a strongly romantic aesthetic: it "popularised the notion that artists were romantic geniuses".⁶

¹ Alan Bowness, "Introduction", *Post-Impressionism. Cross-Currents in European Painting*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 1979-1980, Catalogue (London, 1979), p.9. Bowness also points out the instability of the term, Post-Impressionism, which has since come to describe a much broader (and contradictory) range of art.

² Benedict Nicolson, "Post-Impressionism and Roger Fry", *Burlington Magazine*, 93 (1951), p.13.

³ Picasso, for example, had completed *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*, widely regarded as the first cubist picture, in 1907, but three years later in London he was represented as a much more conservative artist. See, Francis Frascina, *Cubism: Picasso and Braque* (Milton Keynes, 1983), p.29.

⁴ Nicolson, p.13.

⁵ Dennis Farr, *English Art 1870-1940* (Oxford, 1978), p.201.

⁶ Nicolson, p.15. Nicolson notes that Fry was later to experience "a lapse in memory" concerning the content of the show: significantly he elides the "romantic Rouault". See also, Fry *Vision and Design* (London, 1920), p.159.

10.1 The 1910 exhibition catalogue

According to MacCarthy, who anonymously performed for Fry "the ticklish job of writing the preface to the catalogue",⁷ the Post-Impressionist artist's individual expression is at odds with the naturalistic project of the Impressionists, who "were interested in analysing the play of light and shadow into a multiplicity of distinct colours; they refined upon what was already illusive in nature."⁸ Impressionism, then, is concerned with pushing analysis of the object world to the limits. The Post-Impressionists use larger, flatter areas of colour in departing from their technique and their naturalism.

The Impressionists' atomistic observation of the natural world might lead us, following Bergsonian criticism, to connect this method with Woolf's recommendation: "Let us record the atoms as they fall". Woolf, however, is interested not merely in how the eye physically records the world, but in how consciousness, "the mind", deals with the information. Her sentence in full reads: "Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness." (CR, p.190) This process is similar to the workings of Woolf's "amusing game": "each sight", just as in "The Sun and the Fish", "scores upon the consciousness" - that is, starts up a "pattern", or fits in the mind by finding a mate. This is not a cold objective exercise in observation, but a dynamic subjective interaction with the world: a feat of imagination. The Post-Impressionists "were not concerned with recording

⁷ MacCarthy, "The Art Quake of 1910", *The Listener*, 1 February 1945, p.124.

⁸ MacCarthy, "The Post-Impressionists", *Manet and the Post-Impressionists*, November 8 to January 15, 1910-11, Grafton Galleries, Exhibition Catalogue (London, 1910), p.8.

impressions of colour or light" and "were interested in the discoveries of the Impressionists only so far as these ... helped them to express emotions which the objects themselves evoked; their attitude towards nature was far more independent, not to say rebellious."⁹ They did not reject light and colour so much, then, as the action of "recording impressions". Light and colour, it is implied, become vehicles for the artist's expression of emotions before the object world. This is in keeping with Gauguin's dictum: "Derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it," he instructs, "and think more of the creation which will result than of nature."¹⁰ We might remember that the generalizations, "nature" and "the object world", usually include women.

In insisting "so much upon the importance of rendering ... exact impression", Impressionism betrays the object it seeks to capture which "as transferred to canvas ... was just so much shimmer and colour" and "all the emotion and associations" that the object "may be made to convey in poetry were omitted."¹¹ We might consider the gender implications set up in this Impressionist model of subject and object. The artist is automatically assumed to be male; and it is his "exact impression" of the object-world that ultimately prevents that world from being "rendered at all". His surface, subjective, impressions get in the way of his object to the point of obliterating, or overwhelming it. This intervention may be interpreted in explicitly sexual terms, as evidenced by the famous quip by the Impressionist painter, Pierre Auguste Renoir. His crippled hands prompted a journalist

⁹ MacCarthy, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Paul Gauguin, Letter to Emile Schuffenecker, 14 August 1888, *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis*, edited by Maurice Malingue (Paris, 1949), p.134; *Theories of Modern Art. A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, ed. Herschel B. Chipp, p.60.

¹¹ MacCarthy, "The Post-Impressionists", p.9.

to ask "With such hands, how do you paint?" Renoir replied: "With my prick".¹²

MacCarthy refers Impressionism's failings to the superior capacity of poetry, which, he suggests, can convey the "emotion and associations" of the object. Post-Impressionism is the result of dissatisfaction with this failing¹³ in a tradition, of which the Impressionist "plein-air" technique is a culmination, dedicated to remaining faithful to nature.¹⁴ The Post-Impressionists cheerfully abandon this conscientious tradition in favour of expression and design. The expression of the object's true essence and its emotional and associative evocation in the subject is the proper task of art: "a good rocking-horse often has more of the true horse about it than an instantaneous photograph of a Derby winner."¹⁵

Manet's "revolutionary" achievement is thus the abolishment of the conventional opposition of light and

¹² Jean Renoir, the artist's son, *Renoir, My Father* (1958), translated by Randolph and Dorothy Weaver (London, 1962), p.185, recalls that "No one laughed at his quip. For what he said was a striking expression of the truth; one of those rare testimonies, so seldom expressed in the history of the world, to the miracle of the transformation of matter into spirit." Jeanette Winterson, in *Written on the Body* (London, 1992), p.22, provides a feminist retort to Renoir's quip: "She said, 'Don't you know that Renoir claimed he painted with his penis?' 'Don't worry,' I said. 'He did. When he died they found nothing between his balls but an old brush.'"

¹³ MacCarthy, "The Post-Impressionists", p.9.

¹⁴ The surrealist painter Max Ernst has an anecdote about his Sunday-painter father, which demonstrates this concept. See, Ernst, *Monitor*, edited by Huw Wheldon, (London, 1962), pp.162-163: "He had such a scrupulous conception of the truth, that I was revolted by it. He once painted a landscape in the garden and there was a tree in the landscape. Later on he took this canvas into his studio and tried to arrange it a little bit and there was this tree in this canvas which didn't fit in - it was against the harmony of the whole thing. So he decided finally to take out this tree: to suppress the tree in his canvas. O.K. And the canvas looked very good afterwards. But then his conscience was so upset by the fact that he had told a lie, as he thought, that he finally decided to suppress the tree also in the garden. He cut it down! It was the most beautiful tree we had in the garden."

¹⁵ MacCarthy, "The Post-Impressionists", p.9.

shade in painting: "He adopted, too, hitherto unknown oppositions of colour. In fact he endeavoured to get rid of chiaroscuro."¹⁶ At the root of Post-Impressionism, then, is the revolutionary use of "oppositions of colour" which overturns traditional chiaroscuro. We might compare this with Woolf's own use of colour in her eclipse story, where bright colour displaces the traditional opposition of sunlight and shade.

From the explanation of Manet's precedence, we can see that the "architectural effect" achieved by Cézanne appears to be founded on the use of the new oppositional deployment of colour planes: this makes for "geometrical simplicity", as well as for the schematization of the picture. Again the structural quality of colour and its conscious arrangement, coincide with Woolf's own design practice. Interestingly, MacCarthy's response to Matisse bears little resemblance to that of the early reviewers (their hostility aside) who explode in anger or mirth at Matisse's "epileptic" and "Kaleidoscopic" colour. But MacCarthy lights upon "line" and "rhythm" as the most notable features of this "primitive", or "barbaric", art.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., p.10.

¹⁷ Ibid..

10.2 Roger Fry's sources¹⁸

Fry's "conversion to the cause of modern art"¹⁹ came in 1906 when he saw two Cézannes at the International Society's exhibition.²⁰ His review shows that Cézanne's art is "effected without any chiaroscuro - merely by a perfect instinct for the expressive quality of tone values."²¹ Elsewhere he remarks on Cézanne's decorative use of colour, "the values of ... which indicate mass":²² colour is again linked to mass - it is structural. Yet in Fry's formative piece, "An Essay in Aesthetics" of January 1909, having identified "the emotional elements of design" as rhythm of line, mass, space, light and shade, and colour, he concludes that "Colour is the only one of our elements which is not of critical or universal importance to life, and its emotional effect is neither

¹⁸ Farr, *English Art 1870-1940* (Oxford, 1978), p.189, observes: "no new developments, even those which seem to break most violently with tradition, can be entirely dissociated from what has gone before". Post-Impressionism may be referred back for precedents in, for example Pater and Whistler, or in the Arts and Crafts Movement, as discussed by S.K. Tillyard, *The Impact of Modernism 1900-1920. Early Modernism and the Arts and Crafts Movement in Edwardian England* (London and New York, 1988), pp.xv-xvii. It may also be possible to find its roots as early as "that crucial change of direction in the later 1880s when experience rather than appearance became the reason for art", and even to find in some senses that "Post-Impressionism is Victorian painting", as suggested by Bowness, "Introduction", *Post-Impressionism. Cross-Currents in European Painting*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 1979-1980, Catalogue (London, 1979), p.11. My argument is more concerned, however, with the "tremendous impact" of Fry's launching of Post-Impressionism, which ensured that "English art was never to be the same afterwards" (Farr, p.201); and with its reception as a shocking and violent break with tradition.

¹⁹ Bowness, "Introduction", *Post-Impressionism. Cross-Currents in European Painting*, p.9.

²⁰ See Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (London, 1980), p.117.

²¹ Roger Fry, review, *Athenaeum*, 13 January 1906; quoted by Woolf in *Roger Fry* (London, 1940), p.112.

²² Fry, Letter to the *Burlington Magazine*, in *Letters of Roger Fry*, edited with an introduction by Denys Sutton (London, 1972), vol. 1, p.299; also in Bullen, pp.44-48. The *Burlington Magazine's* "Unsigned review" of the exhibition is reprinted in Bullen, pp.41-44.

so deep nor so clearly determined as the others."²³ Fry's enthusiasm for colour seems to have lessened.²⁴ Yet MacCarthy's introduction, as we have seen, heavily emphasizes the deployment of oppositional colour planes and the abandonment of traditional chiaroscuro.

10.2.i Julius Meier-Graefe

Fry's earliest understanding of the art he was to celebrate as Post-Impressionist is "much indebted to" the expressionist and romantic theories of Julius Meier-Graefe.²⁵ The English translation of Meier-Graefe's influential book, *Modern Art*,²⁶ appeared in 1908;²⁷ and, according to one critic, "virtually provided the script for the show at the Grafton Galleries".²⁸ But Falkenheim, who summarizes Meier-Graefe's influence in

²³ Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics", *New Quarterly*, January 1909; *Vision and Design*, p.23.

²⁴ Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, p.119, comments on Fry's underplaying of the importance of colour in "An Essay in Aesthetics": "The most difficult aspect of Post-Impressionism for Fry was its use of strident colour, naturally antipathetic to his taste for subtle greys."

²⁵ See Dennis Farr, p.201; Nicolson, pp.12-13; Denys Sutton, *Letters of Roger Fry*, vol. 1, p.40; Bowness, p.9; J.B.Bullen, pp.8-9; Falkenheim, pp.18-19.

²⁶ Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics* (1904), translated by Florence Simmonds and George W. Chrystal (London, 1908).

²⁷ Douglas Cooper, in "The Post-Impressionist Phase", *The Courtauld Collection* (London, 1954), p.50, explains that this "inventive book" was "the first attempt at a systematic interpretation of the whole subject in terms of art not history". It "had a great influence on the artistic thought and taste of the younger generation in England, and Fry in particular derived many of his early ideas about modern art from its pages." See also Bowness, pp.9-10: "Fry acquired much of his information and many of his value judgements from Meier-Graefe ..."

²⁸ Wees, *Vorticism and the English Avant-Garde*, p.21. See also, Cooper, p.51: "Fry adopted [Meier-Graefe's] interpretation in all its essentials as his *point de repère*". See also, Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life*, p.133.

terms of heavy theoretical emphasis on colour,²⁹ suggests Fry's "temporary flirtation with German art criticism" was responsible for a "romantic inclination which is uncharacteristic of [his] fully developed tastes and critical thought".³⁰

"COLOUR AND COMPOSITION", his heading for modern artists, reflects the structural status of colour in Meier-Graefe's theory. Cézanne's painting is characterized by kaleidoscopic "vigorous contrasts" and line-free "mosaic of colour";³¹ and Meier-Graefe identifies the route out of Impressionism for modern art through the innovatory use of colour in artists such as Monet, and Seurat and Signac. He finds elegiac consolation in a vision of Impressionism's luminous colours lingering long enough to kindle new colourist flames: "the light they gave us was not extinguished until it had revealed the way of the future."³²

Meier-Graefe's histrionic accounts of his methods have been fundamental to Van Gogh's reputation as a wild and tormented, paint-hurling expressionist.³³ Yet he sees Van Gogh, not as a purely northern romantic painter, but as the product of that northern tradition meeting with the classicism of the south. In "Provence, where the sun

²⁹ Falkenheim, p.19: "Meier-Graefe upheld the notion that art is a recreation of the permanent structure that underlies appearances.... Cézanne's genius was his ability to translate the finest nuances of our perceptions of nature into multiple color relationships. Thus, Meier-Graefe went to great lengths to describe the artist's system of color orchestration as his method of both formal organization and of rendering the chaotic natural world intelligible." See also Cooper, p.51.

³⁰ Falkenheim, p.18.

³¹ Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art*, Vol.I, pp.267-68.

³² Meier-Graefe, *ibid.*, p.325.

³³ Meier-Graefe, *ibid.*, p.204: "All his pictures are a battle; battle in the literal sense; he painted, buffeted by the mistral; the effects he sought lasted sometimes but a few moments, and had to be got in one sitting. And even more urgently was he driven forward by the frantic fire within, that blazed under the burning skies above him: creating, creating ..."

bathes the earth in pure colour ... the new country, in which all the conditions were sharply opposed to those of his own nation: flame met flame."³⁴ His alchemical terminology is prescient of Woolf's own.³⁵ Meier-Graefe also describes Van Gogh's colourism in the mixed terms, not unlike Woolf's, of carnage and sexuality: "It is gruesome to see him paint - a kind of orgy, in which the colours were splashed about like blood."³⁶ Van Gogh is above all a colourist. His paintings evidence "a colossal combat of colours, that take on an almost objective significance".³⁷ The artist's bodily involvement in his art is expressed in this very physical emphasis on colour; and, like Cézanne, he constructs in colour, "having gained a decorative method equal to that of the old mosaicists".³⁸

Gauguin's colourist achievement is the move towards the "systematic division of large planes of colour".³⁹ Pertinent to our understanding of Gauguin's reception at Fry's exhibition, is Meier-Graefe's quotation from Gauguin's own exhibition catalogue of February 1895.⁴⁰ Here, Gauguin's barbed exchange with Strindberg concerns the depiction of women in relation to his displacement of old chiaroscuro with the new colour techniques.

Gauguin's world was not [Strindberg's]. "It is too sunny," he wrote, "for me, the lover of chiaroscuro. And in your Eden dwells an Eve, who is not my ideal - for indeed, I too have a feminine ideal - or two."⁴¹

³⁴ Meier-Graefe, *ibid.*, p.204.

³⁵ Whereas Perry Meisel, *The Absent Father: Virginia Woolf and Walter Pater* (New Haven and London, 1980), p.137, speculates this terminology to have its roots in the writing of Walter Pater.

³⁶ Meier-Graefe, p.205.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.207.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.207, 212.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Vol. II, p.60.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.62.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*.

Gauguin's response emphasizes the moral implications of Strindberg's chiaroscuro vision.

"Your civilisation is your disease," he says, "my barbarism is my restoration to health. The Eve of your civilised conception makes us nearly all misogynists. The old Eve, who shocked you in my studio, will perhaps seem less odious to you some day.... Only the Eve I have painted can stand naked before us. Yours would always be shameless in this natural state, and if beautiful, the source of pain and evil..."⁴²

Gauguin's Eve is not defined by the moral oppositions inscribed in Strindberg's chiaroscuro. She stands in full light, expressed in bold oppositional colours. Meier-Graefe sees Gauguin's art itself as a similarly unshaded source of illumination in a chiaroscuro world.

Everyone is of Strindberg's opinion now, even the boldest of those who owe their culture to literature. They love chiaroscuro, twilight facts, which are altered by a change of illumination, the meaning of which is inspiring but obscure. When one appears who would break through the gloom and who offers us elements shining in all the undimmed lustre of their nature, they screen their eyes angrily with a hand, and judge by what they believe they see through their fingers. Of course all that remains is the detail so dear to criticism. The beauty has been shut out.⁴³

We have seen how suffrage art depicted patriarchal discrimination against women in terms of chiaroscuro (that is, masculine solar light in relation to feminine shadow), which in turn was to be dispelled by luminous suffrage colours. Woolf's leviathan cook may epitomize this feminist move from darkness into light. We may also connect Gauguin's reflections on misogyny and chiaroscuro, with suffrage attacks on patriarchal chiaroscuro. Just as Meier-Graefe sees Post-Impressionist colours as the source of modern aesthetic enlightenment, so might feminism find parallels in their use of colour for political enlightenment.

⁴² Ibid..

⁴³ Ibid., pp.63-64.

To understand Fry's rejection of his early colour-based romantic definition of Post-Impressionism,⁴⁴ we must turn to another of his early sources: the French artist and critic, Maurice Denis.

10.2.ii Maurice Denis

In January 1910 Fry's translation of Denis's influential essay on Cézanne appeared in the *Burlington Magazine*.⁴⁵ Unlike Meier-Graefe, Denis sees Cézanne as a classical painter,⁴⁶ "at once the climax of the classic tradition and the result of the great crisis of liberty and illumination which has rejuvenated modern art. He is the Poussin of Impressionism."⁴⁷ This vague, shifting sense of classic and modern reflects Habermas's observation that "the relation between 'modern' and 'classical' has definitely lost a fixed historical reference."⁴⁸

Denis defines Cézanne's classicism specifically "against expiring naturalism and romanticism."⁴⁹ Even Cézanne's early work, which is considered romantic, Denis sees as

⁴⁴ Cooper, pp.51-52, suggests that "we can only follow the post-impressionist phase in the history of English taste if we are aware of Fry's own constantly changing notions."

⁴⁵ Maurice Denis, "Cézanne", translated by Roger Fry, *Burlington Magazine*, Part I: January 1910, xvi, 207-219; Part II: *ibid.*, 275-80.

⁴⁶ Denis; Bullen, p.63.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁴⁸ Habermas, "Modernity - An Incomplete Project", *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster (London and Sydney, 1985), p.4. He continues: "The distinguishing mark of works which count as modern is "the new" which will be overcome and made absolute through the novelty of the next style. But while that which is merely "stylish" will soon become outmoded, that which is modern preserves a secret tie to the classical. Of course, whatever can survive time has always been considered to be a classic. But the emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from the authority of a past epoch; instead, a modern work becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern."

⁴⁹ Denis; Bullen, p.65.

the artist's "assimilation" and transmutation of "classic tendencies".⁵⁰ In Cézanne's "second period" he identifies a "transmutation into classicism",⁵¹ manifest in the use of colour.⁵² Where Meier-Graefe emphasizes the emotional significance of colour, Denis stresses the rational ("reasoned colour system"), but they both agree on the importance of Cézanne as a colourist.⁵³

Yet Denis's "classicism", however similar in places to Meier-Graefe's "romanticism", also suggests in other places the elevation of form above colour, even where he celebrates Cézanne's inextricable deployment of colour as form.⁵⁴ Colour may well be the source of Cézanne's essential achievement of volume, but it can also be seen as a secondary element, a variant on this voluminous form. His terms nevertheless suggest the displacement of chiaroscuro with colour: "Colourist before everything, as he was, Cézanne resolves this antimony by chromatism - the transposition, that is, of values of black and white into values of colour."⁵⁵ Where modelling was previously achieved by the shading of black and white, Cézanne "*modulat[es]*" in colour planes.⁵⁶

50 Ibid..

51 Ibid..

52 "With the same vigour with which in his previous period he organised the oppositions of black and white, he now disciplines the contrasts of colour introduced by the study of open air light, and the rainbow iridescences of the new palette. At the same time he substitutes for the summary modelling of his earlier figures the reasoned colour system found in the figure-pieces and *natures-mortes* of this second period, which one may call his 'brilliant' manner." (Ibid.).

53 See Denis, *ibid.*, pp.69-72.

54 Ibid..

55 Ibid., pp.72-73.

56 Ibid., p.73: "'I want,' he told me, following the passage from light to shade on his closed fist - 'I want to do with colour what they do in black and white with the stump.' He replaces light by colour. This shadow is a colour, this light, this half-tone are colours..... Volume finds, then, its expression in Cézanne in a gamut of tints, a series of touches."

In view of Fry's later emphasis on the classical, and his toning down of the romantic, Denis's essay is often afforded equal, if not greater, importance as an influence. Some problems arise in this debate about the application of the terms classical and romantic: Fry's definition of the classical was very early disputed; Meier-Graefe's romanticism is not straightforwardly defined; and Denis's ideas, moreover, were at first subsumed by Fry into the "expressionist" framework supplied by Meier-Graefe.

10.3 From romantic to classic

The formal, abstract qualities associated with the classical interpretation of Cézanne, were not enhanced by the romantic context provided by Fry.⁵⁷ But "on the eve of the first exhibition, the expressionist and abstract tendencies in modern art are not held to be irreconcilable": the two critics occasionally overlapping in ideas, "approach their subjects from totally different angles".⁵⁸ But Fry's 1910 exhibition, Nicolson shows, "bore out what Meier-Graefe, *not* what Denis, had written."⁵⁹ I emphasize Nicolson's point because it has been underestimated by later critics, and even misquoted by one.⁶⁰ Fry's early admixture of the theories of Meier-Graefe and Denis is understandable, given their points of overlap;⁶¹ but in his later rejection of Meier-

⁵⁷ Nicolson, p.12.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See, Nicolson, *ibid.*, pp.12-13 (my italics).

⁶⁰ Denys Sutton, in *Letters of Roger Fry*, vol. 1, p.40, quotes Nicolson's line as "'it bore out what Meier-Graefe and what Denis had written.'" (my italics). Intentional or not, this misquote makes for a very different emphasis in Sutton's interpretation of Fry's early formulations.

⁶¹ Falkenheim, p.20, following Nicolson, points out that Meier-Graefe's "so-called romantic approaches to form" and Denis's "supposed classical tendencies" had many points in common.

Graefe's romanticism Fry focuses on the points of difference in Denis's classicism.

In his own observations on Denis's work Meier-Graefe uses imagery of striking similarity to Woolf's.

He uses only pure colour ... and his gradations are so delicate, that his planes are like a crystal veiled in gossamer, and reflecting sunbeams. His line is no less delicate; a breath draws it; ... and in this delicate envelope everything that art ever gave of grace to line seems to be united.⁶²

Woolf's "semi-transparent envelope" shares the qualities of the "delicate envelope" of "gossamer" and "chrysalis" Meier-Graefe sees in the art of Denis. He calls this the "third element between the author and the world, which, even if it be only a veil of transparent threads, causes his expression to be different, better because more universal, than his good will alone could make it."⁶³ Woolf again comes very close to this description:

Now my brain I will confess - for I don't like talking about it, floats in blue air; where there are circling clouds, soft sunbeams of elastic gold, and fairy gossamers - things that can't be cut - that must be tenderly enclosed, and expressed in a globe of exquisitely coloured words. At the mere prick of steel they vanish ... I will teach no more. 'O no more - darkness has vanquished light.'⁶⁴

Like Meier-Graefe's "veil of transparent threads", Woolf's model of consciousness, constructed out of "a globe of exquisitely coloured words", is tenuous and evanescent, yet strong and binding ("things that can't be cut").⁶⁵ On the other hand, like the post-eclipse world

⁶² Meier-Graefe, *ibid.*, Vol. II, p.53.

⁶³ Meier-Graefe, *ibid.*, p.54.

⁶⁴ Woolf, Letter, December 1907, to Violet Dickinson, *L*, I, p.320.

⁶⁵ Compare, Henry James, "The Art of Fiction", *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*, edited by Morris Roberts (New York, 1948), pp.10-11: "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching

it is fragile, and easily extinguished ("At the mere prick of steel they vanish").⁶⁶

10.4 Post-Impressionist theories from 1912

Turning to the second Post-Impressionist exhibition, "the situation has entirely changed", for it "was planned on more systematic lines. Now the emphasis was shifted to the contemporary movement, and of the precursors only Cézanne was retained."⁶⁷ Nicolson does not address the

every air-borne particle in its tissue. It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative - much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius - it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelation."

⁶⁶ Compare the imagery employed to describe the work of the Impressionist painter, Monet, by R.A.M. Stevenson, *Unsigned Review, Saturday Review*, 3 December 1887, LXIV, p.760; *Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception*, edited by Kate Flint (London, 1984), pp.87-88: "Romantic composition, rich brilliant colour, wonderful luminousness, and extraordinary naturalness in the handling, conspire to fetch out the full effect of an aspect of nature Here ... local colour, sunlight, sky reflections etc., all fall into a harmonious whole, without holes or breaks in the continuity of the aerial envelope." Kate Flint, "Introduction", *Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception*, pp.17-18, discusses Stevenson's relatively frequent use of the term "aerial envelope." More unusual, perhaps, is Picasso's similar statement on the evanescent qualities of cubism: "It's not a reality you can take in your hand. It's more like a perfume - in front of you, behind you, to the sides. The scent is everywhere, but you don't quite know where it comes from." This romantic interpretation contradicts the notion of cubism as scientific, analytical, and strictly classical. See, William Rubin, *Picasso in the Collection of the Museum of Modern Art* (New York, 1972), p.72; Francis Francina, *Cubism: Picasso and Braque*, p.61; Virginia Spate, *Simultaneity*, exhibition catalogue (Cambridge, 1976).

⁶⁷ Nicolson, p.15. He continues: "The exhibition was international in character, and included works by British and Russian artists, as well as French, influenced by the Post-Impressionist movement.... Picasso was allotted thirteen paintings and three drawings, among which were a number of analytical cubist works and some gouaches of the 'Negro' period. Matisse had no less than nineteen oil-paintings, seven bronzes, and many other items of the highest quality from all periods of his career, including some of his latest, most lyrical canvases Of the new artists Lhote appears with twelve items, Braque with four *fauve* and cubist pictures, Bonnard with three decorative panels, and Rousseau with a single

contribution of the British artists: Duncan Grant, Eric Gill, Frederick Etchells, Roger Fry, Adeney, Charles Lamb, "Mrs Bell" (Vanessa Bell), "Miss Etchells" (Jessie Etchells), Wyndham Lewis, Frederick Spenser Gore, and Stanley Spencer. He is primarily interested in establishing how Fry's selection of the major continental artists reflects his new interpretation of Post-Impressionism. My focus, however, will turn to Vanessa Bell and her local London art scene in relation to the Post-Impressionist exhibitions. First we should acknowledge the interpretative context set up by Fry and Clive Bell in the second exhibition, since the concepts and vocabulary they now establish form the orthodox view of Post-Impressionism, and inform the orthodox assessment of both Vanessa Bell and Woolf. I will argue that Vanessa Bell's development as a colourist, and Woolf's response to Post-Impressionism, including in particular her understanding of her sister's work, may be at odds with the theories of Fry and Clive Bell.

The most obvious shift in emphasis from the first to second exhibition was from romantic to classic, reflected in the new predominance of Cubism. Nicolson is not surprised "to find that criticism emerging out of the second show differed radically from that emerging out of the first. Whereas the first had popularised the notion that artists were romantic geniuses, the second gave birth to the much more rigid doctrine of significant form."⁶⁸

This new doctrine emphasizes an emotional understanding of form for its own sake above everything else. The overwhelming concern with colour as a main point of

landscape of the interior of a forest. Derain is increased to six items in his latest, more austere style, and Vlaminck and Friesz remain with about the same number as before. This time Rouault, Denis, and the Neo-Impressionists are excluded."

⁶⁸ Nicolson, p.15.

definition in 1910 is largely ignored. The term "significant form" begins to become almost synonymous with Post-Impressionism. This later interpretation is generally considered the more authentic. In the two years between the exhibitions, and in fact very soon after the first, Fry, with the assistance of Clive Bell, was moving towards this position.

Falkenheim notes that Fry's change of tack to become the better known "connoisseur of ordered, 'classical' compositions"⁶⁹ actually began in 1910 when, in three articles for the *Nation*, he sought to refine and defend his ideas on Post-Impressionism.⁷⁰ Falkenheim is in sympathy with Fry's later understanding of Post-Impressionism: she suggests that "the romantic bias" of the first exhibition "offered the British public a distorted notion of what were the objectives of Post-Impressionist artists."⁷¹ Fry's *Nation* articles she cites as the source of his "more reasoned and explicit explanations", belied by the bias of the first exhibition's selection, and of which the general public remained ignorant: "few probably read beyond the catalogue introduction."⁷²

Fry's most startling revision is perhaps his re-classification of Cézanne, who, "initially represented as

⁶⁹ Falkenheim, p.22.

⁷⁰ Fry, "The Grafton Gallery - I", *Nation*, 19 November 1910, 331-3; "The Post-Impressionists - 2", *ibid.*, 3 December 1910, 402-3; "A Postscript on Post-Impressionism", *ibid.*, 24 December 1910, 536-7; all reprinted in Bullen, pp.120-24, 129-34, 147-51.

⁷¹ Falkenheim, p.18.

⁷² Falkenheim, p.23. In the first essay, "The Grafton Gallery - I"; Bullen, pp.120-21, Fry defends the Post-Impressionists against the charge of radicalism and anarchism. He believes "that it is not difficult to show that the group of painters whose work is on show at the Grafton Gallery are in reality the most traditional of any recent group of artists". Falkenheim, p.23, notes that in the second article Fry "first admits that there were too many Gauguins, other Van Goghs would have been desirable to add, and Matisse and Picasso were minimally and unjustly represented".

the wild romantic",⁷³ now shows "a supremely classic temperament".⁷⁴ Cézanne is now "the great classic of our time", whereas "Van Gogh represents as completely the romantic temperament".⁷⁵ Falkenheim suggests that "If Fry had made these distinctions between classical and romantic earlier and had also drawn on the antecedents for the new art as he does here with Cézanne, Post-Impressionism might initially have seemed more acceptable to the now generally hostile public."⁷⁶

Since her project is to trace the development of formalist art criticism from Fry's theories, Falkenheim minimizes and casts doubt on his less amenable early formulations. Nevertheless she demonstrates in detail Fry's shift of focus. Not least, Falkenheim explores Fry's development of a more socially ameliorative, less radical, theory of Post-Impressionism. Fry, it appears, very soon after Guy Fawkes night began to defuse his explosives. If the romantic colour theory of Meier-Graefe is understood as potentially the most powerful explosive, this explains its notable absence from the pages of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition catalogue.

10.5 The 1912 exhibition catalogue

We have ceased to ask "What does this picture represent?" and ask instead, "What does it make us feel?" We expect a work of plastic art to have more in common with a piece of music than with a coloured photograph.⁷⁷

⁷³ Falkenheim, p.23.

⁷⁴ Fry, "The Post-Impressionists - 2"; Bullen, p.131.

⁷⁵ Ibid..

⁷⁶ Falkenheim, p.23.

⁷⁷ Clive Bell, "The English Group", *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, October 5-December 31, 1912, Grafton Galleries, Exhibition Catalogue (London, 1912), p.9.

Clive Bell implies, in his opening remarks on the theoretical premises of the second exhibition, that Post-Impressionism, no longer avant-garde or revolutionary, is now established as mainstream art, part of the new status quo. This art is not concerned with depiction, but with the arousal of emotion.

Bell explains the "revolutionary" aspect of Post-Impressionism in these emotional terms. He still mentions the romantic idea of self-expression, but this is given equal weight with his theory of form. Bell makes it quite clear that the Post-Impressionist revolution is over: the English artists are capitalizing on the advances already made by the French and "their master, Cézanne". Bell's task is to "discover in the work of these English painters some vestige of the qualities that distinguish Post-Impressionists from the mass".⁷⁸ His choice of phrase suggests that Post-Impressionism is to be associated with an aesthetic élite, distinguished from the "mass", implying qualities of privileged refinement rather than revolutionary innovation. Bell calls these qualities "simplification and plastic design". In expanding on these terms, he refers for the first time to the concept by which Post-Impressionism has become best remembered: "significant form". The Post-Impressionist claims the "privileges" of a "literary artist":

those facts that any one can discern for himself or discover in a text book he leaves to the makers of Christmas-cards and diagrams. He simplifies, omits details, that is to say, to concentrate on something more important - on the significance of form.⁷⁹

In dismissing the descriptive and diagrammatic, Bell also implies that sentiment, allegory, political or social comment (all paradoxically, literary qualities), are of

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.10.

⁷⁹ Ibid..

no interest to the artist either: form and design *per se*, without specific meaning, have priority. He dismisses the work of traditional English artists as "merely descriptive" and "at best, romantic."

The object becomes incidental to the Post-Impressionist's resolution of it into the formal design of the picture. Bell's mundane example of a coal-scuttle emphasizes the trivial significance of ostensible subject matter: it is "an end in itself, as a significant form related on terms of equality with other significant forms. Thus have all great artists regarded objects."⁸⁰ This means that the native women of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings, for example, are no longer to be considered as relevant to an understanding of the art. Reduced to the primitive and decorative in MacCarthy's account, they are to be elided altogether according to Bell's rationale. Bell's "significant form", intentionally or not, smooths over the cultural and political implications of such images.

Bell in fact emphasizes the universal appeal of the new English Post-Impressionism.

the art of Mr. Wyndham Lewis, whatever else may be said of it, is certainly not descriptive. Hardly at all does it depend for its effect on association or suggestion. There is no reason why a mind sensitive to form and colour, though it inhabit another solar system, and a body altogether unlike our own, should fail to appreciate it. On the other hand, fully to appreciate some pictures by Mr. Fry or Mr. Duncan Grant it is necessary to be a human being, perhaps, even, an educated European of the twentieth century.⁸¹

The democratic appeal of Bell's significant form - the notion that humanity or even just sensitivity to form and colour is all one needs to appreciate it - is here vying with an appeal to cultural élitism. In the former case,

⁸⁰ Ibid., pp.10-11.

⁸¹ Ibid., p.11.

presumably "one's maid" would find this art easily accessible, but in the latter, she would first need the privilege of an education in European art.

Bell's vocabulary moves further towards a sense of élitism and imperialism, the more he elaborates. The English Post-Impressionists have purged the nation of romanticism and its "irrelevant qualities that for two centuries have made our art the laughing-stock of Europe".⁸² Paradoxically, Bell closes in unabashed romantic strains, by declaring Post-Impressionism a manifestation "of a spiritual revolution which proclaims art a religion, and forbids its degradation to the level of a trade." This art is "intended neither to please, to flatter, nor to shock, but to express great emotions and to provoke them."⁸³ He turns attention away from the material aspects of painting to the transcendent and spiritual, and, although emphasizing the formal properties - which we might understand as line, mass, colour and so on - he does not attempt to analyse them specifically. Whereas MacCarthy dwells on such matters, Bell virtually ignores them. His introduction amounts to a mystical declaration of the existence of significant form.

Fry's introduction to the French artists, although not as dogmatic, follows on from Bell's spiritual interpretation. Whereas Bell asserts "The battle is won" as far as the public acceptance of Post-Impressionism, Fry still feels the need to be understanding of past misinterpretations,⁸⁴ but, like Bell, declares that the object of the Post-Impressionists is "to attempt to express by pictorial and plastic form certain spiritual

82 Ibid..

83 Ibid., pp.11-12.

84 Fry, "The French Group", *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, p.13.

experiences".⁸⁵ He is anxious to shake off the accusations of degeneracy and incompetence, but at the same time he makes Post-Impressionism more palliative to the reactionary tastes of his initially critical audience.

Fry's argument follows Bell's distinction between art that imitates and art that creates, but emphasizes less the emotional and religious significance of Post-Impressionism than the intellectual and contemplative. He also seems to have, at this point, a more materialist understanding of the art: in calling it a "new reality" he is suggesting that art constitutes an alternative material reality, which is not really like Bell's transcendent spiritualism. However, Fry does also dwell on the "logical extreme of such a method": "a purely abstract language of form - visual music".⁸⁶ Fry is certainly open to the development of this possibility: "It is too early to be dogmatic on the point, which can only be decided when our sensibilities to such abstract form have been more practised than they are at present."⁸⁷

Fry stresses Matisse's "entirely new use of colour",⁸⁸ but does not develop the point. He makes his clearest statement of the change in emphasis from the first exhibition when he asserts that the art on show is not romantic but classic.

I do not mean by Classic, dull, pedantic, traditional, reserved, or any of those similar things which the word is often made to imply. Still less do I mean by calling them Classic that they paint "Visits to AEsculapius" or "Nero at the Colosseum". I mean that they do not rely

85 Ibid..

86 Ibid., pp.14, 15.

87 Ibid., p.15.

88 Ibid..

for their effect upon associated ideas, as I believe Romantic and Realistic artists invariably do.⁸⁹

Fry, consolidating with Bell, closes his introduction by disassociating the art on show from the notion of "associated ideas": "All art depends upon cutting off the practical responses to sensations of ordinary life, thereby setting free a pure and as it were disembodied functioning of the spirit". An art which cuts off "practical responses" must exclude, for example, the art of the suffrage movement, which by Fry's definition must be impure. Yet he acknowledges that the notion of disassociated spirituality is an almost impossible ideal. Fry's argument allows for the possibility of "romantic associations",⁹⁰ which we might consider the hostile critics of the first exhibition to have lighted upon; but it establishes that these associations are secondary, and passing, compared to the regenerative and eternal aspects of the classic, formal properties of this art. This is behind the oxymoron in his statement on the "disinterestedly passionate state of mind"⁹¹ recorded by classic art. It is an art free of literary but also of social, political and historical associations, and therefore it is "disinterested". It is an art of pure emotion. In spite of his protestations, Fry's "classic" art remains close to romanticism. To call the "concentration of feeling" "classic" does not really dispel this. He does, however, succeed in minimizing the bodily and physical associations of this idea of "feeling", which he parenthetically reminds us "by no means implies abandonment". In doing so he distances himself further from the orgiastic excesses of Meier-Graefe's theories, which, as we have seen, connect the application of colour with the artist's physical, bodily functions; and he reassures his public of the spiritual

⁸⁹ Ibid., p.16.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp.16-17.

⁹¹ Ibid.

rather than sensual pleasures of Post-Impressionism. The absence of Gauguin's nudes, and of the romantics, Van Gogh and Rouault,⁹² as well as the introduction of cubist abstraction assists his argument. So too does the dwelling on form rather than colour as the most notable aspect of Post-Impressionism.

Boris Von Anrep's introduction to "The Russian Group"⁹³ begins with the words "Russian spiritual culture" and continues with a religious and spiritual interpretation of the art on show. This is well in keeping with the dominant tone of Bell and Fry: Post-Impressionism has become a religion. Nowhere in these three introductory pieces is there emphatic reference to colour, nor is there reference to the abandonment of traditional chiaroscuro. The art is to be summed up in the nebulous term, significant form.

10.6 The doctrine of Significant Form

In *Art*, which comprises his "complete theory of visual art",⁹⁴ Clive Bell expands upon the universal theory of significant form.

There must be some one quality without which a work of art cannot exist; possessing which, in the least degree, no work is altogether worthless. What is this quality? What quality is shared by all objects that provoke our aesthetic emotions?... Only one answer seems possible - significant form. In each, lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms, stir our aesthetic emotions. These relations and combinations of lines and colours, these aesthetically moving forms, I call "Significant Form".⁹⁵

⁹² See Nicolson, p.15.

⁹³ Boris Von Anrep, "The Russian Group", *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, pp.18-21.

⁹⁴ Bell, *Art* (London, 1914), p.v.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.7-8.

"Significant Form" no longer applies specifically to Post-Impressionism but is "the one quality common to all works of visual art": from "the windows at Chartres" to "Mexican sculpture" to "the masterpieces of Poussin ... and Cézanne".⁹⁶ The Post-Impressionists "concentrate" on this quality above all others in their art. Bell also comments on the matter of colour in relation to significant form.

The distinction between form and colour is an unreal one; you cannot conceive a colourless line or a colourless space; neither can you conceive a formless relation of colours.... When I speak of significant form, I mean a combination of lines and colours (counting white and black as colours) that moves me aesthetically.⁹⁷

For Bell colour is in fact form, and therefore presumably structural. Yet he persists in maintaining the distinction between "lines and colours" while claiming their congruity. The power of colour is subsumed in the abstract notion of significant form. As an aspect of pure form, colour is deprived of all meaning except the mystically emotional. The materially different handling of Post-Impressionist colour in comparison to traditional chiaroscuro, furthermore, is lost in Bell's generalizations. It is not his business to address such distinctions. The issue of colour and significant form is problematic, however, in the context of criticism on Woolf and Post-Impressionism, where significant form tends to dominate.

Bell develops the notion of the spiritual dimension of significant form into a full blown religion of art. He concludes his book with a vision of "aesthetic rapture":

For practical purposes, even, it is possible that the religion of art will serve a man better than the religion of humanity.... What he loses in philanthropy he may

⁹⁶ Ibid..

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp.11-12.

gain in magnanimity; and because his religion does not begin with an injunction to love all men, it will not end, perhaps, in persuading him to hate most of them.⁹⁸

This is the source of the model of the "transcendent ... aesthetic" Pauline Johnson attributes to Woolf's Bloomsbury-based modernism. Not only is Bell's religion of art alarmingly reminiscent of Max Nordau's, however, his "aesthetic rapture" seems to be satirized in the "still rapture" of Woolf's lizards in "The Sun and the Fish". The idea of communing with an unchanging, perfect, aesthetic rapture is rejected, we remember, in favour of the model of art as a ruin, perpetually open to historical and political change, and to new theories "without end", as Woolf comments on the ruins of Stonehenge. Whereas the "perfect effigy" is for Bell the totality of art, for Woolf it is a contrary point of definition in her dynamic model.

Bell admits to disagreeing "profoundly" yet "amicably" with Fry (but also acknowledges his assistance in refining some ideas in *Art*),⁹⁹ a caveat that does little to prevent the common assumption of their unanimity. Indeed, Henry Tonks, in *The Unknown God* (exhibited in 1923), painted them as a double-act performing before an audience of their opponents: "Fry holds up a dead cat, a symbol of 'pure form', while Clive Bell rings a bell announcing the new creed: 'Cézannah Cézannah'."¹⁰⁰ D.H. Lawrence likewise saw this as "almost Calvin come to art."¹⁰¹ The politically explosive associations of the first Post-Impressionist exhibition seem to have long

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp.292-3.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p.ix.

¹⁰⁰ Dunlop, pp.156-7. See also, Woolf *Roger Fry: A Biography* (London, 1940), p.156.

¹⁰¹ D.H. Lawrence, "Introduction to These Paintings", *The Paintings of D.H. Lawrence* (London, 1929); reprinted in *Phoenix, the Posthumous Papers of D.H. Lawrence*, edited with an introduction by Edward D. Macdonald (London, 1936), pp.565-66.

since been displaced by the quasi-religious dogma of significant form.

Tillyard finds a religiosity and redemptiveness in Post-Impressionism in keeping with Fry's Quakerism,¹⁰² and a common link between "early Modernism" and the Arts and Crafts Movement in terms of the "religious framework" behind the notion of "Pure Form":¹⁰³ the "religious language" of Post-Impressionism "recalled the religious language of the Arts and Crafts Movement [which] was also the religiosity of the early socialist organizations of the 1880s and early 1890s." But Tillyard does not want to connect this socialist heritage with the contemporary radical politics of the Post-Impressionist period.

The use of Arts and Crafts language, both formal and religious, by Post-Impressionist critics in 1910 carried with it, in consequence, an echo of the heady socialism of twenty years before. It is in this context ... that the limited 'politicisation' of Post-Impressionism in England should be seen. Hostile critics, many of them of an age to remember the 1880s, were responding to the threat of socialism as it had been constituted twenty years previously, not as it presented itself or was perceived in the gradualist, materialist climate of the pre-war years.¹⁰⁴

Tillyard's argument is weakened by her attributing the same spirit of religious fervour to the 1910 exhibition as is more prominently at work in the 1912 exhibition. She may also stretch credulity in suggesting that in 1910

¹⁰² Tillyard, pp.53-4: "Fry, whose non-conformist background perhaps made him sensitive to the religious nuances of his vocabulary, persisted in seeing Post-Impressionism within a generalised Emersonian mystical framework. The feelings expressed by form, he wrote, 'are the directest indication of the general spiritual activity of a class of people. Also I think they are always universal emotions not directed to any particular person but express the whole reaction of the individual to the universe. They are the nature of cosmic emotions.'" She quotes Fry, "Applied Art and the New Movement", n.d., Fry Papers, Kings College Library, Cambridge. Box 12/24.

¹⁰³ Tillyard, p.55.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p.xviii.

the hostile critics of Post-Impressionism were thinking back twenty years, given that the first Post-Impressionist exhibition, as we have seen, opened to the imminent fall of government, the possible demise of the House of Lords, the likelihood of Home Rule for Ireland, and the mounting violence meeting the striking miners and the militant suffragettes. It seems an understatement to call this climate "gradualist". The effect of this preferred connection with nineteenth century, religiously based socialism, is to de-historicize the 1910 exhibition, and to disassociate it from the radical, materialist politics of its time.¹⁰⁵

The aesthetic practice Tillyard seeks to identify as a continuation from the Arts and Crafts Movement to Post-Impressionism - "ideas of purity and limitation" - is identified by her as a primary concern with structure, which "led to the associated ideas of naked and skeletal form."¹⁰⁶ Her emphasis on the Modernist translation of "these ideas into practice" draws on the extremism of Wyndham Lewis's Vorticism and Clive Bell's significant form, compared with Fry's less rigorous endorsement of form.¹⁰⁷ It is towards this extreme, nevertheless, that Fry's theories tend at the period of the second

¹⁰⁵ We might compare this manoeuvre with that of Marcus's in the field of Woolf criticism, where we have seen a similar distancing of Woolf's political associations back to the nineteenth century Quaker mysticism of her aunt.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p.48; Tillyard, quoting Bell, *Art*, pp.215-16, and Wyndham Lewis, "Review of Contemporary Art", *Blast* 2, continues: "Nakedness and skeletal form were not only ends but also means.. Before the first World War, however, purity and nakedness were largely descriptive terms. Clive Bell, in his *Art* ... asserted that 'critics of the Impressionist age are vexed by the naked bones and muscles of Post-Impressionist pictures'. Wyndham Lewis used the same sort of vocabulary. In the second and final number of the Vorticist polemic *Blast*, published in 1915, he applied the image of stripped flesh, and consequently, nakedness, to contemporary European painting. In European painting today, he proclaimed, 'things stand up stark and denude everywhere as the result of endless visionary examination'."

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

exhibition. As for finding in Woolf's work a correlation of this interest in the skeletal, the evidence of "The Sun and the Fish" suggests only a negative one. Here, as we have seen, the rejuvenating flesh of colour takes precedence over the skeletal.

Tillyard rightly stresses that the more lasting definition of Post-Impressionism arises from the second exhibition and promotes the religion of significant form;¹⁰⁸ but it is apparent that alternative interpretations to this dominant definition are possible.

H.G. Wells, in a novel reviewed by Woolf, satirically connects Fry's Quakerism to his establishment of the Omega workshops.¹⁰⁹

The reaction of the revolting generation has always been toward colour; the pyrotechnic display of the Omega workshops in London is but the last violent outbreak of the Quaker spirit.¹¹⁰

Wells notably connects this spirit, not to the concept of significant form, nor to a sense of the skeletal, but to "a thirst for chromatic richness behind the lead of William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites."¹¹¹ He does not, then, refer this project to the influence of the French, but Wells's satire incidentally alerts us to a colourist tradition of sorts within English aesthetics.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p.183.

¹⁰⁹ The Omega Workshops were set up by Roger Fry in May 1913. He employed several artists to design and make painted furniture, decorated ceramics, screens, murals, and printed fabrics. See, Anthony d'Offay Gallery, *The Omega Workshops: Alliance and Enmity in English Art* (London, 1984); Judith Collins, *The Omega Workshops* (London, 1983); Fiona MacCarthy, *The Omega Workshops: Decorative Arts of Bloomsbury* (London, 1985).

¹¹⁰ H.G. Wells, *Joan and Peter. The Story of an Education* (London, 1918), p.6. See, Woolf, "The Rights of Youth", *Times Literary Supplement*, 19 September 1918, p.439; *E*, II, p.297.

¹¹¹ Wells, p.6.

Whatever the theorists did to impose the concept of significant form, the practitioners of the new art, and their audience (friends or foes), it appears, had and saw a somewhat different set of priorities. This becomes clearer when the work of the English artists introduced by Clive Bell under the rubric of significant form, is examined in the context of their local traditions and practices, as well as in relation to the romantic content of the first exhibition. What is of interest here is how the changes in aesthetic practice of the English artists, exhibited in the second exhibition, came about in response to the first. Whereas Fry, with the assistance of Clive Bell, shifted the emphasis of his theory away from colour towards significant form, the artists promoted under this new label were engaging with the colour-based romanticism from which their spokesmen were rapidly distancing themselves.

CHAPTER XI

THE NEW PRISMATICS: VIRGINIA WOOLF, VANESSA BELL AND
ENGLISH POST-IMPRESSIONISM

One should be a painter. As a writer, I feel the beauty, which is almost entirely colour, very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen, as if you poured a large jug of champagne over a hairpin.¹

In this chapter I will put forward as an alternative to significant form an iconographic interpretation of Post-Impressionism, and consider in its light the work of Vanessa Bell along with the understanding Woolf shows of her sister's art and its potential for literary analogy. This discussion provides an art historical basis for understanding Woolf's linguistic approach to colourism, and prepares for the next chapter's analysis of Woolf's catalogue forewords to Bell's exhibitions.

First, we might note Woolf's own response to the second Post-Impressionist exhibition:

The Grafton, thank God, is over; artists are an abominable race. The furious excitement of these people all the winter over their pieces of canvas coloured green and blue, is odious. Roger is now turning them upon chairs and tables: there's to be a shop and a warehouse next month.²

Colour, not significant form, prompts her caustic remarks. Woolf's response to Bell's Art was mixed: "I liked the chapters of theory more than the historical chapters.... There are many things I don't agree with, where I understand. But it's great fun." (*L*, II, p.46) We might also note her earlier observation on "the confused mass of ethics, mysticism, aestheticism, and Art

¹ Woolf, Letter to Vanessa Bell (25 June 1938), *L*, VI, pp.233-4.

² Woolf, Letter to Violet Dickinson (24 December 1912), *L*, II, p.15. Her relief at its closing is probably due to her feeling the strain of her husband, Leonard Woolf's role as secretary to the exhibition.

that have ... served, for the most part for the serious literary criticism of the movement."³

Six years after the second exhibition, time enough to absorb the teachings of Fry and Bell, Woolf records her impressions on seeing a picture by the messiah of significant form, Cézanne.

There are 6 apples in the Cézanne picture. What can 6 apples not be? I began to wonder. There's their relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity. To Roger & Nessa, moreover, it was a far more intricate question than this. It was a question of pure paint or mixed; if pure which colour: emerald or veridian; & then the layering on of the paint; & the time he'd spent, & how he'd altered it, & why, & when he'd painted it - We carried it into to the next room, & Lord! how it showed up the pictures there, as if you put a real stone among sham ones; the canvas of the others seemed scraped with a thin layer of rather cheap paint. The apples positively got redder & redder & rounder & greener. I suspect some very mysterious quality of potato in that picture. (*D*, I, p.140)⁴

Without reference to significant form or spirituality, Woolf responds directly to the deployment of luminous colour in this picture. She finds Cézanne's colours intoxicating, and the apples themselves, endlessly suggestive to the eye. She also picks up on the artists' discussion of Cézanne's application of paint. It is the solidity of the image and materiality of the painting which interest Woolf and - above all, the colours.

Writers, according to Woolf, do not attend art exhibitions "to understand the problems of the painter's art. They are after something that may be helpful to themselves."⁵ This suggests a consciously literary and independent approach to the art and art theories of her

³ Woolf, "The Post-Impressionists", review of *The Post-Impressionists* by C. Lewis Hind (London, 1911), *Nation*, 14 October 1911, p.108; *E*, I, p.380.

⁴ See also *L*, II, p.230.

⁵ Woolf, "Pictures", *Nation & Athenaeum*, 25 April 1925; *M*, p.142.

circle;⁶ and this chapter ultimately addresses the nature of that approach. For Woolf, then, Cézanne has a special literary appeal:

- no painter is more provocative to the literary sense, because his pictures are so audaciously and provocatively content to be paint that the very pigment, they say, seems to challenge us, to press some nerve, to stimulate, to excite. That picture, for example, they explain (standing before a rocky landscape all cleft in ridges of opal colour as if by a giant's hammer, silent, solid, serene), stirs words in us where we had not thought words to exist; suggest forms where we had never seen anything but thin air. As we gaze, words begin to raise their feeble limbs in the pale border of no man's language, to sink down again in despair. (*M*, p.142)

Elsewhere Woolf describes how "those used to deal in words seek out the pictures with the least language about them - canvases taciturn and congealed like emerald or aquamarine - landscapes hollowed from transparent stone, green hillsides, skies in which the clouds are eternally at rest." Here again, colour seems to be the central attraction for the writer: "Let us wash the roofs of our eyes in colour; let us dive till the deep seas close above our heads."⁷

The writer's words conjured up in the presence of painting are Woolf's concern, not those of the art critic or the artist, for nothing, according to Woolf, empties a gallery of writers more effectively than the latter:

But writers have said enough. Their consciences are uneasy. No one knows better than they do, they murmur, that this is not the way to look at pictures; that they

⁶ See, Woolf, Unsigned review of *The Tragic Life of Vincent Van Gogh* by Louis Piérard, translated by Herbert Garland (London, 1925), *Nation & Athenaeum*, 9 May 1925, p.182; *E*, IV, p.249: "M. Piérard refrains purposely from aesthetic criticism". In keeping with the romantic, expressionist view of Post-Impressionism, Woolf adds: "the life is strange enough and tragic enough to be worth reading, were there no question of the genius of the artist. For here we have the astonishing spectacle of an entirely uncompromising man."

⁷ Woolf, "Pictures and Portraits", *Athenaeum*, 9 January 1920; *E*, III, p.164.

are irresponsible dragon-flies, mere insects, children wantonly destroying works of art by pulling petal from petal. In short, they had better be off, for here, oaring his way through the waters, mooning, abstract, contemplative, comes a painter, and stuffing their pilferings into their pockets, out they bolt, lest they should be caught at their mischief and made to suffer the most extreme of penalties, the most exquisite of tortures - to be made to look at pictures with a painter. (M, pp.143-4)⁸

We will return to the matter of the painter's fish-like silence, and to Woolf's own pilferings of her sister's paintings, but first we will hear more from the artists and their theorists.

11.1 "Colour had meaning in 1910"

For Vanessa Bell the 1910 exhibition was the cause of "a great deal of excitement about colour ... which perhaps has rather quieted down now. I suppose it was the result of trying first to change everything into colour."⁹

Later she was to recall "It is impossible ... that any other single exhibition can ever have had so much effect as did that on the rising generation.... That autumn of 1910 is to me a time when everything seemed springing to new life".¹⁰

Bell's recollections of the singular impact of colour confirm the views of Simon Watney, who considers that the reputation of English Post-Impressionists has suffered under the dominant "critical model" of significant form. This has "ensured that English Post-Impressionism would henceforth be judged as if it were a provincial school of

⁸ See, C.J., Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", *Comparative Literature* 41 4 (1989), p.332.

⁹ Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry, no date, c. 1925, Charleston Papers, King's College Library, Cambridge; quoted by Gillespie, p.282; Vanessa Bell, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, edited by Regina Marler (London, 1993), p.272.

¹⁰ Vanessa Bell, unpublished memoir of Roger Fry, Angelica Garnett; quoted Gillespie, p.16.

French painting, thus denying any notion of its own autonomy."¹¹ In consequence, the work of Gore, Gilman, Sickert, Grant, Vanessa Bell and many others "was perceived - where it was seen at all - through the conceptual filter which could only legitimate a modern art which was critically soluble in the ideas and values of Cubism, as seemingly championed by Fry before the revision of his 1912-14 position".¹² For it should be noted that there was a "constantly evolving quality to Bloomsbury formalism",¹³ and that Fry in particular moved some way from his earlier formulations.¹⁴ Fry's "partner in developing the second phase of formalist theory", Christopher Reed points out, "was not Clive Bell ... but Charles Mauron",¹⁵ whose essays addressing "psychological volume" in art the Hogarth Press published in 1927.¹⁶ Mauron, who translated an early version of "Time Passes",¹⁷ is invoked by McLaurin as an influence on Woolf's use of colour "to create psychological volume";¹⁸

¹¹ Simon Watney, *The English Post-Impressionists* (London, 1980), p.137.

¹² Ibid..

¹³ Christopher Reed, "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics", *Twentieth Century Literature* 38, 1 (Spring 1992), p.23. Reed, *ibid.*, suggests that the earlier aesthetics remain dominant in critical accounts because of "their usefulness to the next generation of Americans" who followed Clement Greenberg's theories.

¹⁴ Fry, "Mr MacColl and Drawing", *The Burlington Magazine*, XXXV (1919), pp.84-85: "Whatever Mr Clive Bell may have said, I personally have never denied the existence of some amount of representation in all pictorial art. I have always admitted the purely representative nature of the presentment of the third dimension on the flat surface of a picture. What I have suggested is that the purer the artist the more his representation will be of universals and the less of particulars. I may sometimes have used the word representation in opposition to design to denote more or less particularised representation, but I think in its context this use or misuse of the word is sufficiently clear."

¹⁵ Reed, p.24.

¹⁶ Charles Mauron, *The Nature of Beauty in Art and Literature* (London, 1927).

¹⁷ See James M. Haule, "'Le Temps passe' and the Original Typescript: an Early Version of the 'Time Passes' Section of *To the Lighthouse*", *Twentieth Century Literature* 29, 3 (Fall 1983).

¹⁸ McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved*, p.79.

but it is not this refinement of Fry's aesthetic that Watney pursues, nor does it differ much from the emotional and somewhat vague approach of significant form. However, Fry's essay, "Plastic Colour",¹⁹ influenced by Mauron, indicates the technical precedents for Watney's defining element in the work of the English Post-Impressionists: colour. Before turning to Watney, however, it is worth noting that Fry discusses the evolution of colour in painting from its decorative to structural use, seeing in Cézanne how "colour has ceased to play a separate rôle from drawing. It is an integral part of plastic expression." Planes are "defined rather by their colour relations than by their relations in light and dark".²⁰ On the other hand Matisse's "taste in colour enabled him to arrive at entirely new and surprising oppositions."²¹ Fry sees these two influences at work in the paintings of the English artist Matthew Smith:

He bases himself upon Matisse's conception of the oppositions of flat patches of colour, only, as we shall see, he is trying to import into that more of an equivalent for chiaroscuro than Matisse does. One sees indeed, that it is upon colour that he lays the task of situating his planes in the spatial and plastic construction. Upon colour, too, he relies to achieve suggestions of chiaroscuro. In all this he is pushing to its furthest limits the essentially modern view of the functional as opposed to the ornamental rôle played by colour in pictorial design.²²

But Watney claims for English artists, as even Fry is beginning to acknowledge here, a specific quality to their deployment of colour, which marks out their approach as very different to that suggested by formalist theories:

¹⁹ Fry, "Plastic Colour", *Transformations* (London, 1926).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.218, 220.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p.219.

²² *Ibid.*, p.222.

It was colour which most decisively separated the English Post-Impressionist movement from anything which immediately preceded or followed it. Colour had meaning in 1910. It was simultaneously the pre-condition for the iconography of English Post-Impressionism, and part of that iconography itself.... The construction of space and volume from pure colour relations allowed artists a freedom of design and of actual painterly function, which were unimaginable within the tonal conventions taught at the Slade and elsewhere. But this does not support Fry's over-simplified picture of an art based on the principles of single-point perspectival illusionism being replaced overnight by an art of free expression.²³

Watney's emphasis upon colour and his suggestion that it "had meaning in 1910" counters interpretations of colour as significant form. He is also emphasizing the importance of subject matter - iconography - in the painting of English Post-Impressionists; and he draws on the work of Erwin Panofsky to make this case.

Iconography addresses the "subject matter or meaning of works of art as opposed to their forms".²⁴ Watney investigates the central importance of colour in the iconography of English Post-Impressionism: both as its very "pre-condition" and its substance.

We have already seen that in the political sphere, "Colour had meaning in 1910", and that Woolf uses colour allegorically in "The Sun and the Fish", giving it at one point a specifically suffragette meaning. Colour may well have had meaning for Woolf in 1910. Watney's reappraisal of English Post-Impressionism fits with these findings, and provides an appropriate entrance into an understanding of the prismatic aesthetics of Vanessa Bell which inform Woolf's writing. Watney suggests that Bell, along with other English artists, "took from French painting only what could be assimilated to a strong local tonal tradition, namely, colour."²⁵ Before coming to

²³ Watney, pp.140-141.

²⁴ Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (New York, 1955); quoted by Watney, p.81.

²⁵ Watney, p.81.

Bell, however, it is worth briefly considering with regard to iconography the work and views of Sickert, an important influence on Bell, and whose colourism, as we have seen, Woolf herself formulates in terms of language.

Sickert's dominance of English art before, during and after the first Post-Impressionist exhibition is well established.²⁶ As Woolf's essay shows, Sickert's work may be characterized by his use of colour. "Concerned with the all-over pattern of areas of colour", Sickert "rigorously subordinates the modelling of individual forms to this general pattern. Pictorial space is suggested almost exclusively by colour. Sickert's advice to students was to paint across forms, not into them."²⁷ In the work of the French Impressionists, Sickert observed and responded to, the new tendency to ignore traditional handling of light and shade.²⁸ Introducing the paintings of Camille Pissarro, Sickert observes:

For the dark-and-light chiaroscuro of the past was substituted a new prismatic chiaroscuro. An intensified observation of colour was called in, which enabled the

²⁶ See, Ian Dunlop, *The Shock of the New. Seven Historic Exhibitions of Modern Art* (London, 1972), p.126. Sickert was one of the first English artists to respond to French Impressionism. See, Farr, *English Art 1870-1940* (Oxford, 1978) p.26. During his career he was active in, and initiated, a number of avant-garde groups: the New English Art Club, the Allied Artists' Association, the Fitzroy Street Group, and the Camden Town Group. See Farr, pp.21-47, 189-230; Dunlop, pp.123-131; Wendy Baron, *The Painters of Camden Town 1905-1920*, Christies (London, 1988). Sickert's response to Fry's 1910 Post-Impressionist exhibition was "blasé" to say the least. He gave it a mixed reception, pointing out the differences between the artists on show, rather than finding similarities. He concludes his article/gallery lecture by saying: "This exhibition, a very *frittura mista*, opens up more questions than can be even touched upon in an article. I have no space to speak of Girieud, who inspires interest; of Puy, a real painter, a true colourist." See, Cooper, p.55. Walter Richard Sickert, "Post-Impressionists", *Fortnightly Review*, January 1911, n.s. xcv, 79-89; Bullen, p.165.

²⁷ Farr, *English Art 1870-1940*, p.46; Farr cites Sickert's advice as recalled by Ethel Walker, quoted in John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters: Sickert to Smith* (London, 1952), p.79.

²⁸ See, Watney, p.55.

painter to get the effect of light and shade without rendering the shade so dark as to be undecorative.²⁹

English Post-Impressionism constitutes the continuing engagement with this notion of "a new prismatic chiaroscuro", and its absorption into the tonal tradition of English colourist art.

Subject matter, as Watney emphasizes, is also an important factor; and he opposes the subordination of Sickert's subject matter to the rubric of significant form.³⁰ Sickert and his fellow painters were interested in portraying the everyday life of ordinary, working people; and Watney actually compares their interests with those of Virginia Woolf:

The position of the artists at this time seems to have been much closer to that of Virginia Woolf in the 1930s, recognising that the necessary radical changes in social structure which she looked forward to, could only be realized at the expense of the very culture within which her own writing had value and meaning, than to men like [Wyndham] Lewis and Clive Bell, who simply plunged headlong into reactionary politics.³¹

We might find parallels in the work of these artists with Woolf's interest in the rise of the lower classes from darkness into light. Consider, for example, Gilman's explorations of character in the portraits of his landlady, Mrs Mounter.³² Not only does this portraiture

²⁹ Walter Sickert, "Camille Pissarro", Preface to an Exhibition at the Stafford Gallery; reprinted in *A Free House! or the Artist as Craftsman*, edited by Osbert Sitwell (London, 1947), p.141.

³⁰ Wendy Baron prefers to emphasize Sickert's technique and attention to form, which suggests a preference for the authority of Fry's and Bell's formal theories. See, Baron, "Sickert's Attitude to his Subject Matter", Appendix to *Sickert* (London, 1973).

³¹ Watney, p.134. Watney, p.138, goes on to explain that Sickert's titles "are indispensable guides to our understanding of his art, and his own guarded attitudes towards life. They are anything but arbitrary." In fact they are "culled from newspapers, popular song, classical literature and so on".

³² Gilman claimed "one of his greatest ambitions was to create a character in painting, or rather seize the essence of a character in real life and exhibit it on canvas in all its bearings and with all

of ordinary people mimic Van Gogh's taste in subject matter (the "romantic" artist dropped for the second Post-Impressionist exhibition), it is also close to Woolf's interest in "human character". Woolf, I suggest, in keeping with the English Post-Impressionists under Sickert's influence, records social change in terms of new colours.

11.2 Vanessa Bell

So then let us turn - and where? First, I think, to Vanessa; and I am almost inclined to let her name stand alone upon the page. It contains all the beauty of the sky, and the melancholy of the sea, and the laughter of the Dolphins in its circumference, first in the mystic Van, spread like a mirror of grey glass to Heaven. Next in the swishing tail of its successive esses, and finally in the grave pause and suspension of the ultimate A breathing peace like the respiration of Earth itself.

If I write of books you will understand that I continue the theme though in another key; for are not all Arts her tributaries, all sciences her continents and the globe itself but a painted ball in the enclosure of her arms? But you dwell in the Temple, and I am a worshipper without. (*L*, I, p.282)³³

Bell's development is typical, in many respects, of her generation of British avant-garde artists, in that she moved closer and closer to abstractionism in her art during what has been called the second period of internationalism in British Post-Impressionism (c.1906-1915).³⁴ Bell's work culminates in a flirtation with pure abstractionism by the beginning of the Great War and sobers to more naturalistic methods after it.

the resources of his technique". See, Louis Fergusson, *Harold Gilman: An Appreciation* (London, 1919); quoted by Watney, p.129.

³³ See also, Woolf's dedication in *Night and Day*: "To Vanessa Bell. But, Looking for a phrase, I found none to stand beside your name."

³⁴ Anna Greutzner, "Two Reactions to French Painting in Britain", *Post-Impressionism. Cross-Currents in European Painting*, Royal Academy of Arts, London 1979-1980 (London, 1979), p.178.

That there is an antithesis between "Artist" and "Woman" in the established canon of art history has long been acknowledged,³⁵ and certainly did not escape the attention of the Stephen sisters. Both were mainly educated at home by their father whereas their brothers attended official establishments of education. Vanessa, however, was given drawing lessons by Sir Arthur Cope, and between 1901 and 1904 was permitted to attend the Royal Academy schools. Here she was instructed in painting by J.S. Sargent.

Sargent is teaching most astonishingly well at the R.A. How I wish you were there. He gives lessons as you said he did, that would apply to any paintings. They're chiefly about tone. He insists upon thick paint and makes one try to get the right tone at once. Apparently the drawing is to be got entirely by painting thickly the different tones, which doesn't sound very clear. He generally tells me that my things are too grey. The one thing he is down upon is when he thinks anyone is trying for an effect regardless of truth.³⁶

Thus Bell's early instruction in painting was to subordinate technique to "truth" however painterly the methods. "Observation" was the by-word of this teaching.

Following the death of her mother in 1895 and that of her step-sister in 1897, Vanessa ran the Stephen household; and when her father died in 1904 she, along with her sister, enjoyed a new freedom and independence. This is an important factor in her development as an artist, particularly because, as a woman artist in an art world dominated by men, she was usually made to feel irrelevant and inferior.

Bell observes that "all the members of [the New English Art Club] seemed somehow to have the secret of the art

³⁵ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London, 1981), p.170.

³⁶ Vanessa Bell, Letter to Margery Snowden, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, p.11; see also, Frances Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.35.

universe within their grasp, a secret one was not worthy to learn, especially if one was that terrible low creature, a female painter."³⁷ The Club³⁸ was an exhibiting society founded in 1886, which along with the Slade School of Fine Art encompassed the "art universe" of the day. Bell had attended the Slade (under Henry Tonks) for a while but had found it not to her liking. In 1904 she visited Paris where she met Clive Bell who introduced her to various painters working there. Influenced by this, and having moved the family household from desirable Kensington to unfashionable Bloomsbury, she founded the Friday Club in 1905, a society where young and, at first, female, artists could meet, debate, and exhibit work. She married Clive Bell in 1907.

In 1908 Vanessa Bell painted *Iceland Poppies*³⁹ which was shown at the NEAC in 1909 and was much admired by Sickert. Watney has said that this painting "encapsulates her artistic education". It owes much to Whistler for its layering of paint although Bell's paint is much thicker and she "achieves a unity of tone more severe than any Whistler, since she does not sacrifice form, which is found in her subject matter itself, in the stark horizontals provided by the stems of the poppies, the edge of the table or shelf, and the design on the wall behind. At once exhaustively observed and systematically re-created."⁴⁰ Her sense of design and the bold handling of colour indicate the qualities Bell was to explore in her painting over the next ten or so years; but it is also worth noting that except for rare cases, this is achieved by observations of nature. Complete flatness of design is avoided mainly by the presence of shadows cast by the vase, bowl and bottle,

³⁷ Vanessa Bell, *Memoir VI*; quoted in Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, pp.36-37.

³⁸ Known as the NEAC.

³⁹ Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.188; see illustration VIII.

⁴⁰ Watney, p.40.



Iceland Poppies, 1909

but these shadows are so slight that they seem to be included almost for decorative purpose rather than as suggestions of modelling in a traditional sense. Although the shadows in *Iceland Poppies* may not be "prismatic", they are not "undecorative". Hence Sickert's observations on Pissarro seem quite appropriate to this early work by Bell.⁴¹

In 1908 Bell records her conversations with the painter Henry Lamb (commissioned by Virginia to do a drawing of Vanessa): "We had a long talk about painting. ... He is now painting without any medium (like us), and is using no black. His blacks he makes with blues, reds and greens - an expensive method."⁴² But although Bell seems to admire this method, she goes on to describe the progress of her own portrait of Marjorie Strachey in which she talks of a more traditional handling of light and shadows.⁴³ The first Post-Impressionist show, as Bell testifies above, encouraged a new colour based approach and she abandoned the old ways. Even so, one might expect Bell to emphasize the structural significance of the Picasso still-life she bought in 1911, but she writes to her sister: "I wonder how you'll like it. It's 'cubist' and very beautiful colour".⁴⁴

Looking back on the impact of the second Post-Impressionist exhibition, Bell seems to be suggesting that she took from the French influence an iconographic rather than art-for-art's-sake approach:

⁴¹ Echoing Cézanne's dictum, Gillespie, pp. 228-230, on the other hand, gives a classical, structural emphasis to her interpretation of this picture: "the repetition of spherical shapes, horizontal lines, and groups of three unify the canvas".

⁴² Vanessa Bell, Letter to Margery Snowden, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, pp.75-76.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.77.

⁴⁴ Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Stephen, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, p.109.

I came to the conclusion finally that the most important general difference between French and English art was that the English seemed to be always thinking of the pictures they were producing and the French of something else, I suppose of something they were trying to express by means of the pictures, which in themselves were unimportant to the painters. I thought then that it was very important to have the French attitude of mind. So it is odd that you should suggest now that that is more or less my attitude. Perhaps we all have it much more than we had, and it wouldn't now be the difference between French and English if one could see them together.⁴⁵

Bell sees herself as working away from a self-consciously aesthetic and formal approach to painting even when she was supposedly embracing it. By the time of the second show she was increasingly introducing design based geometric and architectonic elements into her paintings, often using heavy outlines around shapes and flat areas of colour, and rendering shadow with positive colours rather than dark tones. *Landscape with Haystack, Asheham* (the Woolfs' house), shown at the 1912 exhibition, is typical of this new freedom with colour and form, and *Studland Beach*⁴⁶ (one of a series) of the same year is even more extreme in these respects. This is a flat representation of a shore-line which divides the picture plane diagonally, with two groups of figures situated on the opposite diagonal. The group of a standing woman with children at her feet, is in the shelter of a tent at the shore-line (and therefore at the point of the intersection of the two diagonals). Frances Spalding has noted that there is a "compositional tension" between this and the other group in the diagonally opposite corner.⁴⁷ We might also compare *Studland Beach* with

⁴⁵ Vanessa Bell, Letter to Roger Fry, June 1922, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, p.268.

⁴⁶ Gillian Naylor (ed.), *Bloomsbury. The Artists, Authors and Designers by Themselves*, (Great Britain, 1990), p.118; see illustration IX.

⁴⁷ Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.124, also suggests possible resemblances with Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia* and Matisse's *Nu de dos III* (the latter perhaps being influenced by Bell's painting).



VANESSA BELL
ST. ILLDAND BEACH, c. 1912

Gauguin's *Vision After the Sermon*, where a similar diagonal - made by the trunk of a tree - divides one group of figures from another, taken as an image of their inner spiritual experience, the Biblical story of "Jacob wrestling with the angel".

Watney notes that in Bell's painting "the whole scene is drastically pared down, with the canvas divided diagonally into two major areas of uncompromisingly flat colour, a 'sea' of deep indigo painted over a red ground, and a 'beach' of various cream and ochre tints. Even Matisse does not prepare one for these extremely simplified forms before his Moroccan paintings of 1913/14."⁴⁸ He remarks that Bell's paintings "from 1911/12 explore the possibilities of transforming a tradition of monochrome tonality into an art in which colour is built up from related tints. Having emptied her pictures of superfluous information, she was free to concentrate on the exciting potentialities of colour relationships explored for their own sake".⁴⁹

The comparison with Gauguin, however, lends weight to the argument that Bell, even when she reduces form to very simple geometric blocks of colour and abandoned naturalistic effects such as shadow and modelling, does not by any means subordinate "content" to such formal aspects of her work. Like Sargent, in her own way she seems to be somewhat against "trying for an effect regardless of truth". If anything, such abstractionism and reduction of form enhances the subject-matter of *Studland Beach*: "This reduction of form to elemental shapes expresses a feeling which is often austere and remote, but is also ... related to her maternal experience."⁵⁰ This is not to suggest that this work is

⁴⁸ Watney, p.80.

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp.80-81.

⁵⁰ Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.126.

predominantly "narrative" in content but that, however abstract, it is still figurative; and however eternal the subject of motherhood might be, Bell portrays it in quite specific or personal terms as, for example, in *Nursery Tea* of 1912.

Spalding has suggested that in this painting "the human situation presented is totally subordinated to abstract considerations and conveys little of her affection for her children."⁵¹ Yet if one considers the rather hackneyed clichés which more conventional realist portraits of children could be, the attraction becomes obvious in portraying one's son as "the one spot of satisfactory colour with his orange hair and bright pink dress."⁵² In fact Bell records in a letter to Fry her sense of innovatory technical achievement in this picture.

I have been painting my nursery scene. Which is rather comic but I am just in an exciting stage as I flatter myself that I am painting in an entirely new way (for me). Probably you'll think it exactly like everything else I've ever done. I am trying to paint as if I were mosaicing - not painting in spots but by considering the picture as patches each of which has to be filled by the definite space of colours as one has to do with mosaic or woolwork, not allowing myself to brush patches into each other. Its amusing to make these experiments even if they dont succeed. I think this one ought to give one something of the life one seems to get with mosaic. I dont know if it will.⁵³

Bell constructs her picture out of "patches" and "definite space[s]" of colour. This mosaic technique involves the deployment of large areas of colour. It is a technique discussed in both classic and romantic sources for Post-Impressionism: Denis and Meier-Graefe.

⁵¹ Ibid., p.105.

⁵² Vanessa Bell, quoted in Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.106.

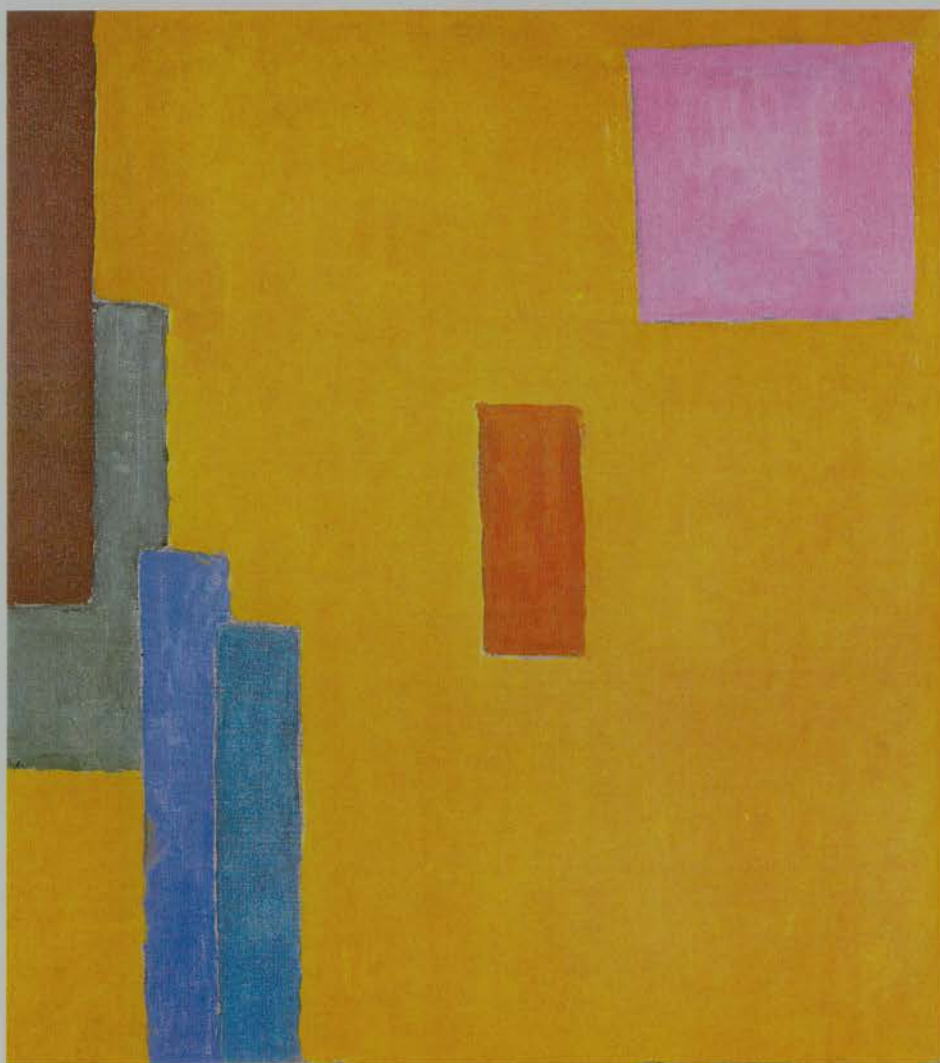
⁵³ Vanessa Bell to Roger Fry, June 5 1911 [The Tate, 8010.8.62 VBRF7]; see, Vanessa Bell, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, p.119.

Bell worked closely with fellow painter Duncan Grant for many years, and both were actively involved with the Omega Workshops. It is likely that it was as a result of their involvement in design projects that Bell and Grant arrived at a pure abstraction in their painting much earlier than many artists in Europe.⁵⁴

One of the most striking examples of Bell's abstract work is a painting now in the Tate, entitled *Abstract*,⁵⁵ which comprises six rectangular patches of colour placed in a field of monochrome yellow. She also uses collage in other paintings of the time (1914/15) which may have been inspired by her use of *papier-collé* in interior decoration (for example her nursery designs). Whatever the motivation, these works represent the brief moment in her career when Bell abandons all representational elements in her work, showing no differentiation between design and fine art. These works were the closest she came to a fulfilment of Fry's and her husband's theories: form and colour relationships are explored for their own sake and refer not to nature but only to themselves. They are self-reflexive and plastic just as Fry might have dictated; yet they seem to have been regarded by Bell herself as private experiments - not something continued in her painting but in her decorative design work. Her paintings do show an interest in formal design, but apart from the few purely abstract works,

⁵⁴ In fact, Frantisek Kupka is credited with the first fully abstract painting, *Amorpha, Fugue in Two Colours*, which, according to Susan Compton, "caused a sensation at the *Salon d'Automne* [Paris] in 1912"; and she notes that "there was more popular discussion of this painting than it received in serious reviews. It was featured in a Gaumont newsreel, released throughout Europe". See, Susan Compton, "The spread of information leading to the rise of abstract art in Europe", *Towards a New Art. Essays on the background of abstract art 1910-20*, The Tate Gallery (London, 1980) pp.188, p.189.

⁵⁵ Susan Compton (ed.), *British Art in the 20th Century*, Royal Academy of Arts (London, 1987) plate no. 24; see illustration X.



Vanessa Bell, *Abstract Painting* c. 1914

they are always rooted in representations of observed objects.⁵⁶

As she moves on from this period of total abstraction her painting reverts to more naturalistic imagery, but as Watney has noted "with hindsight her entire career bears down relentlessly on this point of technical and conceptual sophistication."⁵⁷ Bell explains why she could not ultimately abandon subject matter in favour of pure abstraction:

It is clearly possible to use imitation or representation in producing a great work of art, but it can't be the object of a great artist to tell you facts at the cost of telling you what he feels about them.

Then I don't think I agree with you in your account of the way one looks at a picture (but that may be my blindness). I often look at a picture - for instance I did at the Picasso trees by the side of a lake - without seeing in the least what the things are. I saw trees, but never dreamt of a lake or lakes although I saw certain colours and planes behind the trees. I got quite a strong emotion from the forms and colours, but it wasn't changed when weeks afterwards it was pointed out to me by chance that the blue was a lake. This happens as often as not. The picture does convey the idea of form, of what you call secondary form I suppose, but not the idea of form associated with anything in life, but simply form, separated from life. As a matter of fact we do first feel the emotion and then look at the picture, that is to say, look at it from the point of view of seeing its tertiary form - at least I do. The reason I think that artists paint life and not patterns is that certain qualities of life, what I call movement, mass, weight have aesthetic value.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ The Tate *Abstract* is Bell's most impressive "in this style", according to Watney, p.100: "Her preferred colour range is explored here discreetly yet with immense confidence, in a series of relationships between colour areas and rectilinear forms. The altogether monolithic effect of this canvas totally belies its small size.... This painting is in no sense derived from nature. As such it is a perfect analogue for the concept of *peinture pure*. It cannot be said to symbolize anything beyond its own presence as a set of colour relationships, and the significance of such relationships to an audience acquainted with the values of contemporary parisian aesthetics."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Vanessa Bell to Leonard Woolf, January 22 [1913], *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, pp.133-4.

Vanessa Bell does not regard form in painting as being imitative - "associated with anything in life" - but as something taken from nature or reality, and "separated from life." By this she acknowledges that art is a fiction, but that it is constructed out of rhythms and movements which the artist abstracts from life. She regards "flat patterns" as completely unconnected to such movements; they are separate, rather than separated, from life therefore they can only impose order upon it - not move with its pulse. Instead of insisting that form can be significant only at the expense of content/subject matter, as Fry and Clive Bell do, Vanessa Bell exploits the tension between the two, showing that form and content may cohere in a painting without making it imitative or "descriptive."

But where I quarrel with Clive ... is when he says one gets the same emotion from flat patterns that one does from pictures. I say one doesn't because of the reason I have just given - that movement etc. give me important aesthetic emotions.⁵⁹

Like Fry and Clive Bell, she does not regard art as a photographic resemblance of life, but unlike them she finds the sensual pleasures of artistic form and colour relations to be linked to forms and movements in life, and to have iconographic value. This is the irony of Fry's and Clive Bell's position: "the one thing that the theory of Significant Form cannot cope with is the actual process of signification."⁶⁰

Whereas Fry proclaims that subject-matter is irrelevant to form and that therefore an image of a kitchen utensil is as significant as an image of Christ, Vanessa Bell's paintings often reveal a strong sense of subject in spite

⁵⁹ This part of the letter is not included in the *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, but it is quoted by Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.126.

⁶⁰ Watney, p.94.

of any declarations by her that her pictures are without meaning. Many of her paintings refer to women and children, and formal and colour relationships in her pictures often reflect upon the human. One such psychologically compelling piece is *The Tub* (1917).⁶¹ It depicts a pensive nude woman standing to the side of a round bath tub, which is tilted towards the picture frame so that its rim forms an almost perfect circle. Behind and above this is a vase with three flowers - one yellow and two red.

Spalding suggests a parallel with *Iceland Poppies* where, she claims, the motif of three flowers - one of which "is separated by its colour from the rest"⁶² - perhaps signifies Bell's jealousy of her sister's flirtation with her husband. *The Tub*, she says refers to a similar triangular relationship between Duncan Grant, David Garnett and Vanessa Bell. She points out that the woodcut of *The Tub*, which was made some time later when Bell became pregnant by Grant, shows the nude overlapping the circle of the tub, and behind her two not three flowers. But this imagery, I suggest, may well refer more to the fulfilment of the woman's menstrual cycle than to her jealousy, since the odd flower out in the painting may signify the unfertilized egg which is fulfilled in the woodcut. The shape formed by the stems and flower heads above the circle of the tub is reminiscent of that of a woman's ovaries and fallopian tubes above the womb. The closer position of the woman to the circle of the tub in the woodcut may be taken as an indication of pregnancy since her form breaks the circle just as the menstrual cycle is broken by pregnancy - she can be seen as part of the whole of the circle rather than isolated from it.

⁶¹ Naylor, p.111; see illustration XI.

⁶² Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.171.



VANESSA BELL
THE TUB. 1917

These images may be read in terms of the sensual pleasures of the medium, but technique may also be related to subject matter. Watney remarks on the "numerous pentimenti in this large painting" which:

seem to reinforce the significance of the act of undressing before us, a curiously apt metaphor for this further paring down of her pictorial vocabulary, allowing her to pursue that distinctive dramatisation of the qualities of related brush-marks in the context of an extremely personal iconography which abstraction could never have allowed.⁶³

Flowers are also of some importance in *A Conversation*, also known as *Three Women*,⁶⁴ executed between 1913 and 1916. This very schematized but figurative picture shows three women in conversation at a window in which is visible a cluster of brightly coloured flowers in a landscape which comprises two bands of colour, one green and the other orange. This is framed by two stylized white curtains which stand like columns at either side. In front are the figures of three women in rather sombre garb. There is no sense of depth in the painting, and the heads of the women lie flat against the window motif. Two of them listen while the other speaks. The two listening (one head overlaps the other) wear hats, one green and the other orange like the background; the woman speaking to them is seen in profile against the flowers, whose brightness reflects her animation which is also suggested by the stunning blue of her eye and the gesture of her hands.

The flowers, divided from the women by the plane of the window, seem to be "the visual equivalent" of their chatter.⁶⁵ Although the women's heads may be seen to overlap the flowers, it is also worth noting, I suggest,

⁶³ Watney, p.103.

⁶⁴ Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, p.144; see illustration XII.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.154.



that because of the flatness of the design - the lack of recession - the flowers may also be seen to occupy the same picture plane as the women. Thus the less substantial reality of thought and conversation is given the same solidity and status as the more tangible mass of human form. The division suggested by the window is dissolved and what is seen on either side of it is not in opposition but united in the same pictorial surface.

This painting greatly impresses Woolf, with its iconographic, not its formal, achievements:

I am greatly tempted to write 'Variations on a Picture by Vanessa Bell' for Desmond's paper - I should run the three women and the pot of flowers on a chair into one phantasmagoria.... I think you are a most remarkable painter. But I maintain you are into the bargain, a satirist, a conveyor of impressions about human life: a short story writer of great wit and able to bring off a situation in a way that rouses my envy. I wonder if I could write the Three Women in prose. Would Roger let me have it here for a week or so? (L, III, p.498)

The essentially two-dimensional composition of Bell's painting, according to Gillespie, "anticipates, in a general way, Woolf's use in *The Waves* of the circle as an image of human relationships. None of the women look out from Bell's painting; they look intently at each others' faces, which form a semicircle."⁶⁶ She adds that Woolf's story, "A Society", published in *Monday or Tuesday*, 1921, "and Vanessa Bell's woodcut illustration for it, are closely related to *The Conversation*. The sisters reproduce, each in her own medium, the intimacy of the women, their complete absorption in their discussion, their monumentality, and the unity of the design."⁶⁷ Woolf's response to Bell's pictures betrays a sense of common concern, not just with general human relations, then, but with women's space in particular.

⁶⁶ Gillespie, pp.108-9.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p.111.

In preparing for collaboration with Woolf on *Kew Gardens*, Bell writes:

It's a relief to turn to your story, though some of the conversation - she says, I says, sugar - I know too well! But it's fascinating and a great success, I think.... I wonder if I could do a drawing for it. It would be fun to try, but you must tell me the size. It might not have much to do with the text, but that wouldn't matter. But I might feel inclined to do the two people holding the sugar conversation. Do you remember a picture I showed at the Omega of 3 women talking with a flower bed seen out of the window behind? It might almost but not quite do as an illustration.

Now do send me your theories of aesthetics and feelings on looking at one of my works. I'm longing to hear them.⁶⁸

Gillespie notes that "The moment in the story which stimulated [Bell] visually ... was the third of the four conversations overheard in the garden."⁶⁹ Bell sees parallels, then, between her sister's depiction of conversational exchange and her own. There are parallels also between Bell's painting and Woolf's *Walter Sickert. A Conversation*.⁷⁰ There is, not least, a common interest in expressing a sense of collective communication. Colours, moreover, are the common metaphor conveying this sense.

Woolf constantly draws parallels between writing and painting, and eagerly discusses both topics with writers, painters and theorists alike. She is inquisitive into the nature of painters' lives, as for example when she begs Bell to report from Paris: "do describe a dinner at a cafe and how you artists talk. Please do." (*L*, II, p.472) Woolf often uses vocabulary picked up from her painter friends to talk about her literary works: she

⁶⁸ Vanessa Bell Letter to Virginia Woolf, July 3, 1918, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, pp.214-15.

⁶⁹ Gillespie, p.119.

⁷⁰ Gillespie, p.173.

says to Fry "I'm not sure that a perverted plastic sense doesn't somehow work itself out in words for me". (L, II, p.285)

Woolf's painterly analogies are strongest, however, in reference to Vanessa Bell, whom she readily acknowledges as an inspiration for her stories and characters. She makes frequent reference to "writing Vanessa's life" (L, II, p.325), most significantly in the guise of Katherine Hilbery, and Lily Briscoe. But Vanessa Bell is also an important source for Woolf's aesthetics: "I'm going to write an account of my emotions towards one of your pictures, which gives me infinite pleasure, and has changed my view upon aesthetics." (L, II, p.257)

It is clear that Bell drew considerable inspiration from her sister, both sisters recognizing a common aim in their respective media.⁷¹ About *The Waves*, she writes:

Will it seem to you absurd and conceited or will you understand at all if I tell you that I've been working hard lately at an absurd great picture I've been painting off and on the last 2 years and if only I could do what I want to - but I can't - it seems to me it would have some sort of analogous meaning to what you've done. How can one explain. But to me, painting a floor covered with toys and keeping them all in relation to each other and the figures and the space of the floor and the light on it means something of the same sort that you seem to me to mean. However, I know quite well that my painting will mean it to no one else. Only perhaps it helps me to understand what you're about.⁷²

Bell illustrated Woolf's stories and designed dust-jackets for most of her novels, but Woolf seems to have considered her sister's work at a deeper level than that of mere illustration. Not only is she concerned with the

⁷¹ Spalding, *Vanessa Bell*, paving the way for Gillespie's comparisons, makes much of the artistic exchange enjoyed by the sisters.

⁷² Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Woolf, October 15, 1931, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, pp.367-8.

"plasticity" of her words, but Woolf is also "always trying to get behind words". (L, I, p.408) She observes of *Night and Day*:

and then there's the whole question, which interested me, again too much for the book's sake, I dare say, of the things one doesn't say; what effect does that have? and how far do our feelings take their colour from the dive underground? I mean what is the reality of any feeling? - and all this is complicated by the form, which must sit tight. (L, II, p.320)

Woolf shares her sister's aesthetic preoccupations: they both try to show non-physical experiences as formal realities, at the same time emphasizing and illuminating feminine experience. Both show communication between people as material events. Both relate this to colour.

CHAPTER XII

"HER PICTURES STAND FOR SOMETHING": WOOLF'S FOREWORDS TO BELL'S PAINTINGS

Woolf's elegant and concise forewords to her sister's exhibition catalogues of 1930 and 1934,¹ draw together observations about the status of women artists with explorations of literary analogies to the painterly. Reflecting on the sensual and iconographic power of Bell's colour, they also echo ideas and phrases from both *A Room of One's Own* and "The Sun and the Fish". These explorations of her sister's art, then, may be informed by (as well as inform) Woolf's literary engagement with gendered interpretations of light, dark and colour. This chapter (looking mainly at the forewords but with reference to other essays) explores the complexities and ambiguities of Woolf's response as a woman observing another woman's art in a man's world.

12.1 A woman artist in Bond Street

The 1930 "Foreword" opens with a humorous reminder of the new liberties enjoyed by women artists:

That a woman should hold a show of pictures in Bond Street, I said, pausing upon the threshold of Messrs. Cooling's gallery, is not usual, nor, perhaps, altogether to be commended. For it implies, I fancy, some study of the nude, and while for many ages it has been admitted that women are naked and bring nakedness to birth, it was held, until sixty years ago that for a woman to look upon nakedness with the eye of an artist, and not simply with the eye of a mother, wife or mistress was corruptive of

¹ Woolf, "Foreword", *Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*, The London Artists' Association, Cooling Galleries (London, 1930), reprinted in *The Bloomsbury Group: A Collection of Memoirs, Commentary and Criticism*, edited by S.P. Rosenbaum (London, 1975), pp.169-173; further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (F); "Foreword", *Catalogue of Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*, the Lefevre Galleries (London, 1934), p.1.

her innocency and destructive of her domesticity. (*F*, p.170)

Woolf dramatizes women's intervention in the traditionally masculine realm of art by positioning herself on the gallery's threshold. Poised between exclusion from and possible submission to this male bastion of the arts, she exploits the irony implicit in her sister's exhibiting there: woman as object of the artist's gaze has become its subject.² Previously women have been permitted to look at nakedness only with the subordinate gaze of the mother, wife or mistress, and denied the look and subjective status implied by "the eye of the artist". That this affects both subjectivity and objectivity is suggested by references to the subsequent veiling of the flesh from women's eyes as a moral imperative: "Hence the extreme activity of women in philanthropy, society, religion and all pursuits requiring clothing." (*F*, p.170)

The woman artist comes to stand for the avant-garde artist in pursuit of pure painting - art freed from morality, narrative or meaning. The Victorian aunt, then, may also stand for Victorian attitudes to painting as well as to women artists in particular:

Hence again the fact that every Victorian family has in its cupboard the skeleton of an aunt who was driven to convert the native because her father would have died rather than let her look upon a naked man. And so she went to Church; and so she went to China; and so she died unwed; and so there drop out of the cupboard with her bones half a dozen flower pieces done under the shade of a white umbrella in a Surrey garden when Queen Victoria was on the throne. (*F*, p.170)

The possibility of a male nude as the object of a woman artist's gaze affirms a new sense of feminine

² See, John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (Harmondsworth, 1977), pp.62-63; and Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology* (London, 1981).

subjectivity; and may also restore fleshly associations to the masculine (the male nude as object of the male gaze traditionally represents spiritual harmony and transcendence, rarely real flesh). Queen Victoria and incongruous objects falling from a Victorian cupboard echo elements of the "amusing game". Similarly the observation "she died unwed" suggests that like the unwedded "sights" of that game, the Victorian aunt is a figure of failed creativity. Yet her "flower pieces" remain as testimony to women's artistic potential forced into the shade in the era of nineteenth century imperialism. These introductory remarks set an oppositional and gendered model of light and dark (the woman artist works in "the shade of a white umbrella") against which will emerge the figure of the modern woman artist: "Mrs. Bell".³

Woolf's sense of hesitant trepidation at the door to this one woman show is underlined by her caveat: "These reflections are only worth recording because they indicate the vacillations and prevarications (if one is not a painter or a critic of painting) with which one catches at any straw that will put off the evil moment when one must go into the gallery and make up one's mind about the pictures." (*F*, p.170) Again, observations about the individual woman's art-show seem to stand for visits to exhibitions in general (note the shift here from "I" to "one"). But Woolf also alerts us to the delicate status of the woman artist: on the one hand the artist's gender is irrelevant since "prevarications" attend every visit to a gallery; on the other hand it is

³ Woolf's private references to the luminosity of her sister's art suggest that she expects Bell's paintings dazzlingly to dispel the shadows of Victorian gloom: she describes, *D*, II, p.73, their "astonishing brightness in the heart of darkness", and, *L*, III, p.270, a particular picture "of flashing brilliance, of sunlight crystallised, of diamond durability."

precisely because "Mrs. Bell" is a woman that she arouses interest.

But Mrs. Bell has a certain reputation it cannot be denied. She is a woman, it is said, yet she has looked on nakedness with a brush in her hand. She is reported (one has read it in the newspapers) to be "the most considerable painter of her own sex now alive". Berthe Morisot, Marie Laurencin, Vanessa Bell - such is the stereotyped phrase which comes to mind when her name is mentioned and makes one's predicament in front of her pictures all the more exacting. For what ever the phrase may mean, it must mean that her pictures stand for something, are something and will be something which we shall disregard at our peril. As soon not go to see them as shut the window when the nightingale is singing. (*F*, p.170)

This passage, although fraught with ambiguities, suggests finally that Woolf finds Bell's pictures iconographic since they "stand for something".⁴ But Bell's reputation, as Woolf's vacillations indicate, is far from certain: her talent as a painter is overshadowed by her notoriety as a woman painter of nudes. As such she is considered a threat to male prowess (sexual and artistic): Woolf's depiction of her sister holding the "phallic" brush contradicts the traditionally *macho* image of the artist encapsulated in the anecdote about Renoir;⁵ Bell is a libidinous woman whose "reputation" colours her work.

Yet "brush" may also connote feminine sexuality: as "the most considerable painter of her own sex", Bell is figured as a formidable woman artist capable of wielding a brush over a male object, possibly also suggesting here that she might sweep away (perhaps emasculate) what she

⁴ Gillespie, p.72, on the other hand sees only evasiveness here, suggesting that Woolf "admits ... that a contemplation of the historical difficulties of women in the visual arts is only a way to avoid looking at the pictures and trying to come to conclusions about them. She evades doing so again by commenting briefly upon her sister's reputation in relation to Berthe Morisot's and Marie Laurencin's."

⁵ See Chapter 10.

sees. But she is simultaneously an artist whose subject matter is her own sex, and who inscribes her sexuality in art, the instrument no longer phallic but vaginal. Here the possibility of an autonomous feminine sexuality and art is intimated: woman as subject and object of the artistic gaze, is now able to "illumine [her] own soul" (AROO, p.135). This liberating aspect is countered by the suggestion of Bell's possible confinement to the ranks of women artists stereotypically considered as secondary to the dominant male canon. Such contradictions throw the observer into an "exacting" "predicament" even before Bell's paintings have been glimpsed.

12.2 The song of the nightingale

This predicament, I suggest, may be helpfully explored by considering in some detail Woolf's comparison of Bell's pictures to the song of the nightingale. Woolf seems to be making the point that to stay away from her sister's paintings is to ignore art, and the birdsong stands here as a fitting metaphor for art. But her choice of the nightingale's song in particular may yield a more intricate set of possibilities. The nightingale song may be taken as an allusion to the myth of Procne and Philomela, an appropriate reference perhaps for Woolf to make in introducing her sister's art, but not altogether a pleasant one.⁶

⁶ "Tereus, pretending that [his wife] Procne was dead, asked that Philomela might be sent to him, and on her arrival raped or seduced her and then cut out her tongue to prevent her telling. She contrived to send her sister a piece of embroidery on which was woven her story. Procne found her and took revenge on Tereus by serving him at a meal with the flesh of his and her child Itys. Finding this out, he pursued the women, but the gods turned him into a hoopoe, Procne into a nightingale, and Philomela into a swallow (a later tradition, represented in Latin authors, reverses these last two)." *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1949), p.683; see also, Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Volume 1 (Harmondsworth, 1955), pp.165-167.

Philomela, the silent weaver of images, transformed into a nightingale, is an important figure in Eliot's *The Waste Land*.⁷

Above the antique mantel was displayed
As though a window gave upon a sylvan scene
The change of Philomel, by the barbarous king
So rudely forced; yet there the nightingale
Filled all the desert with inviolable voice
And still she cried, and still the world pursues,
'Jug Jug' to dirty ears.⁸

Woolf's reference to "shutting the window when the nightingale is singing" may, then, suggest Eliot's window scene, but we might also turn to his source in Ovid:⁹

Now through the twelve signs, a whole year's journey, has the sun-god passed. And what shall Philomela do? A guard prevents her flight; stout walls of solid stone fence in the hut; speechless lips can no token give of her wrongs. But grief has sharp wits, and in trouble cunning comes. She hangs a Thracian web on her loom, and skillfully weaving purple signs on a white background, she thus tells the story of her wrongs. This web, when completed, she gives to her one attendant and begs her with gestures to carry it to the queen. The old woman, as she was bid, takes the web to Procne, not knowing what she bears in it. The savage tyrant's wife unrolls the cloth, reads the pitiable tale of her misfortune, and (miracle that she could!) says not a word. Grief chokes the words that rise to her lips, and her questing tongue can find no words strong enough to express her outraged feelings. Here is no room for tears, but she hurries on to confound right and wrong, her whole soul bent on vengeance.¹⁰

⁷ Woolf herself set this poem in type for the Hogarth Press in 1923: see, J.H. Willis, Jr., *Leonard and Virginia Woolf as Publishers: The Hogarth Press, 1917-41* (Charlottesville and London, 1992), p.72.

⁸ Eliot, *The Waste Land*, lines 98-103, *The Complete Poems and Plays of T.S. Eliot* (London, 1969), p.66.

⁹ See also, John Lyly, *Campaspe* (London, 1584), v, i: "What bird so sings, yet so does wail?/ O 'tis the ravish'd nightingale./ Jug, jug, jug, jug, tereu, she cries,/ And still her woes at midnight rise."

¹⁰ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VI, lines 571-586, translated by Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1926), Volume I, pp.328-9. Miller's translation of:

Signa deus bis sex acto lustraverat anno;
quid faciat Philomela? fugam custodia claudit,

Philomela's tapestry may be taken as a model for feminist art:¹¹ its origins lie in woman's suffering ("in trouble cunning comes") and anguished protest. This art speaks secretly to women in a public realm still dominated by men, and its decorative allure is deceptive for it becomes instrumental in the downfall of a tyrant. The purple and white threads of this "Thracian web", considered retrospectively, provide the accidental significance, almost, of a suffrage pennant; and we may even find a parallel in suffragette handkerchieves embroidered by women on hunger strike in Holloway prison.¹² Anti-feminists also employed imagery which

structa rigent solido stabulorum moenia saxo,
 os mutum facta caret indice. grande doloris
 ingenium est, miserisque venit sollertia rebus:
 stamina barbarica suspendit callida tela
 purpureasque notas filis intexuit albis,
 indicium sceleris; perfectaue tradidit uni,
 utque ferat dominae, gestu rogat; illa rogata
 pertulit ad Procnem nec scit, quid tradat in illis.
 evolvit vestes saevi matroni tyranni
 fortunaeque suae carmen miserabile legit
 et (mirum potuisse) silet: dolor ora repressit,
 verbaque quaerenti satis indignantia linguae
 defuerunt, nec flere vacat, sed fasque nefasque
 confusura ruit poenaeque in imagine tota est.

¹¹ Jane Marcus, in "Liberty, Sorority, Misogyny", *The Representation of Women in Fiction*, edited by Carolyn Heilbrun and Margeret Higonnet (Baltimore, 1982), pp.60-97, discusses the use of the Procne and Philomela myth in Woolf's *Between the Acts*; and in "Still Practice, A/Wrested Alphabet: Towards a Feminist Aesthetic", *Art & Anger: Reading Like A Woman* (Columbus, 1988), p.215, she claims it as "a model for a contemporary socialist feminist criticism. It gives us an aesthetics of political commitment to offer in place of current theories based in psychology or in formalism." Although there are some similarities to Marcus's argument, my discussion of this myth below differs in analysis and emphasis. For example, Marcus rightly sees Philomela's text as a model for communication between feminist sisters, but she does not pursue the possible analogy for Woolf and her actual sister.

¹² For example, the Suffragette Handkerchief, worked in Holloway (1912) [now in the Museum of London] by the musician Janie Terreno is embroidered with suffrage colours, violets and the "names of those who were fed by force" and shows a postcard portrait of Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst. For illustration see, Bonner, Frances, Lizbeth Goodman, Richard Allen, Linda Janes and Catherine King (eds.), *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender*

echoes (not necessarily consciously) that of the myth: Tickner draws attention to a postcard depicting the cutting out of a woman's tongue below the legend "Beware of Suffragists".¹³

The tapestry described in Ovid may also prefigure Woolf's references to women's webs of fiction as "the work of suffering human beings". (AROO, p.63) Yet Woolf also aspires to an art whose concerns go beyond such matters:

It is fatal for a woman to lay the least stress on any grievance; to plead even with justice any cause; in any way to speak consciously as a woman. And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with that conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilised. Brilliant and effective, powerful and masterly, as it may appear for a day or two, it must wither at nightfall; it cannot grow in the minds of others. (AROO, p.157)

If a woman's art survives "nightfall", we might gather, it is an art no longer articulated from the shade of oppression marked out for women by patriarchy. Such an art may register its origins in oppression, but it does not plead or grieve, for it is an art transformed, articulating and claiming a new and unshadowed creative position for women. This new art, then, suggests not Philomela's tapestry, which in some versions of the story

(Cambridge, 1992), Colour Plate 13. See also, Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: embroidery and the making of the feminine* (London, 1984), p.201; Catherine King, "Feminist Arts", *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender*, edited by Frances Bonner et al. (Cambridge, 1992), p.176: it is "sprigged with prison arrows and the hammers the women had used to break windows in Oxford Street. On either side at the top are the words 'Hunger-Strike', flanking 'W.S.P.U.' and 'Deeds not words'. The women called themselves, 'Mrs Pankhurst's Bold Bad Ones'."

¹³ Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (London, 1987), p.52: E. Dusédau, postcard, "Beware of Suffragists" (c.1909). Tickner notes this card was made "well before the onset of militant violence" and is symptomatic of the anti-suffragist "urge to render women speechless." Interestingly, as a means of relaxation (and not political protest!), Woolf herself actually embroidered tapestries from her sister's designs. See, for example *L*, III, pp.414-415.

tells of its author's imprisonment among the slaves,¹⁴ but the elegiac song of the nightingale, both art and artist having been transformed and freed. Yet this transformation may not be considered fully as liberation since, in order to survive, the woman artist relinquishes her own shape to find refuge in the shape of a bird. To compare her sister's pictures to the song of a nightingale, we might conclude, is for Woolf to recognize, perhaps, their painful triumph over "nightfall" and all its "fatal" connotations.

In Keats's Ode the nightingale is praised for transporting its audience back to the sunny, arcadian climes of "the warm south" as it sings "of summer" from its "melodious plot/ Of beechen green, and shadows numberless".¹⁵ This suggests the shadows are too numerous to count but also subtly hints that as the bird sings these disappear (there are now none to count). The bird's song of summer contrasts with its dark surroundings, but at the same time dispels that darkness. We do not know whether this poem figured in Vanessa Bell's plan to illustrate some Keats for the Hogarth Press in 1921, for although Woolf thought her project "a very brilliant one", it came to nothing.¹⁶

Elsewhere,¹⁷ Woolf considers the differences between Keats's nightingale and Eliot's to illustrate her point (as in her "amusing game") that for modern tastes: "Beauty is part ugliness; amusement part disgust; pleasure part pain." (*E*, IV, p.433) Anticipating the liminal imagery of her foreword, she summarizes:

¹⁴ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, Volume 1, p.166.

¹⁵ John Keats, "Ode to a Nightingale", *Keats Poetical Work*, edited by H.W. Garrod (London, Oxford, New York, 1970), p.207.

¹⁶ Woolf, Letter to Vanessa Bell, *L*, II, p.491.

¹⁷ Woolf, "Poetry, Fiction and the Future", *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 and 27 August, 1927; *E*, IV, pp.428-440. (Reprinted with minor variations, as "The Narrow Bridge of Art").

"Emotions which used to enter the mind whole are now broken up on the *threshold*."¹⁸ In Keats's poem "sorrow is the shadow which accompanies beauty. In the modern mind beauty is accompanied not by its shadow but by its opposite. The modern poet talks of the nightingale who sings 'jug jug to dirty ears'." (*E*, IV, p.433) This literary abandonment of shadow also fits with Post-Impressionism's colourist displacement of chiaroscuro.

Appropriately enough, after the nightingale allusion in her foreword Woolf crosses the gallery's threshold to celebrate her sister's luminously colourful and shadowless art.

But once inside and surrounded by canvases, this shillyshallying on the threshold seems superfluous. What is there here to intimidate or perplex? Are we not suffused, lit up, caught in a sunny glow? Does there not radiate from the walls a serene yet temperate warmth, comfortable in the extreme after the rigours of the streets? Are we not surrounded by vineyards and olive trees, by naked girls couched on crimson cushions, by naked boys ankle deep in the pale green sea? (*F*, pp.170-171)

This savouring of colour, light and sensuousness delivers us from doorstep "shillyshallying" over women's past subordination: the vision of the Victorian aunt's skeleton gives way to a vibrant celebration of flesh. The imagery of naked boys and girls may suggest the "nuptials" Woolf describes in her vision of androgynous art (*AROO*, p.157). But Bell's art does more than merely counter Victorian prudery:

Even the puritans of the nineteenth century might grant us a moment's liberty in this serene and ordered world. But it is not the puritans who move us on. It is Mrs. Bell. It is Mrs. Bell who is determined that we shall not loll about juggling with pretty words or dallying with delicious sensations. (*F*, p.171)

¹⁸ My italics.

Bell's achievement is a directness of vision beyond the verbal: it is unmediated, and untroubled by "the rigours of the streets" or, as in "The Sun and the Fish", by "the tumult of the world". Left at the gallery door, tumult gives way to a "serene and ordered world". Bell's paintings seem to match the "still rapture" of the lizard-tanks' classical "squares of immortality".

Woolf seems to find her advice to women writers to "Think of things in themselves" awesomely enacted in paint by her sister.

Ninety nine painters ... had they possessed that sense of satire which seems to flash its laughter for a moment at those women in Dieppe in the eighties, would have caricatured and illustrated; would have drawn our attention to the antics of parrots, the pathos of old umbrellas, the archness of ankles, the eccentricities of noses. Something would have been done to gratify the common, innocent and indeed very valuable gift which has produced in England so rich a library of fiction. But look round the room: the approach to these pictures is not made by that means. No stories are told; no insinuations are made. The hill side is bare; the group of women is silent; the little boy stands in the sea saying nothing. (*F*, p.171)

In contrast to declaring privately her sister "a short story writer of great wit", as we saw earlier, Woolf explains publicly here Bell's "uncompromising" (*F*, p.171) art as one free of literary associations, of narrative or of any meaning at all ("No stories are told"): these are stark classical images, now beyond the celebration of the flesh ("no insinuations are made"). Yet satire is achieved - but by other means than narrative. Bell's apparent rejection of caricaturing nineteenth century "umbrellas" and "ankles" suggests her bold innovation as a modern painter, but also her dismissal of Victorian attitudes to women and their clothing: Woolf seems to be hinting at the satirical implications of her sister's direct, unshadowed, treatment of such subject matter. Yet if this sounds like a feminist interpretation

creeping into her analysis, she closes the passage with a statement at odds with the idea of satire and more appropriate to the pages of Clive Bell's *Art*: "If portraits there are, they are pictures of flesh which happens from its texture or its modelling to be aesthetically on an equality with the China pot or the chrysanthemum." (*F*, p.171) This resembles Clive Bell's account of the Post-Impressionist approach to a coal-scuttle.¹⁹

Woolf supplies the orthodox creed, then: subject matter is irrelevant; there is no meaning or narrative content; these are paintings about paintings. Yet, as her doorstep prevarications have intimated, how we read her observations becomes a matter of position: if we remain on the threshold between street and gallery, between Philomela and the nightingale, between the grief and protest of her tapestry and the purity and freedom of the birdsong, we cannot, since we have a foot in both camps, submit entirely to this declaration of significant form.

Remembering Woolf's initial caveat that her sister is exhibiting in male territory, we might see Bell as the nightingale singing of sunshine as a promise of feminine enlightenment, from the as yet unbanished shadows of patriarchy. It may appear to the male eye, in a realm dominated by men, that "The hill side is bare" and that "the group of women is silent", but to a woman's eye such cold pastorals may speak volumes. There is then a double consciousness at work in Woolf's foreword; and this model for reading Bell's paintings may also be profitably put to use in reading Woolf's words.

¹⁹ See, Clive Bell, "The English Group", *Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition*, October 5-December 31, 1912, Grafton Galleries, Exhibition Catalogue (London, 1912), pp.10-11: it is "an end in itself, as a significant form related on terms of equality with other significant forms."

Accordingly, we might reconsider Woolf's observations concerning the "fatal" error of a woman who writes openly of "any grievance". Perhaps Woolf is recommending silence with the thought that Philomela's silent art and her sister's silent response are (not just enforced but) strategically necessary for survival and escape from tyranny. Woolf writes her "Foreword" also from the contested space of Messrs. Cooling's gallery: the presence there of her sister's paintings suggests a challenge to the male orthodoxy but also imprisonment by it. The code between sisters may lie dormant or it may be activated, depending on the permutation of reading context and (gender) position.

Woolf's representation of Bell's art allows for it to be read according to the theory of significant form (the male domain), perhaps gently questioning whether this resembles the birdsong state (free of protest) into which women's art will transform itself after the tapestry phase. But she also discloses its iconographic (and feminist) potential. Rather than settling on either position exclusively, Woolf takes her doorstep vacillations into the gallery. No sooner has she arrived at her paraphrase of the significant form approach than she declares it an interpretative dead end: "Checked at that point in our approach (and the snub is none the less baffling for the beauty with which it is conveyed) one can perhaps draw close from another angle." (*F*, p.171)

12.3 "Goddess and peasant"

Woolf next considers the paintings in relation to the artist's personality: "Let us see if we can come at some idea of Mrs. Bell herself and by thus trespassing, crack the kernel of her art." This writerly approach, however, she finds "rebuffed" by contradictions:

One says, Anyhow Mrs. Bell is a woman; and then half way round the room one says, But she may be a man. One says, She is interested in children; one has to add, But she is equally interested in rocks. One asks, Does she show any previous knowledge of clothes? One replies, Stark nakedness seems to please her well.... Was she ever at a University? Does she prefer herrings or brussel sprouts? Is she - for our patience is becoming exhausted - not a woman at all, but a mixture of Goddess and peasant, treading the clouds with her feet and with her hands shelling peas? Any writer so ardently questioned would have yielded something to our curiosity. (*F*, pp.171-172)

When Woolf asks about Bell's "previous knowledge of clothes", she may be looking for an historical awareness of the oppression suffered by women, and symbolized by the Victorian aunt forced into "pursuits requiring clothing". This state of affairs belongs to the pre-eclipse phase of feminism in which the woman artist/writer struggles to overcome dominant gender restrictions: to show "previous knowledge of clothes" may be to acknowledge this historical struggle. Bell also addresses the post-eclipse condition of "stark nakedness", defying the history of oppression associated with clothing, and celebrates a world of flesh uninhibited by patriarchy or puritanism; but Woolf communicates a sense of unease at total nakedness: it may not be desirable to discard the clothes of history altogether. As an artist Bell has apparently achieved a state of androgyny; her art reveals to Woolf that she has avoided the "fatal" error of being a "woman pure" for she seems to be a "woman-manly" (*AROO*, p.157), that is, she "is a woman But she may be a man". The questions

about University attendance and food preferences echo Woolf's concerns in *A Room of One's Own* with the material conditions necessary for women's education and for the production of their art. The figure of Bell as Goddess-cum-peasant, furthermore, resembles Woolf's portrait there of the "very queer composite being", a portrait worth pausing to consider more fully.

Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the slave of any boy whose parents forced a ring upon her finger. Some of the most inspired words, some of the most profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read, could scarcely spell, and was the property of her husband. (AROO, p.66)

A male-dominated literary canon presents an idealized order of femininity at odds with the historical realities of women's suffering and oppression; and Woolf hints at the complicity of such literature in enforcing the latter. In suggesting how women writers might transform this monster bred of poetry and history, Woolf puts forward an alternative creature which yet has its origins in this hybrid monster:

It was certainly an odd monster that one made up by reading the historians first and the poets afterwards - a worm winged like an eagle; the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping up suet. But these monsters, however amusing to the imagination, have no existence in fact. What one must do to bring her to life was to think poetically and prosaically at one and the same moment, thus keeping in touch with fact - that she is Mrs. Martin, aged thirty-six, dressed in blue, wearing a black hat and brown shoes; but not losing sight of fiction either - that she is a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually. (AROO, pp.66-67)

This way of thinking about women both "poetically and prosaically" acknowledges the historical and material realities of Mrs. Martin's clothes, as well as the

liberating potentialities of fiction. This transformed composite being combines the figure of a historically determined, clothed woman with that of a container (room or space) brimming with contesting alternatives. Similarly, in the foreword, the figure of "Mrs. Bell", emerging for Woolf from the gallery wall, combines the peasant element of kitchen work with the Goddess element of liberated imagination. As "the property of [their] husband" these women remain imprisoned as "the spirit of life and beauty in a kitchen chopping suet", but in these origins lies the potential for transformation and escape. Just as she figures "Mrs. Bell" as a nightingale, so Woolf has given bird-like qualities to "Mrs. Martin": not only does her name suggest the House Martin, close relative of the swallow (and therefore subtly linked perhaps to the Procne and Philomela myth), but her clothes too suggest the blue-black plumage of these birds. Here we may see liberated imagination grounded in the material and historical: the woman artist is both woman and bird, Procne/Philomela and the nightingale/swallow; the origins of Mrs Bell's art lie with the Victorian aunt.²⁰

²⁰ See also, Woolf, "Poetry, Fiction and the Future", *E*, IV, p.433, where "the nightingale singing", an image suggesting the poetic transformation of suffering womanhood, is "incongruously coupled" with the more prosaic and worldly figure of an oppressed, vagrant "diseased old woman". These figures are linked to Woolf's distinction between the poetic and the prosaic: see *E*, IV, p.434: "For of course poetry has always been overwhelmingly on the side of beauty. She has always insisted on certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction. She has never been used for the common purpose of life. Prose has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders; has answered letters, paid bills, written articles, made speeches, served the needs of businessmen, shopkeepers, lawyers, soldiers, peasants." Perhaps we may read in this passage an implicit comment on the (literary) status of women: where prose, the "diseased old woman", speaks of women's historical and actual servility ("dirty work"), poetry, the nightingale, speaks of women's aspirations to be free of such conditions, and to perfect their art ("insist[ing] on certain rights, such as rhyme, metre, poetic diction").

The presence of Procne and Philomela may again be felt as Woolf expands upon the sense of impersonality communicated in her sister's work:

One defies a novelist to keep his life through twenty seven volumes of fiction safe from our scrutiny. But Mrs. Bell says nothing. Mrs. Bell is as silent as the grave. Her pictures do not betray her. Their reticence is inviolable. That is why, if it be true that they yield their full meaning only to those who can tunnel their way behind the canvas into masses and passages and relations and values of which we know nothing - if it be true that she is a painter's painter - still her pictures claim us and make us stop. They give us an emotion. They offer a puzzle. (*F*, p.172)

Woolf's tunnelling reference may be compared with Fry's favourite dictum from the painter Seurat: "painting is 'the art of hollowing out a canvas.'"²¹ Furthermore, and only if the myth of the two sisters remains dormant, we may also read this passage as a declaration of Bell's art as significant form, as art about art, abstract and remote. The critic for *The Times* (Charles Marriott),²² reviewing the exhibition, makes use of Woolf's "enchanting" foreword to confirm the view of Bell's art as a mixture of purist formal concerns and a mystical sense of common humanity, "inviolable reticence" taking on the quality of holy innocence.²³ This is a less extreme version of the quasi-religious sentiments of significant form: art has nothing specific to say, but

²¹ Fry, *Transformations*, p.189; quoted McLaurin, p.87.

²² See, Vanessa Bell, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, p.351.

²³ Marriott, *The Times* Friday February 7, 1930, p.12, sees the pictures' remoteness as somehow connected to Bell's introduction of personal elements into her work: "She has pooled her personality in her painting. One paradoxical result ... is that 'Mrs. Bell says nothing.'" The personal is "diffused" by technique. He praises Bell's pictures for being "in the best sense of the word, innocent", and "joyous in colour, composed in terms of the brush, and by virtue of their 'inviolable reticence', warm with the natural sentiments of the human being."

its very reticence allows us to contemplate our humanity in the terms of Clive Bell's "aesthetic rapture".²⁴

Whatever Woolf's sources for the term "reticence", we might turn to Eliot's allusion to Philomela for a possible precedent to "inviolable". Here the nightingale is not credited with "inviolable reticence", however, but with "inviolable voice". Along with this, Woolf's references to her sister's silence and to the fact that "her pictures do not betray her" suggest that we may read an alternative and contradictory set of allusions to the myth of Procne and Philomela, embedded in the foreword's paraphrases of the theories of significant form. Both approaches to the paintings, we might conclude, are simultaneously voiced and silenced. When Woolf teasingly points out that her sister's pictures might "yield their full meaning only to those who can tunnel ...", we may read this both as acknowledgement of Bell as a "painter's painter", practising significant form, and as a reference to a hidden language akin to the secret communications between Philomela and Procne. It is not my purpose to assert that Vanessa and Virginia themselves communicated like this, nor that Vanessa's paintings actually allude to the myth; but to indicate Woolf's interartistic awareness, and to show that she weaves these references into her (writer's) interpretation of her sister's work.

Woolf's tunnelling reference also echoes her discussion of the interrelation of painting and writing in

²⁴ Spalding, p.235, however, traces "inviolable reticence" not to Clive Bell but to Roger Fry's essay on Vanessa Bell in *Vogue* (early February 1926), which she quotes: "Her great distinction lies in her reticence and frankness." He continues: "Complete frankness of statement, but with never a hint of how she arrived at her conviction. It is with her a point of honour to leave it at that, never to explain herself, never to underline a word, never to exercise persuasion. You are left with the completest statement she can contrive, to make what you can of it or nothing at all, as the case may be. She is full of aesthetic scrupulosity as she is free from all other anxieties."

"Pictures", examining in particular the technique of Proust,²⁵ the sensuous colour and light of whose imagery sets his reader "tunnelling logically and intellectually into the obscurity of the young man's emotions" after "a shred of meaning" with which to illuminate the darkness.²⁶ This extenuated process of reading, I suggest, is one in which Woolf appears to be engaging as she considers her sister's pictures. Similarly, by "tunnelling" (beyond the emotional) below the surface of her prose we have discovered "shred[s] of meaning" in her mythical metaphors. This challenges the significant form/aesthetic interpretation furnished by the suggested echo of Seurat's dictum, but both interpretations remain possible.

Woolf goes on, in her foreword, to emphasize that the strength of Bell's art lies in its signification beyond verbal language: "their expressiveness has no truck with words". The paintings "offer a puzzle" which suggests both that they may embody a code to be deciphered and that, on the contrary, they may remain an enigma not reducible to any single solution or interpretation.

Her vision excites a strong emotion and yet when we have dramatised it or poetised it or translated it into all

²⁵ See C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", *Comparative Literature* 41 4 (1989), p.334.

²⁶ Woolf, "Pictures", *M*, p.141. The passage in full reads: "Here is a scene in a theatre, for example. We have to understand the emotions of a young man for a lady in a box below. With an abundance of images and comparisons we are made to appreciate the forms, the colours, the very fibres and texture of the plush seats and the ladies' dresses and the dullness or glow, sparkle or colour, of the light. At the same time that our senses drink in all this our minds are tunnelling logically and intellectually into the obscurity of the young man's emotions, which as they ramify and modulate and stretch further and further, at last penetrate too far, peter out into such a shred of meaning that we can scarcely follow any more, were it not that suddenly in flash after flash, metaphor after metaphor, the eye lights up that cave of darkness and we are shown the hard tangible material shapes of bodiless thoughts hanging like bats in the primeval darkness where light has never visited them before."

the blues and greens, and fines and exquisites and subtles of our vocabulary, the picture itself escapes. It goes on saying something of its own. (*F*, p.172)

While declaring them beyond words, Woolf nevertheless finds in Bell's paintings a model for a new literary art surpassing that of Thackeray and Dickens (in her "painting of the Foundling Hospital").²⁷ We may interpret this as both a recognition of painting as being beyond all literature and a suggestion that Bell's paintings challenge mainly the nineteenth century literary and sentimental approach to art. Bell is also positioned as a woman innovator who breaks with a male dominated past and language, and we may see her work as inspiration for a new women's literature. In suggesting that Bell's picture itself escapes our vocabulary, Woolf may be alluding to a woman's art that escapes the male tyranny of the public realm, with "our" ironically referring to the supposed universality of this realm. Likewise, if "our emotion has been given the slip" (*F*, p.172), as she suggests, perhaps it may be the aesthetic emotion of the male-formulated significant form that this woman's art escapes in order to speak secretly to her sister. After the "dust and ashes", after the destruction of the old world, "Mrs. Bell" says "Nothing" (*F*, p.172): again, this may mean that she says nothing to the universalizing male, but plenty to women.

But ostensibly Woolf finds Bell's awesome achievement of silence a troubling one, for it suggests a welcome freedom but also a fearful sterility. Bell's picture defies interpretation: "It goes on saying something of its own", which has nothing to do with its author who has absented herself. Beyond even the urgent message hidden

²⁷ See, *F*, p.172: "Here one says, is the fine old building which has housed a million orphans; here Hogarth painted and kind hearted Thackeray shed a tear, here Dickens, who lived down the street on the left-hand side, must often have paused in his walk to watch the children at play. And it is all gone, all perished."

in Philomela's tapestry, we might gather, women's art perhaps continues more purely as art. This may be Woolf's aspiration for women's fiction. Even as she declares its permanence, Woolf hints that the calm enlightenment in Bell's "serene and sunny, and very still" picture may be under threat: this depends on whether or not we read irony in her discerning "no sense that this sunny day is perhaps the last" (*F*, p.172).²⁸ Perhaps this woman's art banishes not merely shadows but nineteenth century sunshine too.

Woolf closes her foreword with a consideration of Bell's art as simultaneously communicating emotion (which may be that associated with significant form) - "And yet somehow our emotion has been returned to us. For emotion there is. The room is charged with it." (*F*, p.172) - and remaining aloof. She writes as someone in awe of and somewhat alienated from this painter's language; and as its interpreter to the uninitiated; but also as its critic.

There is emotion in that white urn; in that little girl painting a picture; in the flowers and the bust; in the olive trees; in the provençal vineyard; in the English hills against the sky. Here, we cannot doubt as we look is somebody to whom the visible world has given a shock of emotion every day of the week. And she transmits it and makes us share it; but it is always by her means, in her language, with her susceptibility, and not ours. That is why she is so tantalising, so original, and so satisfying as a painter. One feels that if a canvas of hers hung on the wall it would never lose its lustre. It would never mix itself up with the loquacities and trivialities of daily life. It would go on saying something of its own imperturbably. And perhaps by degrees - who knows? - one would become an inmate of this strange painters' world, in which mortality does not enter, and psychology is held at bay, and there are no words. But is morality to be found there? That was the very question I was asking myself as I came in. (*F*, pp.172-173)

²⁸ See Roger Fry's comments on the "untroubled serenity" of Bell's paintings in "Vanessa Bell and Othon Friesz", *New Statesman*, 3 June 1922, p.237.

Woolf's complex response to Bell's art goes beyond a token genuflection to the doctrine of significant form.²⁹ Bell's artistic language is both a source of illumination to her and something alienating and unknowable. Woolf sees her sister imprisoned as an "inmate of this strange painters' world": a sterile, permanently sunlit, and unchanging world. Woolf herself, on the other hand, enjoys the freedom to come and go, and to prevaricate at the gallery door. In contemplating her sister's pictures, she touches upon a dilemma in the avant-garde quest for a new transformational language: how far can it disconnect from the traditions it seeks to undermine before ceasing to communicate altogether? Woolf also shows that silence in one domain becomes eloquence in another; and the silence she attributes to her sister's art is one she invests, in her allusions to the myth of Procne and Philomela, with a feminist subtext. Her vacillations take us through positive and negative aspects to both conditions, but they also leave us at the door with one resounding question: "But is morality to be found there?"³⁰

The painter's art may be truly silent after all;³¹ and Woolf frequently calls painters "inarticulate" (*L*, I, p.60), "as mute as mackerel" (*M*, p.143), and their art as "tend[ing] to dumbness" (*L*, II, p.382), even capable of depriving the observer "of a tongue".³² These epithets

²⁹ David Dowling, *Bloomsbury Aesthetics and the Novels of Forster and Woolf* (London and Basingstoke, 1985), p.101, has suggested that here "Woolf admits, in effect, that Vanessa's paintings have a significant form, leaving us with an original satisfying emotion which must be (though one does not label it) aesthetic ecstasy".

³⁰ See Christopher Reed, "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics", *Twentieth Century Literature* 38, 1 (Spring 1992), p.34.

³¹ See Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", pp.336-337.

³² Woolf, "Pictures and Portraits", *Athenaeum*, 9 January 1920; *E*, III, pp.163-164.

echo Simonides' dictum that painting is mute poetry (and poetry a speaking picture),³³ and where tradition, following Plutarch, interprets this as suggesting that both arts share the common aim of imitation,³⁴ Woolf often seems fondly to be advancing verbal over visual art. In likening visual artists to fish, inhabiting a "sublime silent fish-world" (*L*, IV, p.142), she recalls the limited and sterile world of the zoological aquarium. In "Pictures", using a similarly "piscine" vocabulary, she recognizes that to expect anything else of painters is to misunderstand their art:

They must weave their spells like mackerel behind the glass at the aquarium, mutely, mysteriously. Once let them raise the glass and begin to speak, and the spell is broken. A story-telling picture is as pathetic and ludicrous as a trick played by a dog, and we applaud it only because we know that it is as hard for a painter to tell a story with his brush as it is for a sheep-dog to balance a biscuit on its nose. Dr. Johnson at the Mitre is much better told by Boswell; in paint, Keats's nightingale is dumb; with half a sheet of notepaper we can tell all the stories of all the pictures in the world. (*M*, p.142)

Woolf's assertion of the writer's superiority over the painter may also betray a feminist undercurrent: the reference to Dr. Johnson in close proximity to dog tricks is a reminder of his notorious remarks on women preachers, cited by Woolf to show that "even in the nineteenth century a woman was not encouraged to be an artist". (*AROO*, p.83)³⁵ In the passage from "Pictures",

³³ Plutarch, *Moralia*, 346F, translated by Frank Cole Babbitt, vol. IV (London, 1936), p.501: "Simonides ... calls painting inarticulate poetry and poetry articulate painting". See also, Rensselaer Lee, *Ut Pictura Poesis: the Humanistic Theory of Painting* (New York, 1967), p.1.

³⁴ Plutarch, *ibid.*: "Even though artists with colour and design, and writers with words and phrases, represent the same subjects, they differ in the material and the manner of their imitation; and yet the underlying end and aim of both is one and the same".

³⁵ See Woolf, *AROO*, pp.82-83: "Nick Greene, I thought, remembering the story I had made about Shakespeare's sister, said that a woman acting put him in mind of a dog dancing. Johnson repeated the phrase two hundred years later of women preaching. And here, I said

then, Woolf is playfully positioning painters in the place patriarchy has previously marked out for women. Her remark that "in paint, Keats's nightingale is dumb" is one she goes on to contradict when introducing her sister's paintings. In comparing her pictures to that birdsong, Woolf may imply that Bell has for the first time in paint made the nightingale sing. On the other hand, Woolf may be suggesting herself as the songster, lyrically - *verbally* - transporting us from the silent subaquatic world of her sister's art. Perhaps Woolf, adapting as a feminist vehicle Eliot's modernist nightingale, inscribes a morality where she finds none.

It may be the case that it takes Procne to read Philomela's art as iconographic rather than formally significant. In the light of Woolf's vacillations, we might gather that the answer to her final question depends on who is looking, and from where. Gillespie sees Woolf as articulating "the layperson's uncertainties"³⁶ in posing this question, but we might think of these also as the professional concerns of the (feminist) writer. Gillespie also rightly notes that the painter's "reticence both intrigues and repels Woolf",³⁷ and we can now begin to see in more detail how these effects operate in Woolf's writing, not least from a feminist perspective: for as the mythical subtext to her foreword reveals, Woolf is capable of finding a specifically feminist eloquence at work beneath the public silence of her sister's painting. Her "layperson's uncertainties" may also be regarded as sophisticated prevarications upon the strategies

opening a book about music, we have the very words used again in this year of grace, 1928, of women who try to write music. 'Of Mlle. Germaine Tailleferre one can only repeat Dr. Johnson's dictum concerning a woman preacher, transposed into terms of music. "Sir, a woman's composing is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all."'

³⁶ Gillespie, p.73.

³⁷ Gillespie, p.74.

available to women artists exhibiting (and women writers reviewing) in a man's gallery. This context informs Woolf's question about morality and in posing it, she both voices the doubts of the uninitiated about significant form, and puts forward a specifically feminist question, one that keeps in play both the silent protest of Philomela's tapestry and the inviolable song of the nightingale.

12.4 "Character is colour"

Woolf's 1934 "Foreword"³⁸ demonstrates her understanding of Bell's iconographic colourism. She begins by pleading ignorance, while roundly, but also knowledgeably, dismissing the approach to Bell's art she expects from the critics:

As Keats wrote to Haydon, "I have never been too sensible of the labyrinthian path to eminence in Art ... to think I understand the emphasis of painting." Let us leave it to the critics to pursue the exciting adventure which awaits them in these rooms; to trace the progress of the artist's brush beginning, shall we say, with the chocolate-faced nursemaid and the monolithic figures of 1920; to note the birth of other sensibilities; how blues and oranges trembled into life; how this mass mated itself with that; how the lines grew taut or slack; how with an infinitude of varied touches the finished picture came into being.³⁹

Woolf's invocation of Keats gives her a writer's alibi to depart from a painter's or art critic's approach;⁴⁰ but she nevertheless shows off, in her familiar sexually explicit argot ("mated"), a fair understanding of the

³⁸ See, Vanessa Bell, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, pp.376-8; and Spalding, p.266.

³⁹ Woolf, "Foreword", *Catalogue of Recent Paintings by Vanessa Bell*, the Lefevre Galleries (London, 1934), p.1.

⁴⁰ See also, Woolf, "Pictures and Portraits", *E*, III, p.163: "But it is not our business to define what sort of words they are; we are only concerned to prove our unfitness to review the caricatures of Mr. Kapp".

integral relations of colour and mass. She now turns to her own response, in which she includes the reader too. Here she again remarks on the silence of her sister's paintings; but while she makes it clear that they are quiet verbally, she shows that nevertheless their colour makes them visually loquacious.

For us the experience has its excitement too. A meaning is given to familiar things that makes them strange. Not a word sounds yet the room is full of conversations. What are the people saying who are not sitting on that sofa? What tune is the child playing on her silent violin? Nobody moves and yet the room is full of infinite relationships. People's minds have split out of their bodies and become part of their surroundings. Where does the man end and Buddha begin? Character is colour, and colour is china, and china is music. Greens, blues, reds and purples are here seen making love and war and joining in unexpected combinations of exquisite married bliss. A plant bends its leaves in the jar and we feel that we too have visited the depths of the sea.

Cornfields bask in the sun of man's first summer; the haymakers are primeval men. Everywhere life has been rid of its accidents, shown in its essence. The weight of custom has been lifted from the earth. Hamstead is virginal; Ken Wood ecstatic. The onions and the eggs perform together a solemn music. Flowers toss their heads like proud horses in an Eastern festival. In short, precipitated by the swift strokes of the painter's brush, we have been blown over the boundary to the world where words talk such nonsense that it is best to silence them. And yet it is a world of glowing serenity and sober truth. Compare it, for example, with Picadilly Circus or St. James's Square.⁴¹

Woolf communicates great pleasure in the overflowing of her sister's colours and forms out of art and into life and then into music, and so on. This sense of overflowing is heightened by the ambiguity of her references to "conversations", which the art both participates in, and depicts.⁴² (She is, furthermore,

⁴¹ Woolf, "Foreword" (1934), p.1.

⁴² Compare, R.A.M. Stevenson, *The Art of Velasquez* (London, 1895), p.2: "Now people like to attach a ready-made sentiment to a picture; they hate to form their own judgement, and to wait till a canvas speaks to them in its own language."

actually portrayed by her sister in conversation.)⁴³ *The Times* review again makes use of Woolf's foreword and, picking up on her conversational analogies, emphasizes that "though [Bell] can make a picture, anyhow, she is most happy when she makes it out of colour In the more recent paintings the colours, while preserving their decorative individuality, have entered into general conversation - a matter of allusions, responses, protests, and exclamations rather than reportable language."⁴⁴ But if Woolf finds the language of Bell's pictures unreportable, she does not suggest that it has nothing to say.

Woolf identifies and examines in Bell's art, the language of colour, and she attempts a verbal account of its messages, coming very close, in the process, to her own model of verbal language: the "amusing game". Just as there, "sights marry, incongruously, morganatically", and just as in "Craftsmanship" the English language goes "a-rov-ing"; so here, colours ("greens, blues, reds and purples") are "seen making love and war and joining in unexpected combinations of exquisite married bliss". Just as words express character, so too "character is colour". Yet words remain alien to paint: they do not belong to this world of pure, direct sun, untouched by "custom" (and presumably history).

Woolf, no longer "shillyshallying" (as in the earlier foreword) at the gallery's threshold, makes strong connections between verbal language and the language of colour, the latter sometimes articulating what the former cannot. Her comparison of the world of Bell's art with the metropolitan world outside suggests that she considers her sister's paintings, no longer remote, to challenge (not merely escape) the values of urban

⁴³ Gillespie, p.50.

⁴⁴ *The Times*, Tuesday March 13, 1934, p.12.

commerce. Colour seems to be the means of this challenge, one that in Woolf's realm at least may become feminist. Her sister's world is for her a composite one of "glowing serenity and sober truth"; and in this Woolf has apparently moved on from her previously prevaricating view of Bell's "serene and sunny, and very still" art: now she seems to find not only serenity and light but, in the endless movement of colour in conversation, a suggestion of the "morality" she was earlier seeking.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Reed, "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics", *Twentieth Century Literature* 38, 1 (Spring 1992), p.34, suggests that "Woolf asserted that though her sister represented her subject as 'matter merely: static, statuesque,' her art suggests a wide variety of ideas." For the formalist defense of art's separation from morality, see, Fry, *Vision and Design* (London, 1920), pp.21-27; Bell *Art*, pp.106-117.

CHAPTER XIII

TO THE LIGHTHOUSE: PURPLE TRIANGLE AND GREEN SHAWL

13.1 Colour, silence and "flying phrases"

The point about you is that you are now mistress of the phrase. All your pictures are built up of flying phrases.... I think we are now at the same point: both mistresses of our medium as never before: both therefore confronted with entirely new problems of structure. Of course your colour intrigues me, seduces, and satisfies me exquisitely.... I should like you to paint a large, large picture; where everything would be brought perfectly firmly together, yet all half flying off the canvas in rapture.¹

Woolf celebrates Bell's pictures here in terms that recall the woman artist's technique in her latest novel:

Beautiful and bright it should be on the surface, feathery and evanescent, one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly's wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron. (TL, p.264)

Colour is luminous and structural:² both solid and fragile like post-eclipse colours. Woolf envisages an art that is both self-contained and overflowing, reflecting the "tumult" and "still rapture" of "The Sun and the Fish", as well as the silence of the imprisoned Philomela's art and her flight into the nightingale's song. Woolf encapsulates this dual condition when she praises Bell's paintings for being as "firm as marble and ravishing as a rainbow" (L, V, p.236), just as she

¹ Woolf, Letter to Vanessa Bell, 5 March 1927, L, III, pp.340-41.

² Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences. The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston, 1984), p.88, suggests that "this description echoes the pleasant memories Woolf associated with her pre-Oedipal memory of her mother - bright colors, rhythmic movement and stability"; Jack F. Stewart, "Color in *To the Lighthouse*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 31 (1985), p.442, finds "This stereoscopic vision fuses surface and depths, color and form, impressionist radiance and post-impressionist structure."

suggests writing should be "granite and rainbow".³ Bell, however, is less certain of such interartistic analogies:

I don't believe writing really takes more out of one than painting, but it seems to, because it's all to do with life, I think, whereas in painting one seems to get into another world altogether, separate from the ordinary human emotions and ideas. Perhaps that's only an illusion, however. But it may be an illusion that helps. It seems such a relief to have this other world to plunge into.⁴

Bell's view of the visual arts as a retreat from life may support readings of Woolf's novels as retreating from the issues of the real world, plunging the reader deep into aesthetics.⁵ The politically explosive era of modernism attracted some to the new religion of art as a respite from conflict;⁶ but as the initial reception of Post-Impressionism illustrates avant-garde art might also be understood as politically engaging and disruptive.⁷ If Bell's paintings are a means to her escaping life, as an artist, then, they become for Woolf, I suggest, an inspiration for intervening in it, as a writer.⁸

³ Woolf, "The New Biography", *New York Herald Tribune*, 30 October 1927; *E*, IV, p.478.

⁴ Vanessa Bell, Letter to Julian Bell, June 9, 1935, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, p.392.

⁵ Randall Stevenson, in *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), p.163, for example, citing *To the Lighthouse*, characterizes modernist art as "a last possibility of finding 'in the midst of chaos, shape'.... Artists begin to figure centrally in modernist fiction because apparently they, almost alone, offered a possibility of dealing with or escaping from the futile and anarchic history their authors surveyed." See Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy*, Third Edition (1910), translated by Michael Bullock, (London and New York, 1953).

⁶ See Stevenson's use of the term "escaping".

⁷ Stevenson suggests this in the use of "dealing with". Here we might note that this was also the era of artists' manifestoes, and these need not necessarily be interpreted as a parodic retreat from politics but as a declaration of allegiance to political positions.

⁸ See Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1986), p.198, on *To the Lighthouse* as a "liberation fable".

As we have seen, Woolf is capable of investing the silent subaquatic realm of the painter with a coded yet eloquent feminist challenge. She seems more interested in breaking the surface of these waters than in languishing in their depths.⁹ To sum up, I have been suggesting that when Woolf likens her painter sister to a dumb fish, and admires her sunlit pictures, there is at play both a surface meaning (painterly silence) and a feminist subtext (sisterly code).¹⁰ I will be reading *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* with Woolf's feminist articulation of the painter's silence in mind. My approach is not to deny other readings, but to suggest that the allegedly "silent" significant form critics have found in Woolf may conceal its own feminist interruptions: as the reading-model in her foreword allows, context and position as well as structure may help determine our interpretations. My feminist reading itself of course can only be partial.

Woolf herself seems to support a silent reading of her novel when she writes to Fry in terms suggestive of significant form:

I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that people would make it the deposit for their own emotions - which they have done, one thinking it means one thing another another. I can't manage

⁹ Her famous vision of "a fin passing far out" (*D*, III, p.113) becomes appropriate to this painterly context.

¹⁰ Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge, 1973), p.90, on the other hand, claims that Woolf in fact finds "silence and emptiness in all art, and therefore in life itself". This, he suggests, gives a sense of freedom and space; but it is an abstract sense of freedom and one that does not address Woolf's feminism. Alternatively, Patricia Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, California, 1991), pp.36, 41, claims that "Woolf illuminates women's presence through various kinds of silence", and that "through her marking of silence she shows that silence might express something other than an inferior and subordinate state of mind in women."

Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way. Whether its right or wrong I don't know, but directly I'm told what a thing means, it becomes hateful to me.¹¹

Although appealing to Fry's aesthetics, Woolf does not dismiss altogether the possibility of meaning; it may have been important for her in the process of writing not to "think out" its emotional significance, but it is something she expects her readers to engage in; and she herself seems unhappy only with restricted meaning. Her reticence, however, is at odds with her private statements on her intentions to write an elegy,¹² and her decision to put her father's character at its centre (*D*, III pp.18-19). Woolf later worries that she has been "critical" and "irreverent"¹³ about him, suggesting the accrual to her novel's "central line" of some specific and personal meanings.

Woolf, then, broadening out from the closely biographical, seems to have understood this work as challenging a remembered sense of patriarchy, and as celebrating the survival and flourishing of its author's feminist creativity: her father's "life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; - inconceivable." (*D*, III, p.208). This is helpful in the critic's task of "think[ing] out" meanings in connection to Woolf's central design.¹⁴ In telling Fry that she "meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*" Woolf may present to him a silence that in other contexts and from other perspectives may speak volumes. Eliza Haywood's advice to women in a man's world seems applicable to the novel's ambiguous status: "whenever we

¹¹ Woolf, Letter to Roger Fry, May 27th 1927, *L*, III, p.385. "The Lighthouse" may refer to the novel as a whole as well as the lighthouse in particular.

¹² See *D*, III, pp.18-19.

¹³ Woolf, Letter to Vita Sackville-West, 13 May 1927, *L*, III, p.374.

¹⁴ Woolf seems to be suggesting a model of multiple rather than singular meaning.

would truly conquer, we must seem to yield."¹⁵ If *To the Lighthouse* yields to readings of significant form,¹⁶ then, we may not discount the possibility of a feminism simultaneously at work in it. There may be more to Woolf's painterly analogies than the purely "aesthetic emotions" she discloses to Fry.

Engaging photological and prismatic tropes, *To the Lighthouse* addresses feminism, Post-Impressionism, and elegy. Woolf draws on the English Post-Impressionism of her sister, Vanessa; but perhaps also on the politically pyrotechnical aesthetics of her sisters in the suffrage movement. Woolf brings together in her elegy the new language of Post-Impressionist colour, with a new feminist language of colour. *To the Lighthouse* may undermine notions of significant form,¹⁷ then, with a materialist feminist exploration of colour.¹⁸ There are

¹⁵ Eliza Haywood, *The Female Spectator* (London, 1771), I, p.179

¹⁶ For example, C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", *Comparative Literature* 41 4 (1989), p.345, suggests that both Lily Briscoe's painting and Woolf's novel convey significant form.

¹⁷ Although acknowledging that it may be read in terms of an emotional understanding of form for form's sake according to the doctrine of significant form, my approach is to attribute meaning (elegiac for example) to form and structure in this novel.

¹⁸ On the other hand, in his dense analysis of Woolf's palette, to which he refers several complex theories of colour, Jack F. Stewart, "Color in *To the Lighthouse*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 31 (1985), pp.439, 440, 456, offers an abstract and mystical approach to Woolf's connections between character and colour which disallows the possibility of a feminist interpretation. He finds that light is the higher, purer, and transcendent order above colour, and he seems to impose Clive Bell's theories onto Woolf's rather more ambiguous aesthetic practice: "Just as white light refracted through a prism produces the seven colors of the spectrum, so being refracted through self produces the psychological spectrum of the novel. *To the Lighthouse* is built on a nexus of light and color. Its Neoplatonic theme is the relation of the One to the many, the noumenal to the phenomenal.... Only through color interactions - complementing, but transcending, psychological relationships - can Woolf's reader pass beyond printed words and experience that 'luminous silent stasis,' in which aesthetic contemplation and human understanding become one." Similarly Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1945), pp.87-8, finds psychological meaning in Woolf's colours, and identifies a "colour symbolism running right through"

symbolic and allegoric aspects to Woolf's "poetical attitude",¹⁹ I suggest, as well as emotional ones.

Woolf herself notes that when she reads poetry "the Colour Sense is first touched: roused,"²⁰ just as, perhaps, Mrs. Ramsay reads poetry: "words, like little shaded lights, one red, one blue, one yellow, lit up the dark of her mind." (*TL*, p.183)²¹ Her novel, whatever Woolf's protestations to Fry, may be invested with a poetry of colour of quite precise meaning, and with a careful focus on subject matter.²² These observations become important if we take seriously Woolf's estimate that *To the Lighthouse* is an elegy.

To the Lighthouse where each character is associated with a colour which in turn stands for an abstract quality or personality trait.

¹⁹ William Empson, "Virginia Woolf", *Scrutinies by Various Writers II*, edited by Edgell Rickword (London, 1930), p.207.

²⁰ Woolf, *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks*, edited by Brenda R. Silver (Princeton, 1983), p.13.

²¹ McLaurin, p.194, offers a "less 'literary'" appreciation of colour which "is used to convey ... an emotional equivalence, a subtle relation which is not logical." McLaurin, we might say, prefers to "tunnel" into Woolf's work on the level of aesthetic emotion, but Woolf herself, we remember, talks of "tunnel[ing] logically and intellectually". For example, McLaurin, p.194, finds "an emotional relation established in the equivalence which is made between the ashen ship which leaves behind a purple patch of oil [*TL*, p.207] and Mrs Ramsay, whose grey clothes are mentioned [*TL*, p.210] and who becomes a purple triangle in Lily's painting." But we might in addition make a logical and intellectual (iconographic) connection with Woolf's feminist prismatic, and even specifically with the suffrage colours.

²² On the other hand, citing these examples, Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts*, p.281, remarks that "Mrs. Ramsay's response to the written word parallels the artistic response of a painter like Vanessa Bell to the world around her: neither focuses on meaning or subject; both, actually or metaphorically, perceive color; and both perceive works of art as separate worlds that, like the natural world, elicit such responses."

13.2 "But what? Elegy?"

(But while I try to write, I am making up "To the Lighthouse" - the sea is to be heard all through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant "novel". A new -- by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?) (*D*, III, p.34)

I have argued elsewhere that *To the Lighthouse* follows some conventions of pastoral elegy,²³ which here I will relate to the novel's engagement with the tropes of colour, light and shade. The movement of an eclipse, as we have seen, suggests that of elegy in its transition from light to darkness to light again; and the three parts of *To the Lighthouse* echo this "triadic"²⁴ movement: "The Window", suggesting a means of natural illumination and its reception, gives an account of one day and a candle-lit and moon-lit evening in the period before the Great War; "Time Passes" is characterized mainly by darkness; and "The Lighthouse", again suggestive of illumination, this time artificially generated rather than passively received, describes one (post-war) day leading to vision and enlightenment. As in Woolf's eclipse story, then, the source of illumination seems to undergo a transformation: from

²³ Jane Goldman, "Metaphor and Place in *To the Lighthouse*: Some Hebridean Connections", *Tea and Leg-Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland*, edited by Caroline Gonda (London, 1992), pp.137-156; see also, Gillian Beer, "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*", *Essays in Criticism*, XXXIV (January 1984) 33-55; Stevie Davies, "Elegy", *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse* (Harmondsworth, 1989), pp.100-139; Elissa Greenwald, "Casting Off From 'The Castaway': *To the Lighthouse* as Prose Elegy", *Genre* (Spring 1986) 37-57; Peter Knox-Shaw, "'To the Lighthouse': The Novel as Elegy", *English Studies in Africa*, 29, 1 (1986) 31-52; John Mepham, "Mourning and Modernism", *Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays*, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London, 1983), pp.137-156; Karen Smythe, "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29, 1 (Fall 1992) 64-79; Ruth Z. Temple, "Never Say 'I': *To the Lighthouse* as Vision and Confession", *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Claire Sprague (New Jersey, 1971).

²⁴ Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences. The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p.62.

window to lighthouse, in broad terms.²⁵ We might also interpret the "down-pouring of immense darkness" (*TL*, p.195) in the middle part as a kind of eclipse since it marks the occlusion of one way of life, or one sense of subjectivity, and leads to the emergence of another. I am suggesting the presence of an elegiac movement in *To the Lighthouse* to be considered in terms of gendered and contested subjectivity.²⁶ If the first part presents a study of old order, pre-war, values (the promotion of marriage and children as the social norm, careers and intellectual pursuits as the public domain of men, and domestic duties as the private realm of women), then the final part shows their considerable erosion: Lily Briscoe the artist (along with others) dissents from the pre-war marital prospectus pushed by Mrs. Ramsay, the housewife, whose death in the intervening years comes to stand for the passing of those values.

That Woolf admits to having exorcised the ghosts of her parents²⁷ and that, somewhat conversely, her sister thanks her for having resurrected them, by writing *To the Lighthouse*,²⁸ has encouraged critical assessments of the novel as "frankly biographical"²⁹ and a tendency to regard it only in vague terms as an elegy.³⁰ Because

²⁵ The lighthouse does make its presence felt throughout the novel but it is only reached in the final part.

²⁶ See, Karen Smythe, "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29, 1 (Fall 1992), p.65.

²⁷ See *D*, III, p.208: "I used to think of him & mother daily; but writing *The Lighthouse* laid them in my mind."; and also Woolf's recollection, *MB*, p.90, that "When [*To the Lighthouse*] was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I do not see her."

²⁸ Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Woolf, 11 May 1927, Bell, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, edited by Regina Marler (London, 1993), p.317.

²⁹ Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness: Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1970) p.70; see also Elissa Greenwald, "Casting Off From 'The Castaway': *To the Lighthouse* as Prose Elegy", *Genre* (Spring 1986), pp.37-38.

³⁰ Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London and New York, 1990), p.93.

Woolf also expresses interest in formal questions about combining prose and poetry ("But can prose ... chant elegy"),³¹ critics have acknowledged her references to elegy in generalized discussions about the self-reflexively lyric nature of her narrative, without attending to more specific issues of the genre (such as meaning).³² Peter Knox-Shaw is almost unique in providing "an exposition of the novel's elegiac structure"³³ but he does not relate his ideas to feminism and he tends to see the novel's sense of consolation as arising from reinstatement rather than transformation of the past.³⁴ This implies that the old order values of

³¹ Woolf, "Poetry, Fiction and the Future", *New York Herald Tribune*, 14 and 27 August, 1927; *E*, IV, p.436. (Reprinted with minor variations, as "The Narrow Bridge of Art", in *Granite and Rainbow and Collected Essays*).

³² Avrom Fleishman, "Forms of the Woolfian Short Story", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.xi, exemplifying the former tendency, argues that "elegy is a genre that figures mightily in Woolf's fiction, but only as end - remembrance and propitiation of the dead - rather than a set of conventional means". Gillian Beer, "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*", *Essays in Criticism*, XXXIV (January 1984), p.37, more interestingly but no less abstractly, relates the elegiac in *To the Lighthouse* to a discussion of "the topics of the British empiricists, Locke, Hume, Berkeley, - the survival of the object without a perceiver, the nature of identity and non-entity, the scepticism about substance" which she sees operating as a subtext to Woolf's narrative. Karen Smythe, "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29, 1 (Fall 1992), p.74, keeps her discussion of the elegiac at an abstract, technical level, commenting on "the self-reflexive trope of consolation" at work in *To the Lighthouse*; but she does point out the importance of elegy in relation to subjectivity, p.65. Elissa Greenwald, "Casting Off From 'The Castaway': *To the Lighthouse* as Prose Elegy", *Genre* (Spring 1986), p.43, on the other hand, does consider "Woolf's formal innovations in *To the Lighthouse* ... as prose equivalents of the elegiac structure".

³³ Knox-Shaw, "'To the Lighthouse': The Novel as Elegy", *English Studies in Africa*, 29, 1 (1986), p.33. See also Stevie Davies, "Elegy", *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse* (Harmondsworth, 1989), pp.100-139, who intelligently compares *To the Lighthouse* to Milton's *Lycidas*, but again does not explore elegy in terms of feminism.

³⁴ Knox-Shaw, p.50: "True to Virginia Woolf's elegiac intentions *To the Lighthouse* as much as Lily's painting, salvages experience from the past: it counteracts those destructive forces denoted by 'the whelming tide' in *Lycidas* (l.157) and by cataclysm in 'Time Passes'."

Mrs. Ramsay are preserved rather than challenged by Lily Briscoe's art in the post-war part of the novel; a view I dispute.

In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf breaks new ground not only in putting a woman artist at the centre of a modernist *künstlerroman*,³⁵ but also in positioning her in a, previously male-dominated, elegiac tradition.³⁶ In Lily's painting, and Woolf's novel, both the subject and object of the artist's gaze is feminine.³⁷ This displacement raises the important factor of the "pathetic fallacy": if nature is personified as feminine and other in this tradition,³⁸ how can a woman elegist's lyric celebration of self function without reinscribing her as part of the object world? The allegoric structure is thrown into collapse, for allegory depends on the otherness of its vehicle;³⁹ the vehicle cannot also be the tenor ("the thing in itself").⁴⁰ In connection with this, the role of photological tropes in elegy, as we have seen, presents problems relating to gender: if the loss of solar light communicates the loss of the (always and already) masculine subject, it cannot function in the

³⁵ See Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction*, pp.164-165; Mary Lou Emery, "'Robbed of Meaning': The Work at the Center of *To the Lighthouse*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38, 1 (Spring 1992), p.219.

³⁶ John Dryden, however, does elegise a woman painter-poet in "To the Pious Memory of the Accomplisht Young Lady Mrs Anne Killigrew, Excellent in the two Sister-Arts of Poësie, and Painting. An Ode", *The Poems Of John Dryden*, edited by James Kinsley (Oxford, 1958), Volume I, pp.459-465. He refers to painting as "the large Demains which the *Dumb-sister* sway'd" (line 100).

³⁷ See Susan Raitt, *Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse* (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), p.101: "Lily is forced to negotiate her own relation to the spectacle of Mrs. Ramsay as some form of narcissism."

³⁸ See Knox-Shaw, p.32.

³⁹ For discussion of the allegorical vehicle as feminine, see Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1985), and Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word. Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York and Oxford, 1987).

⁴⁰ Yet in another sense we might see elegy as about that very crisis in language: that is, it cannot substitute what is lost: the dead, pace Vanessa Bell, are not raised.

same way for the feminine (traditionally associated with darkness). But as we have seen, the photological or solar trope of elegy may be refigured for feminism.

13.3 "The Window": "She would move the tree"

The elegiac emblem of a storm-struck tree is circuitously achieved by Lily's elimination in her second picture of the tree at the centre of her first composition.⁴¹ In pastoral poetry the tree is the symbol of patronage - political and literary - and under its shade ("umbra"), pastoral figures have languished from Theocritus to the present. Pastoral tradition signifies the turn from idyll to elegy⁴² (the main movement of *To the Lighthouse*) with a storm-struck tree⁴³ and the loss of its "umbra":⁴⁴

⁴¹ See, Goldman, "Metaphor and Place in *To the Lighthouse: Some Hebridean Connections*", p.138.

⁴² See Knox-Shaw, p.34, on the "rupture of pastoral concord".

⁴³ An old "Recipe for Pastoral Elegy" advises the elegist to "Blast an old oak or two": see, Extract from unsigned letter to the *London Magazine* (March 1738); *The Pastoral Mode: A Casebook*, edited by Brian Loughrey (London and Basingstoke, 1984), p.66.

⁴⁴ See Goldman, p.138; Annabel Patterson, *Pastoral and Ideology. Virgil to Valery* (Oxford, 1987), pp.50-51: Petrarch's second Eclogue (lines 2 13, 19-21) stands as the origin of this tradition:

Nec nemorum tantam per secula multa quietem
 Viderat ulla dies: passim saturata iacebant
 Armenta et lenis pastores somnus habebat;
 Pars teretes baculos, pars nectere sarta canendo
 Frondea, pars agiles calamos; tum fusca nitentem
 Obduxit Phebum nubes, precepsque repente
 Ante expectatum nox affuit; horruit ether
 Grandine terribili; certatim ventus et imber
 Seuire et fractis descendere fulmina nimbis,
 Altior, ethereo penitus convulsa fragore,
 Corruit et colles concussit et arva cupressus.

...
 ... Ingentis strepitu tremefacta ruine,
 Pastorum mox turba fugit, quecunque sub illa
 Per longum secreta diem consederat umbra.

(For no day for many centuries had seen so great a calm in the groves: on all sides gentle sleep possessed full-fed flocks and shepherds; some as they sang constructed wooden staffs, or leafy garlands, or fluent reed-pipes; when a dark cloud obstructed the shining sun, and suddenly and without warning night descended on us

the descent of darkness in "Time Passes" echoes this motif.

But at first Lily decides to "put the tree further in the middle" (*TL*, p.132): the thought returns at dinner as she is haunted by Charles Tansley's refrain "Women can't write, women can't paint". (*TL*, pp.134-135) Lily's aesthetic contemplation is informed by the context of her (social and political) struggle with Tansley's chauvinism:⁴⁵ to see this contemplation as purely an issue of significant form is to ignore this context. Under unspoken pressure from the socially ameliorative Mrs. Ramsay to "say something nice to that young man there", Lily takes refuge from these dominant gender codes in her deliberations about painting.⁴⁶ Inspired by and transforming the domestic accoutrements of feminine servility (embroidered tablecloth and salt cellar), Lily mentally manipulates the figures of her painting in terms that suggest their compositional significance and their constructedness.⁴⁷

Yet if Lily finds refuge from Mrs. Ramsay's marital schemes in making the tree more central in her composition, the paradox of this artistic gesture is revealed when, after dinner Mrs. Ramsay herself identifies her ambition with the sight of a tree,⁴⁸

["nox affuit"]; the sky shuddered with a terrible hailstorm; rain and wind contested and lightning descended through the cloud-fissures. Standing higher than the rest, deeply smitten by a thunderbolt, the cypress fell headlong, shaking the hills and the fields on impact

Trembling in the great crash of its ruin, a crowd of shepherds took flight who had formerly through the long day sheltered in its secure shade).

⁴⁵ See Joan Bennett, *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist* (Cambridge, 1945), pp.29-31.

⁴⁶ See *TL*, p.144. See also, *TL*, p.159, where Lily, observing the behaviour of Minta, newly engaged to Paul Rayley under the auspices of Mrs. Ramsay, again sees her art as compensation.

⁴⁷ See Raitt, *Virginia Woolf's To the Lighthouse*, p.84.

⁴⁸ See Goldman, "Metaphor and Place in *To the Lighthouse*", p.142.

leading her to conclude that "Paul and Minta would carry it on when she was dead" (TL, p.176). Mrs Ramsay identifies herself with the tree as a natural and unifying sign of an old-order status quo. She is complicit with this status quo, but her subordination to it is signalled by her association with shadow imagery. Her "crepuscular" (TL, p.189) position is in the "umbra" of patriarchal patronage, conceptually cast by the light of Mr. Ramsay's solar intellect and power:⁴⁹

she could feel his mind like a raised hand shadowing her mind; and he was beginning now that her thoughts took a turn he disliked - towards this 'pessimism' as he called it - to fidget. (TL, p.189)

Ramsay's luminous mind betrays a physically violent aspect not normally associated with his cerebral reputation. This "splendid" enlightenment mind is part of a larger canon of enlightened masculine subjectivity: "His own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and would then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still. (He looked into the darkness, into the intricacy of the twigs.)" (TL, p.59) Conceptually his wife is (in) his shadow:⁵⁰ she is "a wedge-shaped core of darkness, something invisible to others" (TL, p.99), which may be taken as the pastoral umbra as well as the umbra of a solar eclipse. The novel, then, charts the eclipse of Mr Ramsay's solar position, and the emergence of a new constellation of subjects, symbolically glimpsed by Mrs Ramsay at the

⁴⁹ Margaret Drabble, "Introduction" to Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, edited by Margaret Drabble (Oxford, 1992), p.xv, alerts us to a biographical reading which may support this idea of Ramsay's solar identity, when she reminds us that George Meredith "created a fictional portrait of Leslie Stephen as Vernon Whitford, 'Phoebus Apollo turned fasting friar', in his novel *The Egoist*, 1879."

⁵⁰ Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (Chicago and London, 1968), p.134, may be pointing to this notion of traditional enlightenment as essentially formed by chiaroscuro, when he remarks: "The lighthouse, in effect is compounded of light and dark."

close of the first part, when she sees "the stars... trying to flash out from behind the edges of the leaves" (TL, p.175). Significantly, a tree blocks her view.⁵¹

Lily's final mark on the canvas at the novel's close is not recounted as a tree, but as "a line there, in the centre" (TL, p.320); the tree has vanished.⁵² This possible sense of a lost umbra may be interpreted in relation to the dispersal of the Ramsays' chiaroscuro by the intervening progress of Lily's Post-Impressionist colourism.⁵³

13.4 Bright violet and staring white

Lily's transformative vision is already evident in her first painting where she depicts Mrs Ramsay and son as a "triangular purple shape": the "wedge-shaped core of darkness"⁵⁴ turns purple under Lily's gaze. We might

⁵¹ For a discussion the Ramsays' marriage, and of critics' views on it, see Jane Lillienfield, "Where the Spear Plants Grew: the Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*", *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Jane Marcus (London, 1981), pp.148-169. See also, Annis Pratt, "Sexual Imagery in *To the Lighthouse*: A New Feminist Approach", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18, 3 (Autumn 1972) 417-431, for discussion of androgyny in relation to this.

⁵² Beer, "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*", *Essays in Criticism*, XXXIV (January 1984), pp.43-44, finds the tree is still faintly present in Lily's last picture: "At the book's end the line in the centre of her picture is distanced almost as far as it is possible to go from the particularity of the tree with which she began. It is almost entirely free of reference. But it was generated out of the referential." McLaurin, p.186, is confident that Lily's "final stroke is 'to move the tree to the middle.'"

⁵³ Rachel A. Taylor, in an early review of *To the Lighthouse*, talks of "the fascinating chiaroscuro of the novels of Mrs Woolf" in which "the bright shadow, the dark light, seem to flicker and fuse in strange pavane"; *Spectator*, 14 May 1927, 871; in Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1975), p.198.

⁵⁴ See J. Hillis Miller, "Mr. Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: The Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*", *Modernism Reconsidered*, edited by Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle (Cambridge, 1983), pp.169-170.

compare this with the novel's opening description of mother and son: a vignette of family values, implicitly connected (in the image of the Army and Navy catalogue and in Mrs. Ramsay's ambitions for her son) with imperialism and colonialism.⁵⁵ James seems already inducted into this masculine realm which separates him from his mother by a "private code";⁵⁶ and he might almost be considered to be practising the art of pastoral in his development of a private internal language fixed on the natural and object world outside. This "secret language" (*TL*, p.12)⁵⁷ suggests a self-consciousness in the narrative: perhaps it too is encoded, allegorical. In this scene's deployment of colour, for example, we may discern the red, white, and blue of a union jack,⁵⁸ an apt reflection of the imperialist subtext.

Lily erects her easel in a space vulnerable to intrusion: she dreads the overbearing presence of Mr. Ramsay who "almost knocked her easel over, coming down upon her with his hands waving" (*TL*, p.32) Attempting to produce her art in a space defined and contested by male presence and opinion, Lily finds William Bankes's presence more tolerable, however, in spite of Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking designs. But nevertheless he does force her to take "her eyes off her picture":

The jacmanna was bright violet; the wall was staring white. She would not have considered it honest to tamper with the bright violet and staring white, since she saw them like that fashionable though it was, since Mr. Paunceforte's visit, to see everything pale, elegant, semi-transparent. Then beneath the colour there was the

⁵⁵ See *TL*, p.11.

⁵⁶ See Sue Roe, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice* (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), p.66.

⁵⁷ See Hermione Lee, "Introduction" to Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, edited by Stella McNichol (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.xxxviii.

⁵⁸ See *TL*, p.12: James's eyes are "fierce blue" and "impeccably candid" (which may signal white), and his mother imagines "him all red and ermine on the Bench or directing a stern and momentous enterprise in some crisis of public affairs."

shape. She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in her hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the edge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself - struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: "But this is what I see; this is what I see", and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her. (TL, p.34)

Lily's vision arises from a process of artistic tension,⁵⁹ echoing that of childbirth (suggested by "conception" and the reference to the child's dark passage; there is also the sense of suckling in Lily's vision being clasped to the breast); and this figures as a move from women's traditional function of creativity (childbearing) to the new possibility (some might argue, substitute) of her artistic creativity. Lily's desire to remain "honest", furthermore, may suggest something other than a desire for naturalism.⁶⁰

Her struggle for self expression in a male dominated environs coincides with her vision of "bright violet" and "staring white". These prismatic colours⁶¹ seem to defy the masculine presences overshadowing her work, and may even offer a glimpse of suffrage colours. The moment might be taken, then, as a metaphor for the woman artist's politically contested position. Lily's prismatic colours stand as an alternative to the

⁵⁹ McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London and New York, 1990), pp.97, 98, offers a more harmonious and conventional view of this process, and draws on Clive Bell's sense of aesthetic emotion and significant form: "Behind the image ... is Virginia Woolf's beautiful evocation of family life."

⁶⁰ Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts. The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Syracuse, NY, 1988), p.196, connects this passage with Vanessa Bell's experiences as a woman artist.

⁶¹ McLaurin, p.193, on the other hand, does not see white in *To the Lighthouse* as a positive colour. For him "'white', the absence of colour, symbolises just that - the uncolourful."

patriarchal chiaroscuro threatening to engulf her. This is again played out when Lily, caught in the conflict of emotional and social subordination and self doubt (*TL*, p.35), puts down her brushes to go with Bankes. As she does so the colours seem to recede:

"It suddenly gets cold. The sun seems to give less heat," she said, looking about her, for it was bright enough, the grass still a soft deep green, the house starred in its greenery with purple passion flowers, and rooks dropping cool cries from the high blue. But something moved, flashed, turned a silver wing in the air. It was September after all ... and past six in the evening. (*TL*, p.35)

It is possible to see the range of colours here almost as a Post-Impressionist mosaic of oppositional planes; and at the same time to chart in them a movement away from the flickering glimpse of green and purple to the dark omen of the rooks. The unnamed bird, apparently on the wing in September, might even be a House Martin or a Swallow; its silver glint almost supplying the white of the suffrage tricolour to go with the purple and green.⁶² With or without a feminist subtext, however, this passage brings a sense of cooling off, auguring the onset of the evening, of the winter, and of the war and devastation to come. The colours may thus also be interpreted as part of the novel's elegiac vocabulary.

We might compare Lily's view with Tansley's earlier one of Mrs. Ramsay "against a picture of Queen Victoria wearing the blue ribbon of the Garter"; she has "stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets". (*TL*, p.27) Lily offers a transfiguration of this patriarchal image. She departs from the Victorian

⁶² Again, I would like to emphasize that my reading rests primarily on a feminist interpretation of colourism in general, regardless of the possibility of a specific suffragist import. Although purple, white and green seem to flicker through the novel, my reading does not seek to reduce Woolf's feminist prismatic to one narrow interpretation.

Pre-Raphaelite version of ethereal femininity that Mrs. Ramsay seems to present to Tansley.⁶³

13.5 Green shawl and purple shadow

We find another cluster of prismatic (and potentially feminist) colours when Mrs. Ramsay notes Lily's "white puckered ... face" (*TL*, p.45); next she flings a "green Cashmere shawl over the edge of a picture frame" as she measures up her knitting against James's leg (the colour of which is not stated) (*TL*, p.47); and then a blue changes to "soft purple" in the simile describing her bird-like response to hearing of the Swiss girl's dying father: "She had stood there silent for there was nothing to be said. He had cancer of the throat." (*TL*, p.48) The man's cancer almost seems to stop the voice of Mrs. Ramsay herself, as if she might normally speak with his; and this suggests the extent to which this woman's expression is governed and constructed by men. Yet into this verbal silence Woolf introduces a visual message in the language of oppositional colour which both registers a change to the darker in emotional tone, but which may also signal a reference to feminist colours: from "sunshine" to "soft purple" may both chart a movement from light to dark, and from masculine "solar" light to feminist colour. Again this double signification suggests both Mrs. Ramsay's complicity with patriarchy and her potential to overthrow it.

Out of this contradictory state a resolution may arise, perhaps glimpsed at the section's closing vignette. In this classical mother-and-son composition, sanctioned by

⁶³ Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford, 1988), p.70, comments that in Tansley's vision the "woman's perfection and summation of every part establishes the man's identity."

the presence of an "authenticated master-piece by Michael Angelo", Mrs. Ramsay, "Knitting her reddish-brown hairy stocking" (TL, p.51),⁶⁴ is occupied in an act of Victorian "philanthropy ... requiring clothing". But the presence of "the green shawl which she had tossed over the edge of the frame" (TL, p.51), breaking its gilt line, seems silently to hint at alternative possibilities somewhere between art and life.⁶⁵ The liberational potential, however, is far from realized by Mrs. Ramsay herself, who later takes the "green shawl off the picture frame" to go to her husband "For he wished, she knew, to protect her", and she wears it to smooth over a difference with him. (TL, p.104) Later Lily notices her wearing the shawl when she catches sight of the Ramsays "in the dusk standing, looking, the symbols of marriage, husband and wife." (TL, p.115)

Mrs. Ramsay again makes use of the shawl as a means of familial amelioration when she wraps it around the skull in her children's bedroom: "She could see the horns, Cam said, all over the room. It was true. Wherever they put the light (and James could not sleep without a light) there was always a shadow somewhere." (TL, pp.176-177). Mrs Ramsay's daughter cannot sleep with the skull in the room, casting shadows; her son wants the light on and the skull where it is.⁶⁶ We may find here the seeds of social and artistic progressiveness. In aesthetic terms, we might consider Mrs Ramsay's green shawl to impose a

⁶⁴ See Eric Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking", *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p.525ff..

⁶⁵ Henry R. Harrington, "The Central Line Down the Middle of *To the Lighthouse*", *Contemporary Literature*, 21 (1980), p.370, prefers to see this as a characteristic of Woolf's narrative: "superimposition for absurd effect."

⁶⁶ See Lee M. Whitehead, "The Shawl and the Skull: Virginia Woolf's 'Magic Mountain'", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18, 3 (Autumn 1972) 401-415; A.G. Hoffman, "Subject and Object and the Nature of Reality: The Dialectic of *To the Lighthouse*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 13 (1972), pp.694-695.

Post-Impressionist colourist solution which displaces the play of light and dark of skeletal structure.⁶⁷ We may also consider this as a proto-feminist act: the chiaroscuro which keeps women in the shadow of masculine light has perhaps been obliterated by a green cover potentially suggestive of a suffrage banner.⁶⁸ Significantly the shawl remains there (albeit somewhat tattered) during the dark interlude of "Time Passes".⁶⁹

Mrs. Ramsay emerges from these contradictory moments both as a shadow to the light of patriarchy, and as a potential source of counter-illumination. On the one hand, as "a wedge of darkness" (*TL*, p.100) she finds her thoughts photologically shaped by the lighthouse beam;⁷⁰ but on the other hand, she herself is a "column of spray ... burning and illuminating". (*TL*, p.62) Lily, furthermore, finds in Mrs. Ramsay a secret message, accessible in close bodily proximity. (*TL*, p.82) It is "nothing that could be written in any language known to men" (*TL*, p.83).

This meditation on a secret unifying language between women⁷¹ comes just before Lily's discussion of her

⁶⁷ Compare, Whitehead, "The Shawl and the Skull: Virginia Woolf's 'Magic Mountain'", p.402: Mrs. Ramsay "conceal[s] knowledge of death, terror and dissolution behind a veil".

⁶⁸ Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, p.65, suggests the green shawl "comes to symbolize the virtues of maternal protection."

⁶⁹ Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, p.8, notes that in "Time Passes", the shawl "is gradually being dislodged by a larger perspective which encompasses both dark and light, suffering and joy."

⁷⁰ See *TL*, p.101: "We are all in the hands of the Lord ... But instantly she was annoyed with herself for saying that. Who had said it? not she; she had been trapped into saying something she did not mean." See Bette London, *The Appropriated Voice: Narrative Authority in Conrad, Forster, and Woolf* (Ann Arbor, 1990), pp.130-132.

⁷¹ "Men" may suggest both universal humanity and males in particular. This ambiguity is undercut, as we will discuss below, by Lily's later statement about subduing the woman in her to something more general.

picture with Bankes who asks "What did she wish to indicate by the triangular purple shape just there?"⁷² In replying Lily explains nothing about her secret woman's language, but instead resorts to compositional terms; nor does she offer a colourist explanation. Instead she refers to the need for a sort of chiaroscuro:

It was Mrs. Ramsay reading to James, she said. She knew his objection - that no one could tell it for a human shape. But she had made no attempt at likeness, she said. For what reason had she introduced them then? he asked. Why indeed? - except that if there, in that corner, it was bright, here, in this, she felt the need of darkness. Simple, obvious, commonplace, as it was, Mr. Bankes was interested. Mother and child then - objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty - might be reduced, he pondered, to a purple shadow without irreverence. (TL, pp.84-85)

The suggestion of balancing brightness and darkness encourages Lily to call the purple triangle a purple shadow;⁷³ and in her further elaboration to Bankes it becomes a colourless shadow: "A light here required a shadow there." (TL, p.85) Lily's respect for the logical representation of light and shade in accordance with nature, is in keeping with Impressionist plein-air techniques;⁷⁴ but her departure from the concept of direct depiction of her subject matter is in keeping with the Post-Impressionist abstractive technique of dreaming before nature (the purple triangle). Yet in talking to a man about this Lily seems to move away from colourist explanations towards one based on chiaroscuro. The colour purple retreats further into shadow the longer the

⁷² See Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", *Comparative Literature* 41 4 (1989), pp.344-345.

⁷³ Knox-Shaw, p.41, on the other hand, makes the distinction that "where Lily presents Mrs Ramsay in her painting as a 'triangular purple shape' Virginia Woolf presents her as a 'wedge-shaped core of darkness'." But he rightly adds that she is also presented "as a being who is shaped by the pressures of history."

⁷⁴ Harrington, p.372, on the other hand, sees this deployment of light and shade as post-impressionist.

discussion continues; and Lily, furthermore, rather as Woolf herself writes to Fry, explains to her male audience⁷⁵ the "question" of "relations of masses, of lights and shadows" in terms of significant form, "subduing" in the process, "all her impressions as a woman to something much more general". (*TL*, p.86)⁷⁶ Lily, avoiding the authorial error of thinking of her sex, hides her considerations of intimacy with Mrs. Ramsay (and all it implies for a feminist aesthetics), then, in a discussion which draws on both significant form and a sense of androgyny.⁷⁷

Ironically the section closes with Lily's gratitude to the Ramsays for a small social miracle: "This *man* had shared with her something profoundly intimate". (*TL*, p.86)⁷⁸ Here she seems to come close to succumbing to Mrs. Ramsay's matchmaking, but it is the exchange about art she has enjoyed; and her response masks a desire for a rather different intimacy. This man also appears to have stopped Lily painting, for she abandons her work and shuts her paint-box (*TL*, p.87). Lily does not actually paint again until the novel's final part. But colour⁷⁹ is important in the story that Mrs. Ramsay earlier in the day reads to her son.

⁷⁵ See Raitt, p.72.

⁷⁶ My italics.

⁷⁷ McLaurin, pp.191-192, discusses the passage with reference to Fry's *Vision and Design*.

⁷⁸ My italics.

⁷⁹ At the dinner table we find other references to aesthetics and composition, such as a fruit bowl gleaming with the oppositional colours yellow and purple (*TL*, p.168).

13.7 "A shadow was on the page"

Mrs. Ramsay reads "The Fisherman and His Wife" from *Grimm's Household Tales*⁸⁰ (Andrew Lang's introduction to which includes criticism of Max Müller's "'Solar' method" of interpretation).⁸¹ This "parable of egotism"⁸² charts the increasing opacity of the sea as the fisherman repeatedly returns to ask an enchanted flounder to grant the wishes of his insatiably acquisitive wife.⁸³ Significantly Mrs. Ramsay, dutifully feeling herself inferior to her husband,⁸⁴ and aware of Augustus Carmichael, himself a victim of uxorial excess,⁸⁵ notices his "shadow was on the page" (*TL*, p.66).

At first the fisherman finds the sea "all green and yellow, and no longer so smooth";⁸⁶ but it turns dark grey when his wife decides that if he "'won't be King, I will'" (*TL*, p.90).⁸⁷ After Emperor and Pope, the wife finally wants to be God, the ultimate sovereign.⁸⁸ The woman's desire for the highest subjectivity results in both man and wife being rudely returned to their humble origins where, as Mrs. Ramsay tells James, "they are

⁸⁰ "The Fisherman and His Wife", *Grimm's Household Tales with the author's notes*, translated and edited by Margaret Hunt, with an introduction by Andrew Lang (London, 1884), volume I, pp.78-85. The text quoted in *To the Lighthouse* matches this edition.

⁸¹ See, Lang, *ibid.*, pp.xxxv-xxxviii.

⁸² Knox-Shaw, p.45.

⁸³ Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, p.72, suggests that the story brings to the surface the "incompatibility of the marital relations upon which Mrs Ramsay nonetheless so vehemently insists." See also, Jane Lilienfield, "Where the Spear Plants Grew: the Ramsays' Marriage in *To the Lighthouse*", *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Jane Marcus (London, 1981), p.157; Thomas A. Vogler, "Introduction", *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "To the Lighthouse": A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), pp.25-26.

⁸⁴ See, *TL*, p.65: "she did not like, even for a second, to feel finer than her husband".

⁸⁵ See, *TL*, pp.66-67.

⁸⁶ Grimm, *Grimm's Household Tales*, p.78.

⁸⁷ Grimm, p.81.

⁸⁸ Grimm, pp.81, 83-84.

living still at this very time." (TL, p.98)⁸⁹ The raging black sea of the story⁹⁰ prefigures the dark storm at the centre of *To the Lighthouse*,⁹¹ and echoes the movement of elegiac eclipse. In the story, however, the rise of woman's subjectivity, associated with augmenting colour and then blackness, causes the eclipse of her own sovereignty, and a patriarchal status quo seems to be restored at its end⁹² (although both husband and wife suffer penury). It serves as a warning against uxorial ambition, and implicitly recommends the containment of feminine desire.⁹³ This is not the outcome of *To the Lighthouse* but Woolf's novel does seem to rework the story for feminism; and the colour deployment in the story feeds into Woolf's gendered allegoric vocabulary. The story's function as part of patriarchal enlightenment seems confirmed by "the light of the Lighthouse" appearing in James's eyes as "the interest of the story died away in them" (TL, p.98);⁹⁴ but its colours continue to resonate with feminist potential.

"The Window" closes with the chiaroscuro vision of the Ramsays, the wife in the shadow of her husband, triumphantly submitting to his will, murmuring an

⁸⁹ Grimm, p.85.

⁹⁰ See TL, p.97: "'Then he put on his trousers and ran away like a madman,' she read. 'But outside a great storm was raging and blowing so hard that he could scarcely keep his feet; houses and trees toppled over, the mountains trembled, rocks rolled into the sea, the sky was pitch black, and it thundered and lightened, and the sea came in black waves as high as church towers and mountains, and all with white foam at the top.'" See also, Grimm, p.85, which in the last line reads: "and all with crests of white foam at the top." See Beer, "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*", pp.54-55.

⁹¹ See Beer, "Hume, Stephen, and Elegy in *To the Lighthouse*", p.51.

⁹² See Maria DiBattista, "*To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), pp.172-176.

⁹³ Jean Alexander, *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Port Washington, 1974), p.115, notices "a causal relation between wifely insubordination and terrestrial chaos."

⁹⁴ See Harrington, p.379.

appropriate line from a Shakespearean sonnet: "As with your shadow I with these did play" (*TL*, p.187).⁹⁵ If Mrs. Ramsay's shadowy image in this first part may be seen in terms of the quiescent pastoral "umbra" - a shaded space of patriarchal patronage under which she languishes and around which Lily less happily hovers - then the "downpouring of immense darkness" of the middle part may be seen as the augmenting of this subdued shadow into the more devastating umbra of an eclipse.⁹⁶ As we have noted, it is possible to see the storm/eclipse as a means of reaffirming and reinvigorating the status quo, in which case we might read the third part of *To the Lighthouse* as a reinstatement of the values of the first.⁹⁷ But as the transformational movement of elegy allows, and Woolf's feminist refiguration of the eclipse has shown, the passage from darkness into new light may mark a transition to new values.

13.8 "Time Passes": "So with the lamps all put out"

We may see at work in "Time Passes" a gender based transition effected in a figure of enlightenment (or photological trope): it begins with the extinguishing of lights in the pre-war house,⁹⁸ the last light belonging to the poet Mr. Carmichael "who liked to lie awake a little reading Virgil, [and who] kept his candle burning rather longer than the rest." (*TL*, p.195); and it ends

⁹⁵ William Shakespeare, Sonnet 98, lines 13-14, *The Sonnets*, edited by John Dover Wilson, Second Edition (Cambridge, 1969), p.51.

⁹⁶ Geoffrey Hartman, "Virginia's Web", *Chicago Review* 14 (Spring 1961), p.22, discusses the encroaching darkness in *To the Lighthouse*.

⁹⁷ Knox-Shaw, p.50.

⁹⁸ This echoes Sir Edward Grey's famous remark in the pre-war dusk of August 1914: "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." Quoted in John Buchan, *The People's King, George V: A Narrative of Twenty Five Years* (Boston, 1935) p.98; Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1936), p.372.

with Lily's waking in a new dawn light. Enlightenment has transferred from masculine experience to feminine. For this to occur, as in "The Sun and the Fish", the relationship and gendering of traditional subject-object oppositions undergo considerable change.⁹⁹ The turning point in this process comes, I suggest, at the end of section six where we learn that "the mirror was broken" and, in parenthesis, that Mr. Carmichael "brought out a volume of poems in the spring". (TL, p.208) This marks a moment of rupture and recovery after which appears, in tandem with the restorative work of Mrs. McNab and fellow workers,¹⁰⁰ a difference in gender relations discernible in Woolf's tropes of light, shade and colour:

With the sunset sharpness was lost ... loosely the world shook itself down to sleep, darkly here without a light to it, save what came green suffused through leaves, or pale on the white flowers by the window.

[Lily Briscoe had her bag carried up to the house late one evening in September. Mr. Carmichael came by the same train.] (TL, p.219)

The colours of green and white illuminate the darkness and herald Lily's arrival: they communicate the pastoral message of renewal as well as flash two suffrage colours. Purple, the remaining suffrage colour, shines in the next and final section of "Time Passes":

Through the open window the voice of the beauty of the world came murmuring ... entreating the sleepers ... if they would not actually come down to the beach itself at least to lift the blind and look out. They would see then night flowing down in purple; his head crowned; his

⁹⁹ See TL, p.196: "Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could say 'This is he' or 'This is she.'"

¹⁰⁰ See, Mary Lou Emery, "'Robbed of Meaning': The Work at the Center of *To the Lighthouse*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38, 1 (Spring 1992); Goldman, "Metaphor and Place in *To the Lighthouse*", p.155; Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, pp.78-81; Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987), p.101; Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford, 1988), p.77.

sceptre jewelled; and how in his eyes a child might look.
(*TL*, pp.219-220)

Instead of the individual seeking reflection in the natural world, as before (and "Time Passes" has shown the disintegration of that relationship),¹⁰¹ the world itself now seems to beckon people; instead of "the mystic, the visionary" looking to beach and ocean as a mirror (*TL*, pp.203-204), they are to look to the night sky. Darkness, unlike earlier manifestations, is now masculine, majestic and benign. The gender of subjectivity seems to have become unfixed in this image: not only has darkness become masculine, but its purple dress is both a sign of old-order male sovereignty (part of a king's regalia) as well as of new feminist subjectivity. This may mark, not the endless deferral of the signification of subjectivity, but a point of transition from a model of exclusively masculine subjectivity to a collective one inclusive of the feminine. The darkness does not engulf or obliterate differences and individuals as in the much cited opening passages of "Time Passes",¹⁰² so much as tenderly embrace them; but there is a sinister aspect to the "curtains of dark wrapp[ing] themselves over the house", suggesting that to "acquiesce and resign" would be to give up the struggle too early, and it is against its comforting "folds" that the sun¹⁰³ rouses Lily from the precipice of sleep:

the birds beginning and the dawn weaving their thin voices in to its whiteness, a cart grinding, a dog somewhere barking, the sun lifted the curtains, broke the veil on their eyes, and Lily Briscoe stirring in her sleep clutched at her blankets as a faller clutches at the turf on the edge of a cliff. Her eyes opened wide.

¹⁰¹ See, for example, *TL*, p.199: "The nights now are full of wind and destruction ... the sleeper from his bed to seek an answer."

¹⁰² See *TL*, p.196.

¹⁰³ The gendering of night as masculine implicitly throws into question the gender of this sun.

Here she was again, she thought, sitting bolt upright in bed. Awake. (TL, pp.220-221)

"Time Passes" ends with the rousing to full consciousness of a woman artist in an object world that has been refigured and regendered. It has moved from the chiaroscuro of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay to the collectively informed prismatic of Lily Briscoe, explored in the final part of the novel.

13.9 "The Lighthouse": silent resistance

"The Lighthouse" examines the novel's central masculine subject now deprived of his feminine foil: Ramsay's enlightenment mind has lost its uxorial shadow, and it becomes a collective effort on the part of his children and guests to resist his demands for sympathy (and a replacement).¹⁰⁴ By the close he himself has become part of a new configuration of plural subjectivity: Mrs. Ramsay's shadow is displaced by Lily's Post-Impressionist colours; his notion of the ever expanding solar ball of masculine enlightenment¹⁰⁵ is challenged by her less apocalyptic understanding of enlightenment as interstellar: "little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark" (TL, p.249).

The arrival at the Lighthouse of Mr. Ramsay, Cam, James, and the Macalisters, coincides with Lily's completion (in

¹⁰⁴ Geoffrey Hartman, "Virginia's Web", *Chicago Review* 14 (Spring 1961), p.22: "Resistance is the major theme of this novel."

Compare, Arnold Kettle, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf", *An Introduction to the English Novel* (London, 1961), vol. 2, p.105:

"What is lacking in *To the Lighthouse* is a basic conflict".

Hoffman, "Subject and Object and the Nature of Reality: The Dialectic of *To the Lighthouse*", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 13 (1972), p.693, on the other hand, finds that the

"conflict between Mr. Ramsay's world of fact and Lily Briscoe's and Mrs. Ramsay's world of impressions and intuition forms the philosophical dialectic of the novel."

¹⁰⁵ See TL, p.59.

Carmichael's presence) of her painting recording the loss of Mrs. Ramsay and the assertion of her own artistic subjectivity. We might note the inclusion of Cam on this voyage, for a feminine presence is not specified in the plans for the earlier expedition; in this sense at least the voyage is not the exact fulfilment of the aspirations in the first part. Similarly, although in some ways a completion of the one she started in the first part of the novel (*TL*, p.228), Lily's painting is a new one.¹⁰⁶ As in the first case, however, she constructs her art in a position threatened by male presence; and in seeing her canvas as a means "to ward off Mr. Ramsay" (*TL*, p.231), Lily may be considered to be again practising a feminist aesthetics.

A woman, she had provoked this horror; a woman, she should have known how to deal with it. It was immensely to her discredit, sexually, to stand there dumb.... In complete silence she stood there, grasping her paint brush. (*TL*, p.236)

The contrast between Lily's silent resistance to Mr. Ramsay's implicit demands for sympathy and the compliant response she imagines would be made by Mrs. Beckwith, "that kind old lady who sketched" (*TL*, p.236), suggests Woolf's distinction between the submissive art of the Victorian aunt and the defiantly silent art of "Mrs. Bell". Indeed the feminist import of the woman artist's verbal silence is underlined by Lily's refusal to console Mr. Ramsay - and perhaps also her refusal of sexual advances implicit in the analogy of her "draw[ing] her skirts a little closer round her ankles" (*TL*, p.236) - while she clutches her brush, the instrument that renders her articulate in the realm of paint. Cam and James also use silence against Mr. Ramsay's "tyranny" (*TL*, p.252).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ See *TL*, pp.231, 243-244. See also Lee, "Introduction", p.xxxix; Harrington, p.369.

¹⁰⁷ Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1986), pp.194, 196, suggests that "the Ramsays'

Lily appears to reject Ramsay in order to focus, as she paints, on the memory of his wife, especially her silent "moment of intimacy":

The moment at least seemed extraordinarily fertile. She rammed a little hole in the sand and covered it up, by way of burying in it the perfection of the moment. It was like a drop of silver in which one dipped and illumined the darkness of the past. (TL, p.265)

The hole suggests both feminine sexuality ("intimacy" and "fertile" contributing to this) and vocality - a mouth to be silently enjoyed and silenced. Mrs. Ramsay points to a physical realm beyond the verbal where intimate communication is possible.

13.10 "Green paint on her brush"

But Lily also entertains blasphemous sentiments about Mrs. Ramsay. "Squeezing her tube of green paint" (TL, p.266), she imagines the triumphant pleasure in informing Mrs. Ramsay of the Rayleys' failed marriage.¹⁰⁸ The green paint has become invested with the fantasy of overcoming Mrs. Ramsay.¹⁰⁹ Its possible suffrage significance makes the colour green appropriate as a mark of defiance against this arch propagandist for marriage, although as

marriage is silently challenged by those around them", and that the "sense of a revolution in the domestic order in which formerly silent underlings (wives, children, servants) are suddenly given a voice, directly affects the narrative strategy of *To the Lighthouse*."

¹⁰⁸ Compare with TL, p.265: "And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there."

¹⁰⁹ Sue Roe's, p.64, biographical reading supports this view: she finds Lily "represents an alternative" to Mrs. Ramsay whose "model, Julia Stephen, was active in the Anti-Suffrage Movement." See also, Jane Lilienfield, "'The Deceptiveness of Beauty': Mother Love and Mother Hate in *To the Lighthouse*", *Twentieth Century Literature* 23 (1977), p.347.

a sign also of fertility it remains ambiguously linked with Mrs. Ramsay's shawl.

But just as Lily, brandishing her green paint,¹¹⁰ celebrates the passing of Mrs. Ramsay - "We can over-ride her wishes, improve away her limited, old-fashioned ideas" (*TL*, p.269) - she has an apocalyptic vision of love, attended by an oppositionally coloured "reddish light"¹¹¹ burning in her mind: "It rose like a fire sent up in token of some celebration by savages on a distant beach." Lily feels the "headlong desire to throw herself off the cliff and be drowned looking for a pearl brooch on a beach." (*TL*, p.270) This recalls her vicarious pleasure in Paul and Minta's love at the pre-war dinner party,¹¹² but the imagery of savages, perhaps a retrospective condemnation of the banquet, may also suggest, along with the intoxicating "winy smell", Bacchic revelry.¹¹³ We may also read here an allusion to the unrequited lovers' leap associated with Sapphic mythology,¹¹⁴ suggesting perhaps Lily's secret passion for Mrs. Ramsay. The red light, then, records Lily's ambiguous feelings at the dinner:¹¹⁵ "the roar and the crackle repelled her with fear and disgust ..." (*TL*, pp.270-271) Both seductive and repulsive it seems to confirm for Lily, however, that she "had only escaped by the skin of her teeth" (*TL*, p.271) Mrs. Ramsay's "mania

¹¹⁰ See Roe, pp.74-75.

¹¹¹ Compare *AROO*, p.49: "They had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth."

¹¹² See *TL*, p.158: "Lily wanted to protest violently and outrageously her desire to help him ...".

¹¹³ Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (Chicago and London, 1968), pp.44, 45, sees Paul and Minta as Mrs. Ramsay's sacrificial victims.

¹¹⁴ See Chapter 14 for a fuller discussion of Sappho and the Leucadian lovers' leap.

¹¹⁵ See *TL*, pp.159-160: "while the women, judging from her own experience, would all the time be feeling, This is not what we want; there is nothing more tedious, puerile, and inhumane than love; yet it is also beautiful and necessary".

... for marriage" (TL, p.270).¹¹⁶ Rather like Post-Impressionist colour planes, then, the green paint of defiance juxtaposes with the ambiguous reddish light of near complicity.¹¹⁷

Suggesting a political consequence to her aesthetic practice,¹¹⁸ Lily recalls her earlier exultant resolution to "move the tree to the middle, and need never marry anybody":¹¹⁹

She had felt, now she could stand up to Mrs. Ramsay - a tribute to the astonishing power that Mrs. Ramsay had over one. Do this, she said, and one did it. Even her shadow at the window with James was full of authority. (TL, p.271)

Here Lily realizes in artistic terms that Mrs. Ramsay, oppressed and overshadowed by patriarchy, nevertheless perpetuates its values: her "Do this" is a repetition of her husband's "Do this" recalled by Cam; and Lily seems to paint to defy this.¹²⁰ Her pre-war tactic to centre the tree seems impossible now, for she discovers "the whole wave and whisper of the garden became like curves and arabesques flourishing round a centre of complete emptiness." (TL, p.275) The compositional gap left by the departed Mrs. Ramsay - "the empty drawing-room steps" (TL, p.275) - suggests the loss of a pastoral umbra: "Was there no safety? ... No, guide, no shelter, but all was miracle, and leaping from the pinnacle of a tower into the air?" (TL, p.277). The overwhelming desire to fill the space forces Lily to break her turbulent silence with

¹¹⁶ Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, p.85; Roe, p.76.

¹¹⁷ See Stewart, "Color in *To the Lighthouse*", p.451.

¹¹⁸ Christopher Reed, "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics", *Twentieth Century Literature* 38, 1 (Spring 1992), p.30: Lily's painting is "connected to her refusal to marry or play a traditionally feminine role."

¹¹⁹ Marder, *Feminism and Art: A Study of Virginia Woolf* (Chicago and London, 1968), p.57: "Because she has moved the tree to the middle ... Lily need never marry." (Marder's italics).

¹²⁰ See TL, p.262.

a tearful invocation of Mrs. Ramsay (TL, pp.277-278) - a gesture at odds with her desire to overcome the woman.

The parenthetical account of the mutilation of fish, interrupting this cry (yet possibly simultaneous with it), might be considered as a complex reflection on Lily's artistic dilemma:

[Macalister's boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait his hook with. The mutilated body (it was still alive) was thrown back into the sea.] (TL, pp.277-278)

The boy cutting the fish may represent the artist's act of creation: cutting out a square of nature and framing it - the square brackets themselves acting as frame.¹²¹ But we might wonder whether the section mirrors or opposes Lily's artistic act:¹²² perhaps the boy's treatment of the fish is precisely in contrast to Lily's aesthetic method, for as a woman artist she may not want to re-enact such patriarchal barbarism.

The square cut out from the fish is suggestive of a literalist slice-of-life naturalism, and does not fit with Lily's "tunnelling" method. Perhaps, on the other hand, by invoking Mrs. Ramsay out loud Lily has momentarily yielded: she has recalled from the past a version of femininity mutilated into submission by men. But it is also one that Lily herself wants to partially retrieve and transform: remaining a "skimpy old maid, holding a paint-brush on the lawn" (TL, p.278) she appears a transitional and composite figure made out of Victorian aunt and defiant feminist.

¹²¹ Stevenson, *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction*, p.160, discusses this passage in terms of the artist's act of framing: "cutting panels out of life". See Eric Auerbach, "The Brown Stocking", *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, p.540.

¹²² See, John Burt, "Irreconcilable Habits of Thought in *A Room of One's Own* and *To the Lighthouse*", *English Literary History*, 49 (1982), pp.897-899.

Lily's recurrent memory of Mrs. Ramsay "raising to her forehead a wreath of white flowers" and "stepping ... across fields among whose folds, purplish and soft, among whose flowers, hyacinths or lilies, she vanished." (TL, pp.278, 279), links her with purple and white flowers suggestive of elegy¹²³ and of suffrage; but she also recalls her as "going unquestioningly with her companion, a shadow, across the fields." (TL, p.279).¹²⁴ Mrs. Ramsay is no longer seen as a shadow but as obviously accompanying one: as if a colourist version of the woman is haunted by a shadow version, the former positive, the latter negative. These are the two versions of Mrs. Ramsay we earlier saw disappearing and emerging in the discussion between Lily and Bankes where she is first referred to as a "triangular purple shape" and eventually reduced to merely "a shadow" (TL, pp.84-85).

13.11 Green light and purple foot

Lily's attention moves to the progress of a "brown spot", Mr. Ramsay's boat (TL, pp.279-280), which may be seen as a masculine intrusion on her reverie. But if brown for a time dominates the palette in the pre-war nuptial banquet,¹²⁵ it is now reduced to a speck in a sea of blue

¹²³ Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 139-141, *The Poems of John Milton*, edited by John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York, 1978), p.250: "Throw hither all your quaint enamelled eyes,/ That on the green turf suck the honied showers,/ And purple all the ground with vernal flowers." See, Davies, *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse* (Harmondsworth, 1989), p.117.

¹²⁴ See Marianne Hirsch, "The Darkest Plots: Narration and Compulsory Heterosexuality", *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Margaret Homans (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1993), p.206.

¹²⁵ See TL, pp.152-163, where the brown of Mrs. Ramsay's triumphant "Boeuf en Daube" seems to be the dominant tone: significantly it is picked up in Minta's "large brown eyes"; she also wears, picking up the candlelight, a "golden haze"; Mr. Ramsay admires "these golden-reddish girls"; and Paul's blue eyes contrast with the "great brown

and purple. The focus switches to Cam's "green thought in a green shade"¹²⁶ when "her mind made the green swirls" and

wandered in imagination in that underworld of waters where the pearls stuck in clusters to white sprays, where in the green light a change came over one's entire mind and one's body shone half transparent enveloped in a green cloak. (TL, p.281)

From Lily to Cam the colours move in oppositional sequence: from blue and purple to brown then to green and white. In a sense Mr. Ramsay mediates between the two women: his brown intrudes in their purple, green and white.¹²⁷ Linked with Lily's paint, the green light and green cloak also connect Cam's thoughts to her mother's green shawl over the skull, and suggest a bodily, material source of colour.

James imagines his father as a wheel running over a "foot, purple, crushed" (TL, p.284), and its colour corresponds with Mrs. Ramsay's purple shadow;¹²⁸ but James only obliquely refers to his mother as the victim and his father now rides "over his foot, over Cam's foot, over anybody's foot. One sat and watched it." (TL, p.285) James is here both victim and bystander,¹²⁹ and he also identifies the oppressed in the patriarchal quest for enlightenment (Mr. Ramsay's mission to the Lighthouse) as

pot" in which is a "confusion of savoury brown and yellow meats". "Boeuf en Daube" has been identified as one of Roger Fry's specialities. See Frances Spalding, *Roger Fry: Art and Life* (London, 1980), p.128; Reed, "Through Formalism: Feminism and Virginia Woolf's Relation to Bloomsbury Aesthetics", p.40.

¹²⁶ Andrew Marvell, "The Garden", line 48, *Complete Poems*, edited by George deF. Lord (London, 1984), p.50. See Davies, *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse*, p.8.

¹²⁷ Davies, *Virginia Woolf: To the Lighthouse*, p.118.

¹²⁸ See also TL, p.247: Mr. Tansley "was always carrying ... a purple book".

¹²⁹ DiBattista, "To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale", p.166, comments that Oedipus means "swollen foot" and that here "the crushed foot is linked to paternal tyranny".

both male and female: purple becomes associated with both sexes.¹³⁰

James is aligned with his mother in being shadowed by Ramsay: "Something, he remembered, stayed and darkened over him" (*TL*, p.285) He remembers his father's words falling "like a blade, a scimitar, smiting through the leaves and flowers even of the happy world and making them shrivel and fall." This suggests an elegiac moment: it recalls Ramsay's earlier verbal "pelt of jagged hail" (*TL*, p.54) and the "drench of hail" sent in "Time Passes" (*TL*, p.199), as a deliberate act of divine spite.¹³¹

In trying to recall more specifically "whose foot" he was thinking of, he remembers "an old woman gossiping in the kitchen" (*TL*, p.285) - an image of feminine servitude, echoing Mrs. McNab - and "a thin yellow veil ... drawn" over "plates and bowls and tall brandishing red and yellow flowers" (*TL*, p.285).¹³² That enlightenment is a masculine province is suggested by James's memory of the Lighthouse as "a silvery, misty-looking tower with a yellow eye that opened suddenly and softly in the evening" (*TL*, p.286): its yellow eye, in keeping with the dominant colour veiling the scene, may be taken as a sign

¹³⁰ Harrington, pp.376, 378: "The triangle of Lily's first picture represented Mrs. Ramsay and James together, but in the second picture, the triangle represents Mrs. Ramsay alone. James sails with his father. The split between father and son is closed."

¹³¹ See Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 4-5, *The Poems of John Milton*, edited by John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York, 1978), p.240: "And with forced fingers rude,/ Shatter your leaves before the mellowing year."

¹³² This echoes the image in "Time Passes" of "the profusion of darkness which ... swallowed up here a jug and there a bowl of red and yellow dahlias" (*TL*, p.196), but chronologically it precedes this flood since it is James's memory of the opening scene in "The Window". In the "Time Passes" scene the red and yellow may be linked to gender difference which is then obliterated by darkness, but here the red and yellow are not obliterated but veiled by yellow, suggesting that one gender now dominates the scene, presumably the masculine. For further discussion of yellow in *To the Lighthouse*, see McLaurin, p.194.

of masculine subjectivity.¹³³ But now he has a new perspective: "He could see the white-washed rocks; the tower, stark and straight; he could see it was barred with black and white" (*TL*, p.286). James's discovery that "nothing was simply one thing" (*TL*, p.286), then, shows two versions of this figure of enlightenment: one yellow-eyed, and associated with his father's oppression of his mother;¹³⁴ the other black and white, perhaps indicative of James's countering of paternal tyranny, a challenge which if successful might merely replicate it.

13.12 Sinking ship and wave of white

Lily's parenthetical observation on "The sea without a stain on it" (*TL*, p.289), suggests a return to clear waters as in the Grimms story. The sea seems to have "swallowed up" the father-and-son struggle going on in the boat (*TL*, p.289). As if picking up on this, Cam tells herself "a story of adventure about escaping from a sinking ship." (*TL*, p.289) Her pleasure in this change is characterized in terms of chiaroscuro:

And the drops falling from this sudden and unthinking fountain of joy fell here and there on the dark, the slumbrous shapes in her mind; shapes of a world not realised but turning in their darkness, catching here and there, a spark of light; Greece, Rome, Constantinople. (*TL*, p.290)

Cam's understanding of the dormant dark shapes in her mind, linked in the novel's lexis to Mrs. Ramsay, seems to come both from the fountain and from the spark of light; "turning in their darkness" suggests their transformation, as if they will slip the bonds of darkness. But the passage also implies that the darkness

¹³³ See DiBattista, "To the Lighthouse: Virginia Woolf's Winter's Tale", p.167; Pamela J. Transue, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style* (Albany, New York, 1986), p.91.

¹³⁴ Later, *TL*, p.292, Mr. Ramsay reads a book of "yellowish pages".

itself results from, as well as is illuminated by, the light of successive (patriarchal) empires. This poignant moment of a woman's self-realization rests on the paradox of her "little island" of enlightenment emanating from the very system that also oppresses the feminine as darkness - "it had, she supposed, a place in the universe" (TL, p.290). This is confirmed by Cam's thoughts on her father in his study (TL, p.290), for her a haven of learning; and she comes to see him as "most wise; he was not vain nor a tyrant. Indeed, if he saw she was there, reading a book, he would ask her, as gently as any one could, Was there nothing he could give her?" (TL, p.291) Cam is not necessarily yielding to her father's tyranny but assessing his enlightenment tradition for her own ends and position. Her admiration for this tradition is mixed with indications of its decline. As she goes on "telling herself about escaping from a sinking ship" (TL, p.293), we might be reminded of the capsizing light of the eclipse, and the potential for feminist emergence from this dying patriarchy. Cam's sense that "The sea was more important than the shore" and that "About here ... a ship had sunk" (TL, p.293), suggesting the loss of an old order, is reflected by Lily's observation that Mr. Ramsay "and his children seemed to be swallowed up in that blue, that distance" (TL, p.294).

If the sea swallows something of the patriarchy from the land, then the shore seems to have a gift from the sea in the shape of Mr. Carmichael who is "puffing and blowing like some sea monster" (TL, p.294). He presides over Lily's meditations.¹³⁵

¹³⁵ See Miller, "Mr. Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: The Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*", *Modernism Reconsidered*, edited by Robert Kiely and John Hildebidle (Cambridge, 1983), pp.167-189; Kyoko Ono, "*To the Lighthouse* as a Criticism on Modern Civilization: Why does Mr. Carmichael Stand There?", *Studies in English Literature*

She seemed to be standing up to the lips in some substance, to move and float and sink in it, yes, for these waters were unfathomably deep. Into them had spilled so many lives. The Ramsays'; the children's; and all sorts of waifs and strays of things besides. A washerwoman with her basket; a rook; a red-hot poker; the purples and grey-greens of flowers: some common feeling held the whole together. (TL, p.295)

Lily's aquatic sense of commonality (intersubjectivity, perhaps) brings a prismatic alternative to Cam's earlier thoughts in chiaroscuro: the oppositional colours contrast with the hierarchy of light and dark. But this new formation is reflected in the now "unsatisfactory" positions of the boats in the bay:

The disproportion there seemed to upset some harmony in her own mind.... she could not achieve that razor edge of balance between two opposite forces; Mr. Ramsay and the picture; which was necessary. (TL, p.296)

Lily is no longer painting in the same social and political space, a space contested by Ramsay's patriarchy. In this new configuration, Mr. Carmichael, poet and sea-monster, does not threaten but seems to assist Lily's progress: her picture must come not from opposition to Ramsay, but from her new sense of collectivity. She must also reconsider the object of her gaze: "something evaded her when she thought of Mrs. Ramsay But what she wished to get hold of was that very jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything." (TL, p.297)

To get back in touch with her object, Lily begins to reflect on Carmichael's dislike of Mrs. Ramsay (TL, p.299); and she seems to have a special silent affinity with him. Not knowing him in a conventional sense, she finds him an encouraging presence, almost a muse.

Significantly, she defines their relationship in terms of colour: "to know the outline, not the detail, to sit in one's garden and look at the slopes of a hill running purple down into the distant heather. She knew him in that way." (*TL*, p.299) Purple is now linked to Lily's thoughts on Carmichael as well as Mrs. Ramsay. She recalls his dislike stems from Mrs. Ramsay's neglect of art and intellectual pursuit in favour of misplaced philanthropy (*TL*, p.300). Interestingly, Lily, incidentally alluding to Procne, characterizes Mrs. Ramsay's philanthropic tendencies as solar ones: "like the swallows for the south, the artichokes for the sun" (*TL*, p.301).

She also seems to overcome the negative influence of Tansley:

There he was, lean and red and raucous, preaching love from a platform (there were ants crawling about among the plantains which she disturbed with her brush - red, energetic ants, rather like Charles Tansley). (*TL*, p.302)

Lily's intrusion of her brush is not an act of destruction but of disruption - she seeks to transform with the feminine Tansley's political world, force it to address what has been excluded. And it is a social, multi-subjective view of Mrs. Ramsay that she comes to desire: "Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with" (*TL*, p.303).

Lily wonders also about the secret, rather than public or social, Mrs. Ramsay, "knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone" (*TL*, p.303), actions which suggest a silent artistic code. She remembers the passion and conflict of the Ramsays' marriage which "tired" and "cowed" Mrs. Ramsay (*TL*, p.306), but also the sinister irony of Mrs. Ramsay's preparing her daughter Prue for "that same happiness" (*TL*, p.308). Prue's sacrifice to

such ambitions,¹³⁶ is recalled in the imagery of "valleys, white, flower-strewn" (*TL*, p.309), and when Lily suddenly finds Mrs. Ramsay restored to her, white dominates the palette: somebody causes the window to whiten and throw "an odd-shaped triangular shadow over the step" which "altered the composition of the picture a little" (*TL*, p.309). And with a "wave of white" returns "the old horror" of desire for Mrs. Ramsay: "Mrs. Ramsay ... knitted her reddish-brown stocking, cast her shadow on the step. There she sat." (*TL*, p.310)

This imagery may be read in terms both of significant form and of feminist iconographic colourism. On the one hand Lily's emotional response to Mrs. Ramsay is translated into the formal democracy of "ordinary experience ... on a level with the chair, with the table" (*TL*, p.310); and the white and shadow, bereft of social significance, are co-opted to compositional demands to create significant form.

On the other hand, Mrs. Ramsay as *Mrs. Ramsay* is the central focus of Lily's picture, the feminine object of a feminine gaze. Even her shadow has a political as much as formal significance, as we have seen, and here it may be read as a sign of her oppression. But "cast" may suggest both the forming and the discarding of this shadow; and the fact that Mrs. Ramsay is described as actively casting her own shadow points both to her complicity in patriarchy and to her possible rejection of it. The simultaneous presence and absence of shadow, then, marks a point between chiaroscuro and colourism, the threshold of public and private feminist aesthetics. The image changes with context. Tantalizingly, we are not told whether Lily actually paints in a purple triangle: is it implicitly there, or no longer necessary?

¹³⁶ See *TL*, p.308: "she had enjoyed it for less than a year, however".

The predominant white now associated with Mrs. Ramsay unites in its wave a past tragic image of feminine creativity (the daughter lost in childbirth) and a new more hopeful one (the woman artist about to find herself).

13.13 Sun and shipwreck: green and blues

Lily, having reached this new compositional threshold, now wants to include, "as if she had something she must share", rather than resist Mr. Ramsay (*TL*, p.310). Similarly, the "glaring white and black" of the male province of the Lighthouse includes, in the next section, a sign of feminine/feminist presence: "One could see the windows clearly; a dab of white on one of them, and a little tuft of green on the rock" (*TL*, p.311). This green tuft may correspond to Cam's presence (green linked) on the journey to the Lighthouse: and unlike the mistaken "old ladies ... at home" scoffed at by James, she is there to see the Lighthouse, close up (*TL*, p.312).

Cam's memory of the house is reduced to "a pale blue censer swinging rhythmically this way and that across her mind" (*TL*, p.313), linking the blue, associated with her brother's memory of Mrs. Ramsay "in a blue light" (*TL*, pp.287, 288)¹³⁷ and with Lily's vision of the blue distance engulfing the boat, to the memory of the pastoral interpretations of her mother's (green) shawl.¹³⁸ From this ameliorative reverie, it is Mr. Ramsay who rouses her to the possibilities of "fresh woods, and pastures new":¹³⁹

¹³⁷ See Stewart, "Color in *To the Lighthouse*", pp.444-445.

¹³⁸ See *TL*, p.313.

¹³⁹ Milton, *Lycidas*, line 193, *The Poems of John Milton*, edited by John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York, 1978), p.254.

"Come now," said Mr. Ramsay, suddenly shutting his book.

Come where? To what extraordinary adventure? She woke with a start. (*TL*, p.313)

Echoing the role of the sun in the awakening of Lily, his rousing of Cam may suggest the part of (previously masculine) enlightenment traditions in the process of women's emancipation. When Cam observes that "it seemed as if they were doing two things at once", she indicates the transformative powers of this solar influence as well as its very transformation: "they were eating their lunch here in the sun and they were also making for safety in a great storm after a shipwreck" (*TL*, p.314). The mundane and the imagined co-exist in the same moment: Cam experiences the patriarchal sun-shine at the same time as she is caught up in the aftermath of its demise.

Looking at her father, while the water "became greener", Cam sees the island as a "dwindled leaf-like" and "frail blue shape" (*TL*, p.317), and this sense of delicate fragility of colour anticipates the moment revealing non-transcendence in "The Sun and the Fish". Just as there, the refiguring of masculine solar subjectivity opens up a space into which a plural and prismatic subjectivity intrudes, so here Mr. Ramsay's last recorded moment in this solar journey opens the way for a new subjectivity:

He rose ... for all the world, James thought, as if he were saying, "There is no God," and Cam thought, as if he were leaping into space, and they both rose to follow him as he sprang, lightly like a young man, holding his parcel, on to the rock. (*TL*, p.318)

At the Lighthouse, the idea of a transcendent masculine solar subject (God) is put in question, and the space filled by contesting and interconnecting subjects, masculine and feminine. Mr. Ramsay seems to show the way towards a materialist understanding of this by his grip on the parcel (containing supplies for the Lighthouse

men) and his connection with the solid rock: this moment of enlightenment, then, may be "attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in" (AROO, p.63).¹⁴⁰

The final switch back to Lily and Carmichael shows the emergence of colour-based enlightenment rather than chiaroscuro: the Lighthouse has "melted away into a blue haze", and in a moment of elegiac consolation Lily imagines that Carmichael,¹⁴¹ in the pre-Christian guise of "an old pagan God"

has crowned the occasion ... when his hand slowly fell, as if she had seen him let fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth. (TL, p.319)

The falling hand echoes Mr. Ramsay's in the boat - "He only raised his right hand mysteriously high in the air, and let it fall upon his knee again as if he were conducting some secret symphony." (TL, p.288) - and marks a moment of relinquishment: the image of a man's hand, previously seen to cast a shadow on the mind of Mrs. Ramsay, now lets the earth take on colour.

At the centre of Lily's picture there is recounted no tree, nor purple shadow, but instead, "all its green and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at

¹⁴⁰ Greenwald, "Casting Off From 'The Castaway': To the Lighthouse as Prose Elegy", *Genre* (Spring 1986), p.52, on the other hand, suggests that here "Mr. Ramsay is symbolically reunited with Mrs. Ramsay, taking on her qualities of helpfulness ... and truthful agnosticism".

¹⁴¹ Knox-Shaw, p.37: "Carmichael's gesture corresponds to the elegiac rite of decking the hero's bier, an episode that in *Lycidas* ('purple all the ground with vernal flowers') as elsewhere, immediately precedes the injunction to weep no more." See also, Greenwald, p.53; and Smythe, "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29, 1 (Fall 1992), p.74, who sees Lily's painting as "a figurative allegory of elegy itself".

something."¹⁴² We are not told the colour into which she has dipped her brush when:

With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the centre. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (TL, pp.319-320)

The line suggests the feminist reclamation of the first person.¹⁴³ Lily's first person is a colourist illumination of the feminine umbra behind the masculine solar subject. As such it contests and transforms this understanding of subjectivity with a feminist and collective model. Just as the momentary intrusion of suffrage colours at the eclipse of masculine solar subjectivity heralds the return of a wider spectrum of colour, so too we have seen in *To the Lighthouse* a feminist intervention in a narrative of subjectivity which moves from the chiaroscuro of the Ramsays to the feminist prismatic of Lily Briscoe.

¹⁴² Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", pp.344, 345, suggests that here Woolf "considers painting from inside the creative process, as *forma formans*; she does not present it from the outside as a finished work, as *forma formata*.... Thus, although Woolf provides us with a sense of an ending, she manages to avoid the suggestion that life can be reified, that it can be contained in a 'closed object'."

¹⁴³ Harrington, p.382, on the other hand, concludes that the painting of this line "records a modernist vision of absurdity". But Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Unmaking and Making in *To the Lighthouse*", *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (London, 1988), p.45, honours it "as an attempt to articulate, by using a man as an instrument, a woman's vision of a woman." See also Goldman, "Metaphor and Place in *To the Lighthouse*", p.155.

CHAPTER XIV

THE WAVES: PURPLE BUTTONS AND WHITE FOAM**14.1 "Some semi mystic very profound life of a woman"**

Yet I am now & then haunted by some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident - say the fall of a flower - might contain it. (*D*, III, p.118)

Woolf's early glimpse of *The Waves* is intriguing, for it seems to bear little resemblance to the novel published five years later. If this work begins in a vision of a woman's life¹ encapsulated in a momentary incident somehow outside history, by 1931 it almost ends in historical specificity as an elegiac tribute to Woolf's brother Thoby. Resisting this temptation² Woolf records: "I have finally netted that fin in the waste of waters which appeared to me ... when I was coming to an end of *To the Lighthouse*" (*D*, IV, p.10);³ she focuses on the symbolic technique of *The Waves* and

¹ See also Woolf, *D*, III, p.114; and *D*, III, p.128, where she envisages a woman writing and darkness giving voice:

"Why not invent a new kind of play - as for instance
Woman thinks:...

He does.

Organ Plays.

She writes.

They say:

She sings:

Night speaks:"

² See Woolf, *D*, IV, p.10: "I have been sitting these 15 minutes in a state of glory, & calm, & some tears, thinking of Thoby & if I could write Julian Thoby Stephen 1881-1906 on the first page. I suppose not." Her sister, Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Woolf, October 15, 1931, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, p.367, confirms an implicit homage to him when she surfaces from her first reading of *The Waves*, but she emphasizes that these feelings, although powerful, are personal and partial ("accidental"); and, as we have seen in Chapter 11 above, she goes on to discuss the novel in comparison to her own painting technique.

³ Compare *D*, III, p.113 (30 September 1926): "One sees a fin passing far out. What image can I reach to convey what I mean? ... I hazard a guess that it may be the impulse behind another book."

the freedom & boldness with which my imagination picked up used & tossed aside all the images & symbols which I had prepared. I am sure that this is the right way of using them - not in set pieces, as I had tried at first, coherently, but simply as images; never making them work out; only suggest. Thus I hope to have kept the sound of the sea & the birds, dawn, & garden subconsciously present, doing their work under ground. (*D*, IV, pp.10-11)

Rather than think of Woolf's initial idea to chart "some semi mystic ... life of a woman" as having "gradually evaporated"⁴ by the time of the novel's completion, yielding to a eulogy to her dead brother,⁵ perhaps we might find it still present, suggested at this "under ground" level of imagery. "Mystic", it is worth noting, as well as referring to sacred, obscure religious feelings, may also suggest "a secret meaning hidden from the eyes of the ordinary person, only revealed to a spiritually enlightened mind: allegorical."⁶ My feminist reading draws on both senses: I hope to explore Woolf's "semi mystic" text for references to a quasi-sacred mythology, and as partly allegorical in meaning. It is important, I think, to bear in mind Woolf's qualification of the word: the woman's life is to be "semi mystic". A later projection suggests "The Moths"⁷ to be about her

⁴ Sue Roe, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice* (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), p.106; see also, Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987), p.180.

⁵ For discussion of Woolf's ambivalence toward Thoby see, Judith Lee, "'This Hideous Shaping and Moulding': War and *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, edited by Mark Hussey (Syracuse, New York, 1992), p.198; Sara Ruddick, "Private Brother, Public World", *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Jane Marcus (London, 1981).

⁶ *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*, New Edition (Edinburgh, 1972), p.873.

⁷ Woolf's early working title for *The Waves*. See Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Woolf, 3 May 1927, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, pp.314-315. See also, Harvena Richter, "Hunting the Moth: Virginia Woolf and the Creative Imagination", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), pp.13-28.

struggle with mystical feelings.⁸ Woolf also expresses ambitions for a less abstract project: "I want to write a history, say of Newnham or the womans movement in the same vein. The vein is deep in me - at least sparkling, urgent." (*D*, III, p.203) These feminist aspirations, although addressed in *A Room of One's Own*, may extend in some ways to the similarly multivocal text *The Waves*.⁹

If ultimately "no two people think alike about it",¹⁰ many agree that *The Waves* is a high modernist text, the culmination of (or inevitable dead-end to)¹¹ Woolf's experimentation in lyric prose,¹² and a virtuoso

⁸ See Woolf, *D*, III, p.203: "Yes, but the Moths? That was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book: a playpoem. And there may be affectation in being too mystical, too abstract; saying Nessa & Roger & Duncan & Ethel Sands admire that That is my temperament, I think: to be very little persuaded of the truth of anything - what I say, what people say - always to follow, blindly instinctively with a sense of leaping over a precipice - the call of - the call of - now, if I write the Moths I must come to terms with these mystical feelings." Critics sometimes overlook Woolf's choice of tense (she says the novel "was to be an abstract mystical eyeless book") and her hesitation over abstraction and "mystical feelings". Jane Marcus, "The Niece of a Nun: Virginia Woolf, Caroline Stephen, and the Cloistered Imagination", *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, edited by Jane Marcus (Lincoln and London, 1983), pp.27, 28, as we saw earlier, has confessed to avoiding "the subject of Woolf's mysticism, and of *The Waves*" until her exploration of the beliefs of Woolf's Quaker aunt led her to interpret "a mysticism that could be embraced by the socialist-feminist", and to ask: "Is it possible to see the structure of *The Waves* as a Quaker meeting, as interior monologues in which each character comes to terms with death and grief? Was the most successful Bernard, that rational mystic?" For a helpful introductory discussion of mysticism in *The Waves* see, Eric Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves*, p.29ff.

⁹ Woolf was to expand her recent papers on "Women and Fiction" for publication as *A Room of One's Own* a year later.

¹⁰ Woolf, Letter to Ethel Smyth, 1 January 1933, *L*, V, p.144.

¹¹ See, Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley Los Angeles London, 1986), p.12; Peter and Margaret Harvard-Williams, "Perceptive Contemplation in the Work of Virginia Woolf", *English Studies* 35 (1954), p.98.

¹² See, Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel: Studies in Hermann Hesse, André Gide, and Virginia Woolf* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1963), pp.244-270; J.W. Graham, "Point of View in *The Waves*: Some Services of the Style", *University of Toronto Quarterly*, XXXIX (1969-70) 193-211.

performance "devoted to abstraction".¹³ Vanessa Bell's response has come to dominate - after being "completely submerged in *The Waves*", she finds herself "gasping, out of breath, choking, half-drowned ... so overcome by the beauty"¹⁴ - along with observations on the novel's eloquent silence,¹⁵ "symbolic universality",¹⁶ and sense of "cosmic unity".¹⁷ But beyond aesthetic emotion *The Waves* may yet say more.¹⁸ Emotional, mystical readings

¹³ Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London, 1977), p.159; see also, Eric Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves* (Cambridge, 1987), p.1. For the same qualities *The Waves* was less politely considered by Vita Sackville-West, "so bad that only a small dog that had been fed on gin could have written it." Woolf, in a letter to Benedict Nicholson, 1 November 1931, reports this opinion, adding that it "pleases me greatly." *L*, IV, p.401.

¹⁴ Vanessa Bell, Letter to Virginia Woolf, October 15, 1931, *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, edited by Regina Marler (London, 1993), p.361. See also, Elizabeth Hardwick, "Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury", *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature* (London, 1974), p.136, who has felt silenced; Stuart Hampshire, "Virginia Woolf", *Modern Writers and Other Essays* (London, 1969), p.43, who feels "either overwhelmed or repelled"; James Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven, 1973), 152, who appears mystically reverential in the presence of the novel's "unrelieved poetic intensity". Stella McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London and New York, 1990), p.140, calls it a "mystical poetical work."

¹⁵ David Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1945), p.111; see also, Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness. Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1970), p.199.

¹⁶ Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, 1975), p.151.

¹⁷ Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences. The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston, 1984), p.120.

¹⁸ Alternative readings have also emerged: see Robert Herrick, "The Works of Mrs Woolf", *Saturday Review of Literature* (New York), 5 December 1931, p.246; Majumdar, Robin, and Allen McLaurin (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (London, 1975), p.280. This early dismissal of a half suspected anti-imperialism in the undertow of *The Waves* has recently been reconsidered by Jane Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons*, edited by Karen Lawrence (Urbana, 1992), pp.136-162; Patrick McGee responds to Marcus in "The Politics of Modernist Form; Or, Who Rules *The Waves*?", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38, 3 (Autumn 1992), p.631. Feminist readings have been developed in terms of both subtext and textuality: see, Maria DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven, 1980), pp.159-160; Sara Ruddick,

tend to emphasize Bernard as a spokesman for Woolf's own artistic vision,¹⁹ and a sense of harmony between characters.²⁰ But I want to suggest the characters as contesting, and Bernard's role as much more ambivalent.²¹ We may find feminism at work as a subtext; and in connection with this, Woolf's writerly engagement with colour may allow us also to interpret iconographically those elements of her writing which appear to comply with orthodox tenets of significant form.²² The orthodox view

"Private Brother, Public World", *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Jane Marcus (London, 1981), p.200; Sue Roe, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice* (Hemel Hempstead, 1990), p.119; Pamela J. Transue, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style* (Albany, New York, 1986), p.128; Alice Jardine, "Pre-Texts for the Transatlantic Feminist", *Yale French Studies*, 62 (1981), pp.231-235; Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London, 1985); Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987); Rachel Blau DuPlessis, "Woolfenstein", *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, edited by Ellen G. Friedman and Miriam Fuchs (Princeton, New Jersey, 1989). Modernist readings begin to yield to postmodernist: see, Eric Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves* (Cambridge, 1987), pp.2, 107-109. Universalist readings to more sophisticated accounts of subjectivity: see, for example, Minow-Pinkney; McGee; DuPlessis; Roe.

¹⁹ See, Marcus, *ibid.*; Sue Roe, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice*, p.106; Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (New York, 1979), p.166; Mary Steussy Shanahan, "The Artist and the Resolution of *The Waves*", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 36 (1975), pp.56, 60; Marianna Torgovnick, "Virginia Woolf, the Vision of *The Waves*, and the Novel's Double Ending", *Closure in the Novel* (Princeton, New Jersey, 1981), pp.183-185; Eric Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves*, p.97: Bernard "in his summing up, finally absorbs the perspective and knowledge of the interludes" and "becomes 'the narrator' of the entire work". But Daiches, *Virginia Woolf* (London, 1945), pp.103-104, observes: "Yet Bernard's summing up is not really a summing up, for he is simply one of the six His conclusions are his own."

²⁰ See, McLaurin, "Consciousness and Group Consciousness in Virginia Woolf", *Virginia Woolf. A Centenary Perspective*, edited by Eric Warner (London and Basingstoke, 1984), pp.28-40; Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London, 1977), p.165. Like many critics, Transue, in *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style* (Albany, New York, 1986), pp.133-134, sees Bernard as unifying all personalities in his.

²¹ See Lucio P. Ruotolo, *The Interrupted Moment: A View of Virginia Woolf's Novels* (Stanford, California, 1986), p.172.

²² Discussion of colour in *The Waves* tends to focus on the differences between the interludes, describing the progress of sun over sea and land, and the main body of the text, a mosaic of soliloquies spoken by six characters. Allen McLaurin, *Virginia*

of the novel's alternation between objective, impersonal interludes and subjective soliloquies, as a study in phenomenology and existentialism,²³ has influenced readings of colour in predominantly psychological terms.²⁴ McLaurin's model of colour²⁵ locks into his informative analysis of the novel's repetitional

Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved (Cambridge, 1973), pp.77, 79-80, drawing on Fry's debt to Denis and Mauron, and Fry's essay "Plastic Colour", argues that in *The Waves* Woolf "uses colour in an attempt to create psychological volume and at the same time give the idea of organisation on the surface of the canvas by means of the interludes." The interludes, "like Monet's *Water Lilies*", are impressionistic records of light falling on the object world, and the main text is Post-Impressionist in its use of colour to establish "psychological volume" (and here Cézanne is the painterly model, following Fry). See also, Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel Between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton, N.J., 1974), p.188; Peter and Margaret Harvard-Williams, "Perceptive Contemplation in the Work of Virginia Woolf", p.112: "The sun ... is ... the 'chief personage' in the impressionist picture which she paints."

²³ For example, Frank D. McConnell calls *The Waves* "a vision of absolute phenomenality", in "'Death Among the Apple Trees': *The Waves* and the world of Things", *Bucknell Review* XVI (1968), p.26; Jean Guiguet, *Virginia Woolf and her Works*, translated by Jean Stewart (London, 1965), pp.37, 378, 379, observes that "Two features of Existentialism which acquire increasing importance recur throughout [Woolf's] work: the Absurd, and the anguish of the moment." He calls *The Waves* "an attempt to formulate Being", but also notes how the novel goes beyond existentialism. See also, Madeline Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.220.

²⁴ McLaurin, pp.80, 81-82, 84, examines the "different languages of colour used by the characters" and the "relationship ... between their 'psychological volumes'", and suggests that the interludes use colour "decoratively" whereas its function in the main text is "plastic" to create psychological volume. See also, Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel*, p.267.

²⁵ Jack F. Stewart, "Spatial Form and Color in *The Waves*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 (1982), pp.103, 90-91, 93, although drawing on similar sources and ideas, interprets with a different emphasis McLaurin's distinction between interludes and soliloquies: "In the interludes, color is not symbolic, in the sense of referring to ideas outside itself, but signifies the phenomenology of existence transmuted into plastic form.... Woolf's art evolved from impressionism to post-impressionism, and the analogy here is with Cézanne Through her own plastic intuitions, aided by discussions with Roger Fry, Woolf came to adapt this 'new syntax' to the novel.... Abstract color occurs in the soliloquies also, but there it is subtly tinged with perceptual and emotional values."

aesthetics,²⁶ but his argument does not allow for the possibility of an iconographic or allegoric (or feminist) deployment of colour.²⁷

Jane Marcus²⁸ understands colour in *The Waves* in relation to imperialism. "Woolf exposes", she rightly observes

... the way that white women are implicated in, rather than exempt from, [the] imperialist project.... Feminist readings often argue that Bernard's fluency depends upon the suppression of Rhoda, that her silence is necessary for his speech. But in their roles as victims, silenced subjects, the women still participate in imperialist practice.²⁹

But Rhoda's suicide,³⁰ although hardly a tempting political solution, may mark unhappy, powerless dissent,

²⁶ See, McLaurin, pp.128-148.

²⁷ Diane Filby Gillespie, *The Sisters' Arts. The Writing and Painting of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Syracuse, NY, 1988), p.267, 303-304, acknowledges Woolf's understanding of colour in relation to space, comparing her with Vanessa Bell, but she disagrees with interpretations of the interludes as impressionistic or without some kind of symbolism: "Hardly objective catalogues of facts, Woolf's descriptions are also filled with similes, metaphors, personifications, and sound repetitions." She proposes a "literary" and metaphoric engagement with colour in Woolf's visually inspired work rather than insisting that it remains at abstract or emotional levels. She also concludes, p.267, that "Woolf is more interested in the perceiver of color, [Vanessa] Bell in its minute variations."

²⁸ Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", *Decolonizing Tradition: New Views of Twentieth-Century "British" Literary Canons*, edited by Karen Lawrence (Urbana, 1992), pp.138, 150 on a very different tack from her earlier mystical interpretation, advocates reading *The Waves* as a "marxist novel that is not realist" in which she views the characters less positively as imperialist ideologues. No longer participants in a Quaker-like democracy, they all "participate in [the] drama of Percival's riding against the spears of the enemy, and they gain a national identity by mythologizing the hero. Reflecting on their common feeling, one may begin to understand the rise of fascism." Although acknowledging (and to an extent building on) the fresh critical ground she has broken in drawing attention to the novel's engagement with imperialism, I differ with Marcus over much of her recent interpretation.

²⁹ Marcus, *ibid.*, p.146.

³⁰ Marcus, *ibid.*, p.137, relates Rhoda's suicide to "Indian widows in sati".

and unwillingness to continue in complicity.³¹ Her silence, likewise may be read as evidence of both complicity and resistance. Rhoda's vision of a "white arm" Marcus interprets as that of "a Britannia in endless surveillance of conquerable lands.... The mighty white arm of empire and civilization."³² I will interpret Rhoda's visions, conversely, as possible sites of dissent. Marcus emphasizes Britannia's origins as a sign of imperial subjugation,³³ but Tickner shows the figure was part of suffrage iconography too.³⁴ In *The Waves*' field of contested iconography and contested subjectivity, however, I suggest that emergent feminist elements remain subordinate and their promise unfulfilled.

14.2 Subjectivity, elegy and eclipse

If not after all a "shrine to Thoby's memory",³⁵ *The Waves* may yet be an elegy. In marking the death of Percival, "heroic man of Empire",³⁶ it may be considered

³¹ Marcus seems to forget her own acknowledgement that *The Waves* is not a realist text: Rhoda's "silence" may be connected to the imperialist silencing of the colonized, something Marcus herself, p.138, also touches on.

³² Marcus, *ibid.*, p.159. Marcus draws on the ideas of Marina Warner in *Monuments and Maidens. The Allegory of the Female Form* (London, 1985), pp.45-49.

³³ Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", p.140; Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, p.49.

³⁴ See, Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women*, p.208: The cover of *Votes For Women*, 13 August, 1915, shows Britannia beneath the legend "A vote! For the Child's Sake"; Tickner describes this as "Militant woman and civic motherhood combined."

³⁵ John Mepham, "Mourning and Modernism", *Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays*, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London, 1983), p.142.

³⁶ Ralph Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel*, p.246. The Grail connotations of Percival's name have been noted: see, Susan Gorsky, "'The Central Shadow': Characterisation in *The Waves*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18, 3 (Autumn 1972) 452-453; Mitchell A. Leaska, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf from Beginning to End* (New York, 1977); Beverly Ann Schlack, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion* (London, 1979), p.126ff.

an elegy on the death of a solar hero (or Absolute Subject).³⁷ Like "The Sun and the Fish" and *To the Lighthouse*, it charts the decline of masculine subjectivity using photological tropes:³⁸ Percival's death³⁹ is reported after the sun has reached its zenith in the solar narrative of the interludes,⁴⁰ and Bernard, in his summing up (after the sun has set in the preceding interlude), likens his sense of self loss to a solar eclipse. In a sense, then, Percival's "mantle passes to Bernard":⁴¹ for if the interlude ends in darkness, Bernard is in the last instance aware of "something rising beneath me like a proud horse", perhaps suggesting that "the day-star ... yet anon repairs his drooping head ..."⁴² Less assuredly, Bernard reports the possible return of the sun: "There is a sense of the break of day. I will not call it dawn." (*W*, p.324) Although tentative, this suggests the resurrection of a masculine solar

³⁷ J.W. Graham describes Percival as "the figure of the perfect vessel" and "the hero of youth, illusion, unconsciousness, and action"; in "MSS Revision and the Heroic Theme of *The Waves*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 29 (1983), p.316. Harvena Richter, "Hunting the Moth: Virginia Woolf and the Creative Imagination", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.23, describes Percival as a lantern to which the other six (moths) are attracted. Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.234, calls him "a comic god of the sun" who "must constantly be destroyed".

³⁸ Jean Guiguet, in *Virginia Woolf and her Works*, translated by Jean Stewart (London, 1965), p.281, actually genders masculine the sun in the interludes of *The Waves*.

³⁹ Beer, "The Body of the People in Virginia Woolf", *Women Reading Women's Writing*, edited by Sue Roe (Brighton, 1987), pp.105, 106 sees Percival as "the principle of death as well as of immediate living", and his death as "the condition of the freedom to explore other kinds of 'I', permeable and transitive."

⁴⁰ Schlack, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion*, p.128: "the sun, whose progress in the interludes ... complements the waxing and waning of Percival's life. He is himself a sun - the others' source of illumination." See also, J.W. Graham, "MSS Revision and the Heroic Theme of *The Waves*", p.316.

⁴¹ Graham, *ibid.*

⁴² Milton, *Lycidas*, lines 168-169, *The Poems of John Milton*, edited by John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York, 1978), p.253.

subject rather than his transformation under the influences of feminism.⁴³ This view may also be confirmed by the imagery of a snake in position of defeat - Louis's "belt fastened by a brass snake" (*W*, p.10) - and of the birds' spiking "*the soft, monstrous body of the defenceless worm*" and "*the sticky mixture*" of slugs (*W*, pp.79-80), suggestive of the traditional mythic victory over the python.⁴⁴

Bernard's description of the sun going out on a solitary, masculine, self, suggests that in losing himself, he also seems to lose the world:

The scene beneath me withered. It was like the eclipse when the sun went out and left the earth, flourishing in full summer foliage, withered, brittle, false. ... The woods had vanished; the earth was a waste of shadow. No sound broke the silence of the wintry landscape. No cock crowed; no smoke rose; no train moved. A man without a self, I said. A heavy body leaning on a gate. A dead man. (*W*, pp.311, 312)

This expression of individual masculine subjective loss, differs from Woolf's description, in "The Sun and the Fish", of a communal sense of loss and the abandonment of individual masculine subjectivity, nevertheless resulting in positive change. Colours (associated with the non-verbal), furthermore, seem to inhibit the radiance of Bernard's self: "'But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red - even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of

⁴³ T.E. Apter, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of Her Novels* (London and Basingstoke, 1979), p.132: "For it is Percival's horse Bernard rides, which is also the rising in him of the fundamental motion of life - the wave - as he confronts death".

⁴⁴ The "*gusts of dead smells*" (*W*, p.80) may suggest "the rotting of the serpent's corpse" of Pythian Delphi. See, Joseph Fontenrose, *Python: A Study of Delphic Myth and its Origins* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959), p.14; and Chapter 8 above. See also, Jean Alexander, *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Port Washington, 1974), p.15.

letting the light through'". (*W*, p.314)⁴⁵ Yet they do not suggest feminist transformation, and the masculine solar subject⁴⁶ seems to survive.⁴⁷

The return of the self seems to accompany that of the light.⁴⁸ Perhaps more emphatically than Woolf's eclipse story, Bernard dwells on a sense of fragility; and the palpableness of light and colour is developed from the fruit simile to the even more animate image of a sponge:

⁴⁵ Kate Flint, "Introduction" to Woolf, *The Waves*, edited by Kate Flint (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.xxxviii, comments: "This demand that we consider subjectivity inherent in all expression, yet that we simultaneously acknowledge that language cannot control, cannot stabilize our sense of selfhood, is crucial to our understanding of *The Waves*." C.J. Mares, "Reading Proust: Woolf and the Painter's Perspective", *Comparative Literature* 41 4 (1989), p.339, on the other hand, ignores the question of subjectivity here, and finds this "Woolf's ultimate expression of [her] vision of landscape as pure form." See also, Heinemann, Jan, "The Revolt against Language: A Critical Note on Twentieth-Century Irrationalism with Special Reference to the Aesthetico-Philosophical Views of Virginia Woolf and Clive Bell", *Orbis Litterarum* 32 (1977), p.221.

⁴⁶ Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, p.142: "As the sun in its equanimity illuminates all of nature, Bernard, too, brings a creative order to the memory of his friends."

⁴⁷ On the other hand, Bernard has been seen to synthesize gender differences. See *W*, p.123: "Nor do I always know if I am man or woman ...". Mary Steussy Shanahan, "The Artist and the Resolution of *The Waves*", *Modern Language Quarterly*, 36 (1975), pp.60-62, 74, argues that "In the androgynous absorption of the identities of all men in all times, Bernard has become, as artist, both preserver and perpetuator of the past." See also, Patrick McGee, "The Politics of Modernist Form; Or, Who Rules *The Waves*?", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38, 3 (Autumn 1992), p.638, on the "ambivalence" of Bernard's gender, and his representation of "the nonidentity of the subject". Pamela J. Transue, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style* (Albany, New York, 1986), pp.133, 141, also discusses the synthesis of the gender dialectic at the novel's close, but points out that "Bernard's androgyny is acceptable; in a female character it would represent an act of rebellion." See also, Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), pp.234-235. My argument detects in the novel dissent from Bernard's imperialist attempts to "sum up" (*W*, p.260) all identities.

⁴⁸ See Torgovnick, "Virginia Woolf, the Vision of *The Waves*, and the Novel's Double Ending", *Closure in the Novel*, p.194.

Miraculously. Frailly. In thin stripes. It hangs like a glass cage. It is a hoop to be fractured by a tiny jar. There is a spark there. Next moment a flush of dun. Then a vapour as if the earth were breathing in and out, once, twice, for the first time. Then under the dullness someone walks with a green light. Then off twists a white wraith. The woods throb blue and green, and gradually the fields drink in red, gold, brown. Suddenly a river snatches a blue light. The earth absorbs colour like a sponge slowly drinking water. It puts on weight; rounds itself; hangs pendent; settles and swings beneath our feet. (*W*, p.313)

The "self" contemplated as absent may be a reviled transcendent, masculine one, against which the colours seem to be pitted.⁴⁹ The colours, as we have seen in the corresponding passage of "The Sun and the Fish", may be read as a positive, materialist, feminist, alternative to this masculine self. Yet here they do not transform this self, but instead remain in obeisance to it: "So the landscape returned to me; so I saw fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me." (*W*, p.313) Bernard apparently contains and orders the colour as he dominates the land. The solar eclipse here reverts to its traditional significance as a ritual testing and reaffirmation of masculine sovereignty.

Masculine solar subjectivity, then, returns to dominate at the close of *The Waves*. If the novel implies criticism of Bernard's position, it does not provide a feminist figure of hope such as Lily Briscoe. Instead it seems reminiscent of the closing scenes in *The Voyage Out* where Terence remains dominant, surviving the death of his fiancée. Inside the elegy on Percival, then, we may find one on Rhoda, whose suicide Bernard reports (*W*, p.307) just prior to the eclipse passage.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Jack F. Stewart, "Spatial Form and Color in *The Waves*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 (1982), p.94, prefers to read this passage mystically, as a tribute to the "nonhuman energy of light", interpreting the colours not in terms of "representational description", but as lyrically orchestrated "epiphenomena of self".

⁵⁰ For comparisons between Rhoda and Rachel Vinrace of *The Voyage Out*, see, Patricia Oudek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia*

To talk of "separate people" in *The Waves*, however, is perhaps to miss the point:⁵¹ "The six characters were supposed to be one. I'm getting old myself ... and I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia."⁵² Woolf puts forward a sense of contested subjectivity, suggesting perhaps the Absolute Subject ("one Virginia") may never fully interpellate the self, which appears a site rather of perpetually conflicting interpellation.⁵³

This is also pertinent to our understanding of the interludes. Some critics have suggested that Bernard emerges at the close of the novel as their author,⁵⁴

Woolf in the English Tradition (Stanford, California, 1991), p.123ff.; Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness. Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1970), p.81; Madeline Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, p.133.

⁵¹ Beer, "The Body of the People in Virginia Woolf", *Women Reading Women's Writing*, edited by Sue Roe (Brighton, 1987), pp.103, 104: "In retrospect we have a strong sense of the individual identities of her people in *The Waves*, even to the point of caricature. Their sinuously overlapping thoughts and images, however, emphasise the easy abrasions and floatings apart which occur in community.... In *The Waves* ... we enter the iridescent play of communal selves."

⁵² Woolf, Letter to G.L. Dickinson, 27 October 1931, *L*, IV, p.397. See also, Susan Gorsky, "'The Central Shadow': Characterisation in *The Waves*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18, 3 (Autumn 1972) p.457ff. More conventionally, critics see Bernard as unifying (and subsuming) all others in his summing up. See, for example, McNichol, *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London and New York, 1990), p.130.

⁵³ See Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)", *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, translated by Ben Brewster (1971), p.172. See also, McGee, "The Politics of Modernist Form; Or, Who Rules *The Waves*?", *Modern Fiction Studies*, p.642: "[Woolf's] literary-linguistic actions in *The Waves* represent ... social identities as ideological constructions which can be articulated as differential forms through the 'non-self-identity' of the signifier, which nevertheless can be recognized as self-identical in a set of social positions that virtually hail or interpellate (in Althusser's sense of the word) social beings which are not simply 'reflected' or exposed as non-identities but called into identity by the process of representation itself."

⁵⁴ Karen Smythe, "Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise", *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 29, 1 (Fall 1992), p.73, proposes that Bernard's

others that each character echoes phrases from them;⁵⁵ but although Bernard does come to dominate, he does not, nor does any other individual speaker, recount everything that occurs in these "prose poems".⁵⁶ We may see these interludes not as "objective" phenomenological accounts of the natural world, but as pastorals⁵⁷ over whose interpretation the various voices vie (including the reader's).⁵⁸ They may tell many stories, identifiable both with individual soliloquies and beyond; they do not merely confirm the bleak vision of Bernard's final dominion. The reader, then, engages in a process of interpreting the interludes both separately and in relation to the soliloquies. I do not propose one set way of reading, accounting for every element, but I hope to suggest a possible reading that may affect our overall understanding of the novel.

As the relationship of sun, shade and colours develops in the interludes, we may discern the sense of an old order chiaroscuro containing, contesting with, and defining itself against an oppositional play of colour. The first interlude, often compared with Genesis, describes dawn bringing division⁵⁹ into a world previously without light: "*The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky.*" (W, p.5) The "*woman couched beneath the horizon ... rais[ing] a lamp*" suggests both woman as enslaved functionary of the

"mind is allegorized in the italicized sections of the text". See also, Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p.168; Warner, *Virginia Woolf: The Waves*, p.96; Gillespie, p.31.

⁵⁵ Lee, p.166; Michael Rosenthal, *Virginia Woolf* (New York, 1979), p.147.

⁵⁶ Joan Bennett, *Virginia Woolf: Her Art as a Novelist* (Cambridge, 1945), p.105.

⁵⁷ Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.236, finds in *The Waves* "a pastoral sensibility".

⁵⁸ Roe, *Writing and Gender: Virginia Woolf's Writing Practice*, p.115.

⁵⁹ See Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel*, p.263.

patriarchal order,⁶⁰ and woman as appropriating the icon of masculine subjectivity (the sun). As we have already acknowledged, the imagery fits with suffrage iconography: for example, the white, green and yellow blades of the sun may perhaps recall the white, green and gold of the Women's Freedom League.⁶¹ "Woolf's sun is no Apollonian figure but a woman," it has been suggested, "no father but a girl";⁶² and the interludes have been identified as a "woman-centred cosmogony" presided over by a goddess,⁶³ but I would propose that although the sun's gender is contested in *The Waves* (as the possible allusions to suffrage iconography allow), the sun remains predominantly masculine.

The colours' subordination to light is perhaps impressionistic, whereas the use of colour to express shadow suggests a post-impressionist abandonment of chiaroscuro: yet the sense of chiaroscuro is retained along with the colour, as in, for example, "a blue finger-print of shadow". (*W*, p.6) The use of simile and metaphor suggests going beyond impressionism to the

⁶⁰ See Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens*, p.35; Goldman, "Metaphor and Place in *To the Lighthouse*: Some Hebridean Connections", *Tea and Leg-Irons: New Feminist Readings from Scotland*, edited by Caroline Gonda (London, 1992), p.142; Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", p.140.

⁶¹ See Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (London, 1987), pp.259-260.

⁶² Gillian Beer, "Introduction", in Woolf, *The Waves*, edited by Gillian Beer (Oxford, 1992), p.xxxi.

⁶³ Judith Lee, "'This Hideous Shaping and Moulding': War and *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, edited by Mark Hussey (Syracuse, New York, 1992), pp.191-192. See also Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), pp.228-229. Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", p.155: "this opening passage as a hymn to Dawn also invokes the Indian text, the *Rig Veda*." Compare, Jack F. Stewart, "Existence and Symbol in *The Waves*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 18, 3 (Autumn 1972), p.445: "This *anima* is the psychic force that welds the flux into unity as the golden circle of the sea surrounds the fiery circle of the sun in an image of nuclear Being ...symboliz[ing] inner wholeness."

visionary and allegoric. "*The birds sang their blank melody outside*" (*W*, p.6), may indicate an existential meaninglessness and absurdity, but on the other hand may provoke the reader to find a hidden message (the melody is perhaps only outwardly blank).

In the interludes, then, colours are contained by an "*uncompromising, undeniable*" sun, which also gives "*to everything its exact measure of colour ...*" (*W*, p.160); and this world of colour, imperially designated by the sun,⁶⁴ is not without shadow:

Behind their conglomeration hung a zone of shadow in which might be a further shape to be disencumbered of shadow or still denser depths of darkness. (*W*, p.162)

There is a cyclical movement of chiaroscuro in the interludes where light "*driving darkness before it*" (*W*, p.180), eventually yields to an all-covering darkness (*W*, p.258-259), only to return us to the beginning of the cycle. Colour, bright as a Fauve painting⁶⁵ at the sun's height, remains subordinate, its feminist potential perhaps signalled but not fulfilled.

14.3 "All my ships are white"

The six characters begin imaginatively to explore their world in ways that might be interpreted in terms of pastoral. For example, Louis, "left standing by the wall among the flowers" makes them vehicles of his imagination (*W*, p.10); and Bernard and Susan frighten themselves with sinister figures (the "lady writing" and "the gardeners sweeping") in their imaginary "Elvedon" (*W*, pp.15-16).

⁶⁴ Indeed it suggests British imperial rule in its orientalist references: see *W*, p.160: "*dark-green jungle trees ... smooth gilt mosque*", and so on.

⁶⁵ See Stuart Hampshire, "Virginia Woolf", *Modern Writers and Other Essays* (London, 1969), p.45.

Rhoda emerges as highly creative in this respect, developing inside an imaginary world of her own ("a short space of freedom"), unable to concentrate and integrate as well as the others. "All my ships are white," she declares as she creates a pastoral world in which she places and manipulates carefully selected objects, inventing a story about a shipwrecked sailor - a piscatory elegy perhaps (*W*, p.17).⁶⁶ These examples of the children at play invite the engagement of the reader, and reflect on our interpretation of the novel as a whole.

Following feminist views, I will focus on Rhoda as a counterpoint to Bernard whose final, dominant expression is considered to suppress hers. The three men all develop openly literary ambitions, and take themselves seriously as writers, authors in the world;⁶⁷ whereas the women function at a different level of self knowledge and social expectation, perhaps experiencing "more fundamentally threatening" crises.⁶⁸ Susan and Jinny are rural and urban versions of women subordinated to the male order.⁶⁹ Rhoda does not fit, yet nor does she fight for her place. Rhoda, we might discern, is not an active or perhaps even conscious feminist: she does not successfully intervene in the material world but more and more retreats from its indifference. Her visions are spaces from which a feminism may arise but they become more and more remote, abstract and enclosed.

⁶⁶ See Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, p.129; and Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", p.229.

⁶⁷ For example Neville, *W*, p.89, thinks it "incredible that I should not be a great poet"; Louis, *W*, p.102, thinks himself "the companion of Plato, of Virgil"; and Bernard, *W*, p.89, begins "to suspect ... that I am among the most gifted of men."

⁶⁸ Transue, *Virginia Woolf and the Politics of Style*, p.132-133.

⁶⁹ See, McNichol *Virginia Woolf and the Poetry of Fiction* (London and New York, 1990), p.131.

14.4 "Purple buttons on her bodice"

The novel describes the common and then segregated education of the two sexes;⁷⁰ and a sense of gender division is already in place from the start (as the Genesis-like first interlude suggests). The women present in the characters' early lives may elliptically gesture towards feminism. The recurrent image of "the lady writing" seen by Bernard and Susan in "Elvedon" (*W*, p.15), for example, has been interpreted as Woolf's model of a feminist writer, the implicit counter-type to Bernard, and the true author of *The Waves*.⁷¹ Given that Bernard's imaginary "Elvedon" may be based on the schoolroom,⁷² we might consider this "lady writing" as Miss Hudson.

⁷⁰ See Jinny's summary, *W*, pp.22-23: "We shall part. You will go to school. You will have masters wearing crosses with white ties. I shall have a mistress in a school on the East Coast who sits under a portrait of Queen Alexandra. This is where I am going, and Susan and Rhoda." See also Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", p.229.

⁷¹ See, Maria DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven, 1980), pp.159-160; Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987), p.180: "In a self reflexive gesture the text figures in *Elvedon* its own project. The woman writing is indeed the narrator of the book, that 'mind thinking' or 'she'... who had initially receded from the text in its final version, and is ultimately the author of the book, Woolf herself." Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", p.140, on the other hand sees "the lady writing" as a "'Britannia' figure and allegory for Bernard" and part of "Woolf's critique of class and empire". See McGee, "The Politics of Modernist Form; Or, Who Rules *The Waves*?", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38, 3 (Autumn 1992), p.633, for response to Marcus. Judith Lee, "'This Hideous Shaping and Moulding': War and *The Waves*", *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth*, edited by Mark Hussey, p.199, argues that Bernard and the woman at *Elvedon* are "aspects of a single consciousness and two phases of imagining. The woman writing at *Elvedon* is, after all, Bernard's own invention." See also, Joseph Allen Boone, "The Meaning of *Elvedon* in *The Waves*: A Key to Bernard's Experience and Woolf's Vision", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 27, 4 (Winter 1981-1982), p.634: "the woman becomes not only Bernard's mother, but the *magna mater* of matriarchal creation myths."

⁷² Shortly after the "Elvedon" passage Rhoda tells us that "Miss Hudson spreads our copy-books on the schoolroom table" (*W*, p.17).

We might also infer from the "purple buttons on her bodice" (*W*, p.19) that Miss Hudson is in sympathy with the suffrage cause.⁷³ The connection seems plausible, given that the period may be dated by the mention of Queen Alexandra's portrait⁷⁴ as some time in the first decade of the century,⁷⁵ the period of high suffrage agitation.

Miss Hudson's purple buttons may be referred to an essay Woolf wrote during the composition of *The Waves*:⁷⁶ "Memories of a Working Women's Guild".⁷⁷ In this careful exploration of her contradictory feelings⁷⁸ in relation to class and the feminist movement,⁷⁹ Woolf, introducing the Guildswomen's letters, seems to make specific reference to the pictorial language of suffrage colours.

This may suggest that Bernard and Susan are also aware of having their work assessed by their teacher while they are at play, and may account for their sinister projections about the lady and gardeners (*W*, p.16).

⁷³ For discussion of suffragist dress code, see Diane Atkinson, "Fashion and politics", *Suffragettes in the Purple, White and Green, London 1906-14*, Museum of London (London, 1992), pp.19-22; see also, *ibid.*, pp.18, 80: item 205, "Votes for Women" buttons, silk satin with silk embroidery, purple, white and green, c.1909.

⁷⁴ See *W*, pp.22, 34.

⁷⁵ See, Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading* (Baltimore, 1975), p.151.

⁷⁶ See Woolf, *D*, III, pp. 304, 307.

⁷⁷ Woolf, "Introductory Letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies", in *Life As We Have Known It*, by Co-Operative Working Women, edited by Margaret Llewelyn Davies (London, 1931), pp.xv-xxxix (reprinted elsewhere as "Memories of a Working Women's Guild"); further reference to this work will appear in abbreviated form in the body of the text as: (*LAW*). Woolf's article was first published in the *Yale Review* (September, 1930) with a number of differences also kept in reprints by Leonard Woolf: see *Virginia Woolf: A Woman's Essays*, Volume 1, edited by Rachel Bowlby (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.133. See also Woolf, *L*, IV, pp.191, 192-193, 201-202.

⁷⁸ S. P. Rosenbaum makes this point in introducing the essay: *A Bloomsbury Group Reader*, edited by S. P. Rosenbaum (Oxford, 1993), p.133.

⁷⁹ See, Flint, "Introduction" to Woolf, *The Waves*, edited by Kate Flint (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.xxxvii.

The Guild was a powerful force for working-class women;⁸⁰ and the essay reflects on a 1913 conference in Newcastle where, in "a public hall hung with banners and loud voices" (*LAW*, p.xxiii), Woolf heard working-class women speakers demand "divorce, education, the vote - all good things ... higher wages and shorter hours" (*LAW*, p.xviii), before focusing on the Guild's head office in Hampstead. Here, Woolf seems playfully to refer to suffrage colours in her description of the typist, Miss Kidd⁸¹ who, "was dressed in a peculiar shade of deep purple The colour seemed somehow symbolical" (*LAW*, p.xxiv).

In 1913, as we have seen, the colour purple was indeed "symbolical", and Woolf's account seems playful acknowledgement of this.⁸² She continues in the same vein when she describes Lilian Harris,⁸³ whose "dress ... was coffee coloured", and directly addresses Margaret Llewelyn Davies:⁸⁴ "you now emerged from an inner room, and if Miss Kidd was in purple and Miss Harris was coffee coloured, you, speaking pictorially (and I dare not speak more explicitly) were kingfisher blue and as arrowy and

⁸⁰ Woolf maintained links with the Women's Co-Operative Guild for many years, and from 1916 ran the Richmond Branch. See *D*, I, p.76.

⁸¹ Harriet A. Kidd was the Guild's office clerk from 1906 until her death in 1917. See *LAW*, p.73.

⁸² The Guild had strong links with the suffrage movement, and participated in the famously colourful suffrage demonstrations: see, Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (London, 1987), pp.9, 74, 84; *LAW*, pp.65, 99. The Guild had a "Rainbow Flag": see Jean Gaffin and David Thoms, *Caring and Sharing: The Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild*, Second Edition (Manchester, 1993), p.iv.

⁸³ Lilian Harris (1866-1949) was Davies's companion, and Assistant Secretary to the Guild until 1921. See, *D*, III, p.23.

⁸⁴ Margaret Llewelyn Davies (1861-1944) was General Secretary of the Women's Co-Operative Guild 1889-1921. See *D*, III, p.23. Woolf, *L*, II, p.76, confesses to Davies, who became a close friend: "I become steadily more feminist ... I wish I could borrow your mind about 3 days a week." See also, Letter to Davies, *L*, II, p.105: "I enjoyed [the 1916 Women's Guild] Congress enormously. I thought yesterday morning was better almost than I had ever heard it. They are really wonderful."

decisive as that quick bird". (*LAW*, pp.xxiv, xxv) Woolf's attention to the colour of the women's clothes and her cryptic parenthetical aside, humorously recalling perhaps the *frisson* of intrigue and danger associated with the early suffrage years, suggest that she may be referring playfully to different shades of feminist colours; and in "speaking pictorially", as well as echoing Simonides, she points to an awareness of this visual feminist language. The allusion to arrows may perhaps refer to the arrow motif on suffrage banners and handkerchieves denoting imprisonment.⁸⁵ Kingfisher blue may suggest Davies's collegiate allegiance:⁸⁶ it is the predominant colour of the Cambridge Alumnae suffrage banner.⁸⁷

Woolf's exploration of the letters that comprise *Life As We Have Known It* concludes: "These pages are only fragments. These voices are beginning only now to emerge from silence into half articulate speech. These lives are still half hidden in profound obscurity." (*LAW*, p.xxxix) These women, it appears, have begun to fulfil Woolf's injunction to "illumine your own soul". (*AROO*, p.135)⁸⁸ She closes with the example of Miss Kidd's

⁸⁵ See also, Diane Atkinson, *Suffragettes in the Purple, White and Green, London 1906-14*, Museum of London (London, 1992), p.79: exhibit no. 200: Hatpin, silver in the shape of a prison convict's arrow, c.1909.

⁸⁶ Davies was a student of Girton College Cambridge 1881-1883; see, Woolf, *D*, I, p.8.

⁸⁷ The banner was "designed by Mary Lowndes and worked by the students of Newnham and Girton" for "the Cambridge contingent in the NUWSS procession of 13 June 1908"; Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914*: illustrations XII a and b, between pp.210-211.

⁸⁸ Anna Davin, "New Introduction", *Life As We Have Known It* (London, 1977), p.ix, suggests that "Certainly letters sent by Guildswomen to ... Davies which Virginia Woolf read during those years moved her to a closer appreciation of their lives, and the value of their organization."

"fragment of a letter", reminding us once more of her symbolical "sombre purple" attire:⁸⁹

'When I was a girl of seventeen,' she writes, 'my then employer ... sent me to his home one night, ostensibly to take a parcel of books, but really with a very different object.... and before he would allow me to leave he forced me to yield to him. At eighteen I was a mother.' Whether that is literature or not literature I do not presume to say, but that it explains much and reveals much is certain. Such then was the burden that rested on that sombre figure as she sat typing your letters ... (LAW, pp.xxxviii-xxxix)

Woolf quotes Kidd's letter as a means of explaining, even decoding, her "sombre purple figure", behind which is revealed a secret history of oppression and rape; and again, we may note an echo of the myth of Procne and Philomela. Miss Kidd's own words break the silence and with reference to them, Woolf translates verbally the pictorial message of her purple attire.⁹⁰

To speak "pictorially" suggests that we may talk silently using pictures, but also that we may voice in words what we see in the silent pictorial realm. Woolf seems to engage in both practices. In the context of a feminist project for working-class women, we have seen Woolf engage in the "symbolical" language of colour as a means of (silently) voicing women's past experience and past suffering. *Life As We Have Known It*, although in some ways a tiresome interruption to Woolf's rather more advanced literary project of *The Waves*,⁹¹ may, then,

⁸⁹ See "A Guild Office Clerk, Contributed by the Editor", LAW, pp.73-80.

⁹⁰ Compare Woolf's fictional description of the Suffrage society worker, Mrs. Seal, N&D, p.78: "Dressed in plum-coloured velveteen, with short, grey hair, and a face that seemed permanently flushed with philanthropic enthusiasm."

⁹¹ See Woolf, D, III, p.304: "With great plodding I have managed to write about the Women's Guild. And I consider setting to work on *The Waves*. I have had over 6 weeks holiday from it. Only again, this morning is ruined because I sit waiting a char, who does not come. And we have Lyn & Sir R. Storrs to tea." This encapsulates the contradictory values critics have found in attempting to

provide a key to feminist readings of the novel. In the sophisticated pictorial language of *The Waves*, I suggest, a similar feminist subtext may lie in the deployment of colour. Like Miss Kidd's purple attire, then, Miss Hudson's purple buttons may also be read symbolically. Perhaps this is the source of the "unhappy, purple waves" earlier sensed by Bernard (*W*, p.15).

This imagery perpetuates in the description of the girls' new teachers. The structuring of the soliloquies invites comparison between male and female experience at school: if Bernard, Louis and Neville turn to Percival, perhaps Rhoda's vision of Miss Lambert may be considered as an alternative to this masculine vision of subjectivity.

"The purple light," said Rhoda, "in Miss Lambert's ring passes to and fro across the black stain on the white page of the Prayer Book. It is a vinous, it is an amorous light. Now that our boxes are unpacked in the dormitories, we sit herded together ..." (*W*, pp.34-35)

Miss Lambert's purple ring illuminates the black and white text with a "vinous" and "amorous" light which seems to counter the implicitly dichotomizing patriarchal inscriptions of the prayer book. It is not the ring that alienates Rhoda but the sitting "under maps of the entire world", the writing "exercises in ink", and the enforced anonymity of "brown serge" (*W*, p.35): images suggestive of education as submissive inscription into empire. The ink and map are linked to the black and white of the prayer book. Against this shines the purple ring. Women are seen here, then, as complicit with imperialist ideology; but there is also an indication of opposition and resistance in the symbolism of the ring. Rhoda's

correlate Woolf's espoused political allegiances, her aesthetic aspirations and her class position: Woolf records the completion of her introductory article on the Guild after which "kindness" (*D*, III, p.307) she is free to return to her Art, at the same time noting her domestic troubles with servants, which threaten to jeopardize her entertainment of an important diplomat and aesthete.

desire to escape these confines is manifest in her search for a kind of Absolute Subject ("a composed, a monumental face") capable of restoring her lost identity; and she locates this in her vision of "a dingle in a wood" (*W*, p.35). Her development of this vision is central to our understanding of a feminist subtext in *The Waves*.⁹²

All is solemn, all is pale where she stands, like a statue in a grove. She lets her tasselled silken cloak slip down, and only her purple ring still glows, her vinous, her amethystine ring. (*W*, p.48)

Miss Lambert possesses transformative powers: "things are changed under her eyes" (*W*, p.47), and she becomes incorporated into the grove vision. The ambiguous syntax makes it unclear where her purple ring glows - in the imaginary grove or in the "private garden" to which Rhoda sees Miss Lambert admit a clergyman (*W*, p.47) - and it becomes a way from one world into another.⁹³ Rhoda may be positioning Miss Lambert as her role model or Absolute Subject; but the idea of somehow replacing a patriarchal supreme subject with a female version is challenged by Miss Lambert herself.

Rhoda imagines becoming the ultimate female imperial subject, a counterpart to Percival (a position perhaps later occupied by the more earthy feminine figure of Susan):⁹⁴

⁹² Purple again seems to stand for an alternative to patriarchal inscription where Jinny later notes "When I read, a purple rim runs round the black edge of the textbook. Yet I cannot follow any word through its changes." (*W*, p.44) Jinny seems to develop an alternative bodily language. See also Susan, *W*, p.143: "I shall be sullen, storm-tinted and all one purple."

⁹³ Compare the draft version, in Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, edited by J.W. Graham (London, 1976), Draft II, p.447: "Only her purple ring glows on her white finger." The final version dwells even more on the purple ring.

⁹⁴ J.W. Graham, "MSS Revision and the Heroic Theme of *The Waves*", p.314, suggests that Percival "seems to have been born into a state often signified in stories of the hero by his cohabitation with the Queen Goddess of the World Woolf chose ... to invoke the Queen Goddess through her treatment of Susan, a *magna mater*, if ever there

as I bend my head down over the basin, I will let the Russian Empress's veil flow about my shoulders. The diamonds of the Imperial crown blaze on my forehead. I hear the roar of the hostile mob as I step out on to the balcony.... I am waving my fist at an infuriated mob. 'I am your Empress, people.' My attitude is one of defiance. I am fearless. I conquer. (*W*, pp.59-60)

In this fantasy, suggestive of Empress Alexandra at the storming of the Winter Palace,⁹⁵ Rhoda's classroom sense of alienation is reversed: she assumes a guise of absolute sovereignty and designates the crowd or mob as faceless. That this is an unsatisfactory solution to Rhoda's lack of self assurance becomes clear with the intervention of Miss Lambert: "But this is a thin dream. This is a papery tree. Miss Lambert blows it down." (*W*, p.60) Rhoda's rejection of the "Empress dream" seems to contradict Marcus's understanding of her grove vision as consistently imperialist. Miss Lambert and her purple ring are at the heart of Rhoda's grove at this point. Miss Lambert is the wind that blows down the tree perhaps as a co-sign of patriarchal subjectivity. Rhoda's vision of an alternative identity, then, evolves around images of Miss Lambert's opposition to imperialist subjectivity.

14.5 "Nymph of the fountain"

After rejecting the Empress dream Rhoda turns to Shelley and her speech begins to echo his poem, "The Question":⁹⁶

Here is a poem about a hedge. I will wander down it and pick flowers, green cowbind and the moonlight-coloured May, wild roses and ivy serpentine. I will clasp them in my hands and lay them on the desk's shiny surface.... I

was one, and through telling us several times that Percival loves her".

⁹⁵ See Flint's note, *The Waves*, edited by Kate Flint (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.230.

⁹⁶ See, Beverly Ann Schlack, *Continuing Presences: Virginia Woolf's Use of Literary Allusion* (London, 1979), pp.105, 178.

will bind flowers in one garland and clasp them and present them - Oh! to whom? (*W*, p.60)

Shelley's poem, recounting a dream about wandering to "a bank of turf ... under a copse", may inform Rhoda's new grove vision with an alternative to the model of imperial sovereignty.⁹⁷ The gift of moonlight flowers of "mingled" and "opposed" hues,⁹⁸ may be taken in contrast to the solar imagery associated with Percival, emblem of masculine subjectivity. If Shelley's speaker is unsure as to whom the flowers are to be given, Rhoda says she will "lay them on the desk's shiny surface", perhaps intending them for her teacher Miss Lambert. Rhoda does not specify Shelley's "flag-flowers, purple pranked with white" and "reeds of such deep green",⁹⁹ but their coincidental suffrage significance may fit with the idea of a hidden feminist potential in colours associated with Miss Lambert. Perhaps the elusiveness of such connections reflects Woolf's own sense of the "under ground" workings of her imagery and symbols: this feminist reading is not worked out, but it does seem suggested.

But other poems by Shelley come to mind as Rhoda continues.

Oh, this pain, this anguish! I faint, I fail. Now my body thaws; I am incandescent. Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilising, opening the shut, forcing the tight-folded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that now flows through me, from my warm, my porous body? I will gather my flowers and present them - Oh! to whom? (*W*, p.61)

⁹⁷ Shelley, Percy Bysshe, "The Question" (1820), lines 9-40, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, edited by Thomas Hutchinson (London, 1927), pp.608-609.

⁹⁸ Shelley, *ibid.*, lines 35, 36.

⁹⁹ Shelley, *ibid.*, lines 18, 23.

"I faint, I fail" echoes a line from "The Indian Serenade" ("I die! I faint! I fail!");¹⁰⁰ but Rhoda's references to the flowing and flooding stream that "pours in a deep tide" echoes the imagery of "Arethusa".¹⁰¹ Arethusa was an attendant nymph to Artemis/Diana, who to rescue her from the amorous river god Alpheus, transformed Arethusa into a fountain that eventually emerged (after going underground to the sea) at Orytygia.¹⁰² Alpheus, as Shelley's poem recounts,¹⁰³ in pursuing Arethusa through the ocean tries to mingle his waters with hers.¹⁰⁴

Woolf's allusions to this myth feed into the elegiac aspects of *The Waves* since both Arethusa and Alpheus are invoked in *Lycidas*.¹⁰⁵ For Bernard, Rhoda is "the nymph

¹⁰⁰ Shelley, "The Indian Serenade" (1819), line 17, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p.575; see also, Schlack, *Continuing Presences*, p.105; Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", p.137.

¹⁰¹ Shelley, "Arethusa" (1820), *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, pp.605-606; see Schlack, *Continuing Presences*, p.124.

¹⁰² See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V. 572 ff., translated by Frank Justus Miller, Loeb Classical Library (London, 1926), pp.279-283.

¹⁰³ Shelley, "Arethusa", lines 37-54, *The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, p.605:

'Oh, save me! Oh, guide me!
 And bid the deep hide me,
 for he grasps me now by the hair!'
 The loud Ocean heard,
 To its blue depth stirred,
 And divided at her prayer;
 And under the water
 The Earth's white daughter
 Fled like a sunny beam;
 Behind her descended
 Her billows, unblended
 With the brackish Dorian stream:-
 Like a gloomy stain
 On the emerald main
 Alpheus rushed behind,-
 As an eagle pursuing
 A dove to its ruin
 Down the streams of the cloudy wind.

¹⁰⁴ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, p.283; Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, V. 7. 2, translated by W.H.S. Jones (London, 1918), vol. 2, p.415.

¹⁰⁵ See Milton, *Lycidas*, lines, 85, 132-3, *The Poems of John Milton*, edited by John Carey and Alastair Fowler (London and New York,

of the fountain" (*W*, pp.126, 283), but Rhoda herself frequently signals identification with Arethusa. Her closing words to the first soliloquies seem to fit with Arethusa's oceanic experiences:

Let me pull myself out of these waters. But they heap themselves on me; they sweep me between their great shoulders; I am turned; I am tumbled; I am stretched, among these long lights, these long waves, these endless paths, with people pursuing, pursuing. (*W*, p.28)

Rhoda's sense of alienation from social convention does not diminish with the passing of childhood: Susan, in contemplating for herself a future of rural motherhood, notes "Rhoda's strange communications when she looks past, over our shoulders" (*W*, p.106). Rhoda, then, looks beyond Susan's conventional understanding of herself as part of a natural cycle, and beyond Jinny's urban version of feminine subordination to a male hegemony.¹⁰⁶ Rhoda resists and evades interpellation into these two

1978), pp.246, 249: "O fountain Arethuse" introduces the passage culminating in the reference to the "perfidious bark/ Built in the eclipse" (lines 100-101) and restores the pastoral tone broken by the words of Phoebus; and "Return Alpheus, the dread voice is past,/ That shrunk thy streams" introduces the famous flower passage (lines 142-150) and similarly restores the pastoral. Cleanth Brooks and J.E. Hardy, *Poems of Mr John Milton* (London, 1957), p.182 (quoted Carey and Fowler, p.249) comment that "The dread voice has been endowed with something of the effect of blazing light - a hot sun inimical to the cool shadows of mythology and the flowers of pastoral poetry." See also, *A Variorum Commentary on The Poems of John Milton*, edited by A.S.P. Woodhouse and D. Bush (London, 1972), pp.666-667, 706-707.

¹⁰⁶ See *W*, p.105, 106: Susan declares "I am the seasons". Placing herself as part of the landscape and natural resources, she imagines joining a rural hierarchy topped by her future husband and blessed by the "hot midday" sun; although above servants and workers in the social order, she is still subordinate and "silent in a blue apron locking up the cupboards." Jinny, more interested in sexual prowess than marriage, finds herself in an urban social order where nevertheless she considers herself in terms of natural imagery: she is a "native Among the lustrous green, pink, pearl-grey women stand upright the bodies of men. They are black and white; they are grooved beneath their clothes with deep rills." (*W*, p.110) This nocturnal aquarium-like world, is one of "risk" and "adventure" (*W*, p.113), where women vie with each other to attract men's favours.

alternative feminine roles presented by her peers, and finds respite in visiting "furtively the treasures I have laid apart":

Pools lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns. The swallow dips her wing in dark pools. But here the door opens and people come towards me.... I must take his hand; I must answer. But what answer shall I give? I am thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body, to receive shafts of his indifference and his scorn, I who long for marble columns and pools on the other side of the world where the swallow dips her wings. (*W*, p.113)

Again we are reminded of Procne and Philomela: Rhoda's grove is now a haven from the sexual advances of men, and appropriately enough has a pool "where the swallow dips her wings".¹⁰⁷ The moon, sign of Artemis/Diana, along with Arethusa's connections with this virgin goddess, may encourage us to interpret Rhoda's grove as approximating Diana's sacred grove. It is only in imagining such a place that Rhoda feels stable and unified: outside in the social world she feels a failure.

Susan and Jinny may be seen as successfully interpellated socialized subjects, whereas Rhoda finds herself "broken into separate pieces" by their world (*W*, p.115), the world of men. Rhoda's sense of unity, available through havens of artistic invention - "Alone, I rock my basins" (*W*, p.115) - seems connected to a sense of remaining inviolate. Her closing vision, before the fourth interlude, appropriately, then, comes by the "sudden effulgence of moon":

¹⁰⁷ See *W*, p.192, where Jinny is linked to Philomela: "Jug, jug, jug, I sing like the nightingale whose melody is crowded into the too narrow passage of her throat." Compare the draft version, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, Draft II, p.599: "Jug jug jug I cry. And I feel the blood boiling in my throat." McLaurin, pp.134-135, suggests "Eliot's sexual disgust is here implicitly criticised"; but Schlack, *Continuing Presences*, p.117, argues that "If she sees herself as singing like the nightingale, she sees herself as wronged innocence raped by a violently lustful world."

I also see the railings of the square, and two people without faces, leaning like statues against the sky. There is, then, a world immune from change. When I have passed through this drawing-room flickering with tongues that cut me like knives, making me stammer, making me lie, I find faces rid of features, robed in beauty. The lovers crouch under the plane tree. The policeman stands sentinel at the corner. A man passes. There is, then, a world immune from change. (*W*, p.115)

Rhoda's vision may suggest a cold pastoral, an unchanging and timeless classical world, beyond the world of people and language, and perhaps stands for the realm of art, cordoned off from life, as well as for virginity. But as a place "where I can display my assortment of curious treasures", it seems to change every time Rhoda recalls it: this world immune from outside change, is one she may yet manipulate. In this particular vision the lovers' sexuality is not specified, and the policeman's role is also ambiguous: is he guarding the lovers, or are they hiding from him and the passing man? Perhaps, then, this world without faces may be free of conventional gender codes. It is the place from which Rhoda may draw (and reject) a sense of self, as we have seen, yet so far she has not found one to sustain her in the social, and verbal, world:

But I am not composed enough.... I am to be broken. I am to be derided all my life. I am to be cast up and down among these men and women, with their twitching faces, with their lying tongues, like a cork on a rough sea. Like a ribbon of weed I am flung far every time the door opens. I am the foam that sweeps and fills the uttermost rims of the rocks with whiteness; I am also a girl, here in this room. (*W*, pp.115-116)

Rhoda figures her sense of violation and dispersal as flotsam and jetsam in the social tide, and ultimately as white foam; imagery appropriate to her identification with Arethusa. Her connection to whiteness in this context, furthermore, supplies an interesting

interpretation of her vision of facelessness:¹⁰⁸ Alpheus, it transpires, pursued not only Arethusa but Diana herself who, on reaching Ortygia, avoided capture by daubing her face and the faces of her nymphs with white mud, so that Alpheus could not pick her out from the group.¹⁰⁹ In connection with this myth, Robert Graves reminds us, "Artemis's most famous statue at Athens was called 'White-browed'",¹¹⁰ an epithet we might also apply to Rhoda. Rhoda's imaginary attempt to escape the world to which Susan and Jinny have readily submitted, then, is informed by these myths, suggesting a desire to avoid the sexual advances of men, and to find refuge in the anonymous companionship of women.

Rhoda's concluding sentence shows that she is thinking "poetically and prosaically" at the same time: as well as not losing sight of fiction - "I am the foam..." - she keeps in touch with historical fact - "I am also a girl, here in this room." The white foam, then, reminds us of Woolf's vision of woman as "a vessel in which all sorts of spirits and forces are coursing and flashing perpetually" (*AROO*, pp.66-67), of Arethusa's fountain-waters mingling with the ocean, and of Diana's refuge among her nymphs.¹¹¹ As well as signalling oppression, these images may also be taken as sources of creative strength and resistance.

¹⁰⁸ See Richter, "Hunting the Moth: Virginia Woolf and the Creative Imagination", *Virginia Woolf: Revaluation and Continuity*, edited by Ralph Freedman (Berkeley, 1980), p.23: "The reader sees her always from the back (gazing towards the other side of the world.)"

¹⁰⁹ See Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, VI .22. 7-10, vol. 3, p.141; Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1962), vol. 1, p.84. Graves, vol. 1, pp.85-86, speculates that this myth "may have been invented to account for the gypsum, or white clay, with which the priestesses of Artemis Alpheia at Letrini and Ortygia daubed their faces in honour of the White Goddess."

¹¹⁰ Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, 1962), vol. 1, p.86.

¹¹¹ It may also suggest "foam-born" Venus/Aphrodite: see *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (Oxford, 1949), p.67; Graves, vol. 1, p.39.

14.6 White arm and purple flame

At the dinner party in honour of Percival, Rhoda's alternative vision of anonymous communal¹¹² subjectivity is countered by the central solar hero, but she endures her friends' cruelty because "there is always some name, some face, which sheds a radiance, which lights her pavements and makes it possible for her to replenish her dreams." (*W*, p.130) Rhoda's visions are socially generated not produced in a vacuum. She refers to an image of feminine retreat from voraciousness: "The tiger leapt, and the swallow dipped her wings in dark pools on the other side of the world" (*W*, p.137); and this may be the social mechanism by which she replenishes her dreams. The tiger may not be tied to one specific interpretation, but it seems to stand for Rhoda's perpetual sense of social panic and oppression: "if I fall under the shock of the leap of the moment you will be on me, tearing me to pieces." (*W*, p.141) The leap of the tiger in one world forces the appearance of a swallow in another.

Rhoda's imagery suggests the Dionysian myths of Actaeon and Orpheus, and she positions herself as a hero torn to pieces by hounds or bacchantes, but then seems to shift between the former and the latter:

Because you have an end in view - one person, is it, to sit beside, an idea is it, your beauty is it? I do not know - your days and hours pass like the boughs of forest trees and the smooth green of forest rides to a hound running on the scent. But there is no single scent, no single body for me to follow. And I have no face. I am like the foam that races over the beach or the moonlight that falls arrowlike here on a tin can, here on a spike of the mailed sea holly, or a bone or a half-eaten boat. I am whirled down caverns, and flap like paper against

¹¹² See Moore, "Nature and Community: A Study of Cyclical Reality in *The Waves*", pp.232-234, on Rhoda's and Louis's "need for real community".

endless corridors, and must press my hand against the wall to draw myself back. (*W*, p.143)

The arrow-like moonlight (suggestive of Diana's hunting skills), the declared facelessness, and the dispersing foam, again point to Rhoda's identification with Artemesian cults.¹¹³ This vision does not focus on an individual solar hero but on the tactical dispersal of identity. Rhoda admits to needing her friends' company to stay this process of dispersal, but also to give her a sense of anonymous communality. The solar hero is not a direct source of illumination to Rhoda, but she is warmed by the incidental "general blaze" (*W*, p.142) from those who gather round him. At its height, she sees this in terms of "queer ambiguous tints" (*W*, p.146), which are not vibrant but on the point of decadence; the beautiful fruit of light has a bloom of decay about it. Jinny too describes musty "Membranes, webs of nerves that lay white and limp" (*W*, p.146), veiling the dinner-table discourse from the material world beyond. Louis notes "The roar of London ... is round us" (*W*, p.146), and Neville, that "We sit here, surrounded, lit up, many coloured; all things - hands, curtains, knives and forks, other people, dining - run into each other. We are walled in here. But India lies outside." (*W*, p.147) The diners, then, inhabit a luminous, yet slightly dingy, imperialist halo, outside which lies the subject nation, India, for which their solar hero is destined. From this dank cocoon Bernard projects his vision of Percival as imperial overlord "applying the standards of the West" (*W*, p.147).¹¹⁴

In Rhoda's parodic counter to Bernard's eulogy, Percival appears an ominous figure: first he is "a stone" round which his friends "swarm" like "minnows", drawing a

¹¹³ Compare Richter, "Hunting the Moth: Virginia Woolf and the Creative Imagination", p.23, who relates Rhoda's visions of water and moonlight to Isis.

¹¹⁴ See Marcus, "Britannia Rules *The Waves*", p.144.

sinister, militaristic, and reified, comfort from his presence: "Gold runs in our blood. One, two; one two; the heart beats in serenity, in confidence, in some trance of well-being, in some rapture of benignity" (*W*, p.148). Then Rhoda describes him as a source of light, creating dominion over a dark world: "remote provinces are fetched up out of darkness";¹¹⁵ and finally, Woolf's slippery syntax allows, as a vulture:

that feeds on some bloated carcass ... within our scope, part of our proud and splendid province, since Percival, riding alone on a flea-bitten mare, advances down a solitary path, has his camp pitched among desolate trees, and sits alone, looking at the enormous mountains. (*W*, p.148)

The "bloated carcass" echoes the shape of the previously "shrivelled" world that "rounds itself" into view (*W*, p.148). This world as Percival's (and vicariously, his friends') carrion, filling out below him (and them), seems a putrescent version of the earth rejuvenated by colour in "The Sun and the Fish", and anticipates Bernard's eclipse simile.

Rhoda offers an alternative vision to this, when Neville, seeing her look "far over our heads, beyond India", asks her to speak.

There ... I see a shape, white, but not of stone, moving, perhaps alive. But it is not you; not Percival, Susan, Jinny, Neville or Louis. When the white arm rests upon the knee it is a triangle; now it is upright - a column; now a fountain, falling. It makes no sign, it does not beckon, it does not see us. Behind it roars the sea. It is beyond our reach. Yet there I venture.... (*W*, pp.150-151)

Rhoda's grove, no longer graced with a purple glow but dominated by an anonymous and fluctuating white figure, may still resemble the Ortygian grove of Artemis/Diana.

¹¹⁵ McGee, "The Politics of Modernist Form; Or, Who Rules *The Waves?*", *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38, 3 (Autumn 1992), p.645.

Rhoda's insistence that she sees the grove always beyond the figures of her friends ("between your shoulders, over your heads"), suggests they somehow cause it,¹¹⁶ but we may wonder whether she ventures there to confirm or escape their patriarchal values: "these pilgrimages, these moments of departure, start always in your presence, from this table, these lights, from Percival and Susan, here and now. Always I see the grove over your heads" (*W*, p.151). Perhaps this is a space of both resistance and refuge, itself marked out by the patriarchy photologically identified with Percival and Susan.

Artemesian connections and Dionysian imagery again appear in the parenthetical conspiracy between Rhoda and Louis "forebod[ing] decay". The "dance of savages", "stags blar[ing] in the thicket", and the "bleeding limbs ... torn from the living body." (*W*, p.152) seem to augur the death of the solar hero (as the sun's zenith is reached in the interludes);¹¹⁷ and we might see Rhoda's oppositional grove vision (Actaeon's offence was against Diana, we recall) as part of the cycle by which the solar subject will eventually be renewed. Yet Rhoda and Louis in predicting his death almost seem to plot it:

The shadow slants. We who are conspirators, withdrawn together to lean over some cold urn, note how the purple flame flows downwards. (*W*, p.152)

The Roman flavour to this suggests the purple flame as a classical symbol of imperial power, and its downward slant an ill omen for the ruler; but it may also connect with the purple glow Miss Lambert brings to Rhoda's grove.

¹¹⁶ See, Moore, *The Short Season Between Two Silences*, p.135.

¹¹⁷ J.W. Graham, "MSS Revision and the Heroic Theme of *The Waves*", p.316: "Percival must die the natural death of the body, which occurs immediately after an extended allusion to Dionysus and an interlude when the sun is at its zenith and can only decline".

14.7 Violets, squares and oblongs

When Percival dies, Rhoda's grove, in keeping with this sense of interrelation, appears to have changed too:

Now the shadow has fallen and the purple light slants downwards. The figure that was robed in beauty is now clothed in ruin.... as I told them when they said they loved his voice on the stair, and his old shoes and moments of being together. (*W*, p.172)

This is a puzzling passage. Rhoda has previously asserted that the white figure is not Percival (or anyone else), but are we now to see it as him? "His voice" refers to Percival but does it refer to the figure?¹¹⁸ Do the fallen shadow and purple light symbolically reflect or somehow cause the figure's ruin? According to the text, Rhoda has told only Louis about the shadow and purple light, now she talks as if her statement were more public. But we might detect antipathy in her admonitory tone, for she does not align herself with those who "loved his voice".

Percival represents the material basis of Rhoda's visionary existence, and her response to his death seems painful acknowledgement of a material world now bereft of his presence: "All palpable forms of life have failed me", and she searches for "something hard" so that she shall not "be blown down the eternal corridors for ever" (*W*, p.172). Her shopping trip shows Rhoda's privileged social position. Percival, it appears, has given her the hostile mercantile world of Oxford Street: "Look now at what Percival has given me" (*W*, p.172). And his death has deprived her of a protector for, in keeping with the

¹¹⁸ Schlack, *Continuing Presences*, p.115, commenting on the figure, suggests: "For Rhoda the dead Percival is the lost phantom lover".

elegiac imagery she cites - "oaks cracked asunder"¹¹⁹ - the haven of his umbra is gone: there is "no one to save me" (*W*, p.173). Her shopping trip reveals the class divisions of the world left by Percival and reminds us of the material wealth underpinning Rhoda's position: her "intellectual freedom depends upon material things". (*AROO*, pp.162-163) She buys luxuries from shopgirls she seems to despise and expresses a loathing for the urban masses.¹²⁰ Yet Rhoda's purchases connect her to the very people she calls "coarse, greedy, casual" and whose "dirty fingers" make "our love impure" (*W*, p.173).

Rhoda's attitude to the material world she sees as Percival's legacy seems rather ambivalent: "Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror, has left me to undergo this humiliation" (*W*, p.173). Is the world reduced to "grossly material things" because it is bereft of Percival's powers of transcendence, or without him is Rhoda seeing for the first time less glamorously the capitalist economy he actually helped to construct? This ambiguity is also felt in Rhoda's bitter retort: "This is my tribute to Percival; withered violets, blackened violets." (*W*, p.174)

Rhoda's visit to a concert supplies a moment of (literally lyric) consolation when a "sea-green woman comes to our rescue" with "the note, 'Ah!'" (*W*, p.176). We may be tempted to interpret this as a possible moment of feminist consolation and transformation. But the imagery of containment and overripeness echoes that of

¹¹⁹ See also, *W*, p.177.

¹²⁰ See *W*, p.173: "Here is the shop where they sell stockings.... Pain is suspended as a girl silently slides open a drawer. And then, she speaks; her voice wakes me. I shoot to the bottom among the weeds and see envy, jealousy, hatred and spite scuttle like crabs over the sand as she speaks. These are our companions. I will pay my bill and take my parcel."

the preceding interlude where the sun strikes and seems to melt and marshal colour: just as the "*plums swelled out their leaves*" (*W*, p.162), so the woman is "swollen but contained in slippery satin" (*W*, p.176). These colours remain part of the solar cycle; they do not overcome or transform it.

Rhoda's grove-vision, now more abstract, seems to lose its purple glow and white figure.

'Like' and 'like' and 'like' - but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? ... There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside.... This is our triumph; this our consolation. (*W*, p.177)

Rhoda's consoling oblongs and squares might be taken as acknowledgement of significant form,¹²¹ but they may also resemble Woolf's "background rods";¹²² the musicians somehow expose a universal structure embracing humanity as without hierarchy or difference ("not so various or so mean"). Percival's death has revealed this as "our triumph", which seems to come from a sense of facing mortality and perhaps understanding death as a great leveller, and the tone recalls Woolf's diary entry after the eclipse.¹²³

¹²¹ Stewart, "Spatial Form and Color in *The Waves*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 (1982), p.93, understands Rhoda's "constructive image" to express "the awkwardness of her effort at integration."

¹²² See *MB*, pp.72-73. Jean Alexander, *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Port Washington, 1974), p.161, notes that in *The Waves* "we find geometric figures with traditionally religious or occult significance counterposed to images of nature." She refers to esoteric and cabalistic symbols in the work of Sir Thomas Browne, Carl Jung, and W.B. Yeats.

¹²³ Woolf, *D*, III, pp.144: "We had seen the world dead. This was within the power of nature. Our greatness had been apparent too". Compare also with Woolf's comments in "Stonehenge", *PA*, pp.199-200 (discussed above, Chapter 3).

This vision becomes for Rhoda her "end" (*W*, p.177), and in setting out on her pilgrimage to Greenwich she no longer exudes misanthropy:

As we lurch down Regent Street, and I am flung upon this woman, upon this man, I am not injured, I am not outraged by the collision. A square stands upon an oblong. (*W*, p.177)

The acceptance of life as it is, "mean streets" and all, as a universal "dwelling-place" (*W*, p.177) is seen alongside a more historically specific description of the economy in Regent Street. Rhoda seems to yield to Percival's world, where previously she has sought escape. Perhaps we might interpret this as a yielding to the religion of significant form. But James Naremore detects "an extremely bitter irony" and "almost a sneer" in Rhoda's acknowledgement of the dwelling-place of squares and oblongs, and this reading seems confirmed by her "withered violets".¹²⁴ In her moment of apparent consolation and reconciliation to such an order, however, emerges a potentially feminist sense of release, as she watches a ship on the river:

A woman walks on deck, with a dog barking round her. Her skirts are blown; her hair is blown; they are going out to sea Now I will relinquish; now I will let loose.... We will gallop together over desert hills where the swallow dips her wings in dark pools and the pillars stand entire. Into the wave that dashes upon the shore, into the wave that flings its white foam to the uttermost corners of the earth, I throw my violets to Percival. (*W*, p.178)

¹²⁴ James Naremore, *The World Without a Self: Virginia Woolf and the Novel* (New Haven, 1973), p.183. T.E. Apter, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of Her Novels* (London and Basingstoke, 1979), p.127, seems to confirm this when she notes that Rhoda's "vision of humanity as grotesque and greedy is replaced by this vision of a sparse rigid world; it is the world of abstract figures which terrified her at school, which refused to provide her with an answer." See also, Alexander, *The Venture of Form in the Novels of Virginia Woolf*, p.170: "The acceptance of the square/oblong superimposition is an acceptance of alienation and, especially for Rhoda, betrayal of the self."

The woman seems connected to Rhoda's sense of release; we might wonder where the ship is going - perhaps India, perhaps not - and whether Rhoda refers to the woman or to Percival when she says "we will gallop together".

Although in an earlier draft Rhoda refers to "when I am thundering with Percival on the edge of the world",¹²⁵ the final version does not specify such a union, but maintains a sense of ambiguity and, as we have seen, tends to dramatize Rhoda's otherworldly visions as generated in opposition to what Percival seems to represent for her peers. We might see two journeys imagined here: one to India, and one to "where the swallow dips her wings". When Rhoda throws the violets to Percival she throws them into the white foam we have come to identify with her Arethusa persona; but the wave itself seems to suggest the far reaching bounds of the empire, the sea through which Arethusa is pursued by the river god (the Thames may suggest Alpheus's presence). This conjunction of elements may offer a model of Rhoda's position within the imperial economy: just as the white foam is its product and is pushed around by its tides, so Rhoda is bound up in a system which, although she may despise it, controls and disperses her. Rhoda's throwing of violets into the white foam seems a poignant moment of capitulation, and like a bruise rising we may see the momentary coincidence of potentially feminist colours; but as Rhoda's subsequent life and suicide suggest, she seems to abandon the emblem to the overwhelming wave.

¹²⁵ Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, edited by J.W. Graham (London, 1976), Draft II, p.642.

14.8 White spaces, cliffs and green light

Certainly when next we encounter Rhoda she speaks in defeat and contempt: "Oh, life, how I have dreaded you ... oh, human beings, how I have hated you!" (*W*, p.222) Her lofty contempt for the masses seems to return her to the Empress dream; and she conflates the mob with her peer group in recounting the tide of conformism overpowering her:

How you chained me to the spot How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the waste-paper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life. (*W*, pp.221-222)

But if Rhoda accuses the world, bereft of bright oppositional colours ("All were dressed in indeterminate shades of grey and brown, never even a blue feather pinned to a hat"), of defiling her visionary "white spaces",¹²⁶ she also acknowledges her own complicity:

But I yielded. Sneers and yawns were covered with my hand. I did not go out into the street and break a bottle in the gutter as a sign of rage. Trembling with ardour, I pretended that I was not surprised. What you did, I did. If Susan and Jinny pulled up their stockings like that, I pulled mine up like that also. (*W*, p.222)

In the context of conforming to the whims of Susan's and Jinny's dress code, and hiding behind "shade after shade" (*W*, p.222), Rhoda's failure to participate in violent acts of dissent may be understood more specifically as a failure to join women in political action against their traditional lot.¹²⁷ "I yielded" also suggests giving into

¹²⁶ Garrett Stewart, "Catching the Stylistic D/rift: Sound Defects in Woolf's *The Waves*", *English Literary History*, 54 (1987), p.429, commenting on this passage, suggests: "She lives for, and in, the interstices of duration imagined as the white blank of a text."

¹²⁷ Compare the draft version, in Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, Draft II, p.626: "It would have been better to stand alone in a room sobbing. Or to have smashed a glass like Jinny in a rage." Here Rhoda wishes she had copied the actions of

sexual advances, and when Rhoda mentions "I left Louis; I feared embraces", we may again be reminded of Arethusa's flight from Alpheus.¹²⁸ Rhoda then makes more explicit her acceptance of the status quo and her air of capitulation at Greenwich:

Then in some Hall I parted the boughs of music and saw the house we have made; the square stood upon the oblong. 'The house which contains all' (W, p.223)

But in opposition to this, Rhoda's journey up the hill (on a mule-back she imagines as her bed) to "see Africa" seems her final pilgrimage, one steeped in a possibly feminist mythology:

The good woman with a face like a white horse at the end of the bed makes a valedictory movement and turns to go. Who then comes with me? Flowers only, the cowbind and the moonlight-coloured May. Gathering them loosely in a sheaf I made of them a garland and gave them - Oh, to whom? We launch out now over the precipice.... The cliffs vanish. Rippling small, rippling grey, innumerable waves spread beneath us. I touch nothing. I see nothing. We may sink and settle on the waves. The sea will drum in my ears. The white petals will be darkened with sea water.... Rolling me over the waves will shoulder me under. Everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me. (W, p.225)

We may see the "woman with a face like a white horse" as some sort of Artemis figure;¹²⁹ but since she seems to leave Rhoda she may not be included in the "we" who "launch out now over the precipice". This action suggests the myth of Arethusa - particularly Rhoda's

her peers, but in the final version Woolf makes the bottle breaking an act of non-conformity.

¹²⁸ Schlack, in *Continuing Presences*, p.116, also notes "myths of pursuit and seduction" in connection with Jinny.

¹²⁹ Compare the draft version, in Woolf, *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, Draft II, pp.626, 627: "Now I call to that curious spirit who trails her hand along hedges & picks flowers who meets my eye sometimes in drawing rooms ... The statuesque woman with a good face like a white horse at the end of the bed makes ... valedictory movement ... She gave me flowers & laid them on my desk; green ... cowbind & the moonlight colour'd May, And, bending them loosely in a sheaf, I gave them - to whom?"

description of finding herself dissolving into water¹³⁰ - but it may also suggest Sappho's legendary "Leucadian Leap" or "lovers' leap" (from a white rock).¹³¹ Rhoda's imaginary leap, then, suggests both flight from unwanted advances in its links with Arethusa, and a suicidal jump due to unrequited love if connected to Sappho. Rhoda's binding of violets may also connect her to Sappho whose epithet was "violet-weaving";¹³² likewise Neville's description of Rhoda as "fl[y]ing] with her neck outstretched and blind fanatic eyes, past us" (*W*, p.215) may suggest Sappho's legendary mid-air transformation into a swan;¹³³ and Rhoda's white spaces and fragmentary visions may suggest the famous lacunae and fragmentary nature of Sappho's surviving oeuvre. Perhaps Rhoda, Sappho-like, represents a half lost woman's poetics, and even a "semi mystic life of a woman".¹³⁴

But whatever the nature of Rhoda's imaginary flight, it is juxtaposed by her recognition of the material world she simultaneously inhabits: "Putting my foot to the ground I step gingerly and press my hand against the hard door of a Spanish inn." (*W*, p.225) Rhoda finds herself on a threshold where intervention seems to meet with resistance; we are not sure whether she is to be accepted, excluded or contained by the hard door.

130 See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, V, lines 631-635, pp.280-283.

131 See, Henry Thornton Wharton, "Life of Sappho", *Sappho: Memoir, Text, Selected Renderings, and a Literal Translation*, Third Edition (London, 1895), pp.17-22; and Ovid, "Sappho to Phaon", *Heroides*, XV, *Heroides and Amores*, translated by Grant Showerman (London, 1931), pp.180-197; for Pope's 1707 translation of Ovid's "Sappho to Phaon" see Wharton, pp.187-197. See also Woolf, "On Not Knowing Greek", *The Common Reader* (London, 1925), p.39: "Sappho leapt off a cliff."

132 See, Wharton, "Life of Sappho", *Sappho*, p.8.

133 See, Wharton, "Life of Sappho", *Sappho*, p.19.

134 See Woolf, "The Intellectual Status of Women", *New Statesman*, 9 October 1920, and 16 October 1920; *D*, II, p.340: Woolf greatly admires Sappho and the "social and domestic freedom of Aeolian women"; and she talks, *L*, IV, p.140, of Sappho not as "a unique writer but supported by many other poetesses", and, *AROO*, pp.164-165, as "an inheritor as well as originator."

At Hampton Court, steeped in the symbolism of male sovereignty,¹³⁵ as well as of its demise,¹³⁶ Rhoda seems to have learnt a more direct, less fearful, approach to her peers.¹³⁷ But she also recognizes her continuing exclusion from their values: "you ... are committed, have an attitude, with children, authority, fame, love, society; where I have nothing. I have no face." Rhoda's facelessness seems connected to her refusal "to accept the shadow of the trees and the pillar-boxes" (*W*, p.243), suggesting her defiance of the place allocated to her gender by traditional values of chiaroscuro. Yet she still extracts her alternative vision from the material presence of her friends: "Behind you is a white crescent of foam". Rhoda's simultaneously poetic and prosaic thoughts show an imperial centre of sovereign subjectivity in relation to classical pastoral motifs. She juxtaposes imagery of distant "Parrots shrieking" in "the intense stillness of the jungle" with that of industrial progress - "(Here the trams start.)"; and conversation in one realm - "(Here we talk.)"- with a silent mythical imagery of oppression in another: "The swallow dips her wings in midnight pools." (*W*, pp.243-244)

¹³⁵ See Beer's note in Woolf, *The Waves*, edited by Gillian Beer (Oxford, 1992), p.256: "Hampton Court is ... a summary history of English power-politics, built by Cardinal Wolsey, given by him under duress to Henry VIII in 1525, who demolished parts and added to it. Later Christopher Wren began new building under William III, but this plan was never completed."

¹³⁶ See Flint's note to *W*, p.248 ("a King, riding, fell over a molehill here"), in Woolf, *The Waves*, edited by Kate Flint (Harmondsworth, 1992), p.236: "William III died of injuries and inflammation following a fall when his horse tripped over a molehill at Hampton Court on 21 February 1702." Flint shows how this connects with Percival's death. See *W*, p.163: "'He is dead,' said Neville. 'He fell. His horse tripped. He was thrown'."

¹³⁷ See *W*, p.243: "I walked straight up to you instead of circling round to avoid the shock of sensation as I used".

But in her torment Rhoda again has compensatory glimpses of a different model:

Yet there are moments when the walls of the mind grow thin; when nothing is unabsorbed, and I could fancy that we might blow so vast a bubble that the sun might set and rise in it and we might take the blue of midday and the black of midnight and be cast off and escape from here and now. (*W*, pp.244-245)

As an alternative to hierarchized relations between self and peers, Rhoda sees a potentially non-solar model of subjectivity in her vision of relativized temporality. This bubble, decentring the solar round, echoes the post-eclipse world in "The Sun and the Fish" and may be seen as an alternative to the world returning to Bernard's solar subjectivity at the close of *The Waves*.¹³⁸ That Rhoda's vision yields to his¹³⁹ is confirmed not only by his reporting of her suicide, but by her own poignant last words:

"Now," said Rhoda, as they pass that tree, they regain their natural size. They are only men, only women.... Pity returns, as they emerge into moonlight, like relics of an army, our representatives, going out every night (here or in Greece) to battle, and coming back every night with their wounds, their ravaged faces. Now light falls on them again. They have faces. They become Susan and Bernard, Jinny and Neville, people we know. Now what a shrinkage takes place! Yet they have only to speak, and their first words, with the remembered tone and the perpetual deviation from what one expects, and their hands moving and making a thousand past days rise again in the darkness, shake my purpose." (*W*, pp.254-255)

This recalls Woolf's description of her companions' return to size from the statuesque after the eclipse.¹⁴⁰ McLaurin observes that Rhoda "is uncompromising in her

¹³⁸ On the other hand, Mark Hussey, *The Singing of the Real World. The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Columbus, 1986), p.18, proposes that here, "Rhoda exhibits that feeling of omniscience and omnipotence that [R.D.] Laing notes as characteristic of the unembodied self in its retreat from the actual world."

¹³⁹ See *W*, p.280: Bernard observes "they press their faces to the walls of *my* bubble." (*My* italics).

¹⁴⁰ See *D*, III, p.144.

love of the geometrical, abstract, and dehumanised";¹⁴¹ but we have seen how this may read ironically; how it differs from her potentially feminist visions of purple and white. Rhoda's visions, furthermore, are not static (the square and oblong, like the purple glow, are not constant), nor does she always seek stasis¹⁴² (she also looks for change). We might wonder also whether she "hates individuality"¹⁴³ *per se* or whether her more distant abstract view of her friends allows Rhoda to see their collective potential, one which might produce less disappointing, perhaps less cruel, individuals than the "people we know".

What does seem to unify Rhoda's visions is a sense of negativity or dissent: they are generated by an anguished dissatisfaction with the status quo. Her unhappiness with her peers seems to lie with their "perpetual deviation" from her vision. She depicts them in a sinister chiaroscuro: as "our representatives", they form part of a wave of militaristic enlightenment from classical times on, battling against darkness. Bitter irony seems to inform these observations, for Rhoda's experiences show she is not represented by these people, and their illumination brings darkness too. Everything they do is at odds with her vision: their actions make "a thousand past days rise again in the darkness" and shake her purpose.

In recognizing in Rhoda a limited sense of subversiveness,¹⁴⁴ critics have suggested her inevitable

¹⁴¹ McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge, 1973), p.137.

¹⁴² McLaurin, p.137: "In music it is the static architectural aspects which she admires, the square on the oblong."

¹⁴³ Jean O. Love, *Worlds in Consciousness. Mythopoetic Thought in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1970), p.81. See also McLaurin, p.137.

¹⁴⁴ For Patricia Ondek Laurence, *The Reading of Silence: Virginia Woolf in the English Tradition* (Stanford, California, 1991), p.169,

tacit complicity in an order which destroys her; and her whiteness, in its apparent "affinity with feelings of isolation, loneliness, desolation, and silence",¹⁴⁵ is seen as a mark of this self-destructiveness. But such arguments, ignoring Rhoda's other colours and offering a limited understanding of her whiteness, draw on a deterministic psychoanalytical model of language as functioning by the suppression of the feminine.¹⁴⁶ They disallow the possible connection of whiteness with a materialist feminism, along with the mythic and political allusions to colour we have explored.¹⁴⁷ Rhoda's suicidal depression may come from the knowledge of a lost potential for material change, I suggest, not merely from a sense that, in tandem with the (always and already) suppressed feminine of language, the status quo remains immutable. In *The Waves*, then, we may glimpse one

Rhoda embodies "a feminine way of knowing, imagining and being, and she subverts through her silences, through her dreaming body, the claim-making phrases of Bernard, a talk-producer who dominates the end of the novel."

¹⁴⁵ Laurence, *The Reading of Silence*, p.174.

¹⁴⁶ Makiko Minow-Pinkney, *Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject* (Brighton, 1987), p.145: "Associated with whiteness and emptiness, outside time and logic, Rhoda marks out the locus of a feminine space, that non-symbolizable 'other' that must be repressed but none the less exist for a normative discourse to be installed.... A feminine discourse of the white spaces remains strictly a contradiction, impossible except as silence." See also McLaurin, pp.81-82, 84: Rhoda's association with white and grey suggests to him absence of colour, sterility, death, and absence itself. (See also, Freedman, *The Lyrical Novel*, p.248.) Although they "are clearly associated with Rhoda", when these colours appear in an interlude, however, "they are removed from psychological depth and are seen as a 'surface' pattern".

¹⁴⁷ Isobel Grundy, "'Words Without Meaning - Wonderful Words': Virginia Woolf's Choice of Names", *Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays*, edited by Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy (London, 1983), p.217: "Rhoda, Greek for rose, is ironical when we compare red Rose, brave Rose Pargiter, with this character's associations with white, with violets, and with fear." See also, Garrett Stewart, "Catching the Stylistic D/rift: Sound Defects in Woolf's *The Waves*", *English Literary History*, 54 (1987), p.453: "Sensing only intermittancy and rupture, Rhoda leaves the novel in one of those white spaces so terribly familiar to her, an unspecified gap in the text that is only retroactively filled in by Bernard's mournful respect."

woman's "new colours" as, Arethusa-like, they appear only to "run underground" again.¹⁴⁸

An image from one of Woolf's earliest projections about the work that was to become *The Waves* seems appropriate here:

Then the day fell into the sea: the sun went down.
& those who watched it saw no green light.¹⁴⁹

At one point Rhoda does glimpse in the gold spot of the sun fading between trees at Hampton Court "a slice of green ... elongated like the blade of a knife seen in dreams, or some tapering island on which nobody sets foot." (*W*, p.235)¹⁵⁰ But, like her other "green oases" (*W*, p.20), this potentially feminist colour¹⁵¹ is lost, perhaps not permanently, to the dominant solar cycle of *The Waves*.

¹⁴⁸ Woolf, "Women and Fiction", *The Forum*, March, 1929; *Granite and Rainbow* (London, 1958), p.82, we recall, says the woman writer "has to observe how [women's] lives are ceasing to run underground; she has to discover what new colours and shadows are showing in them now that they are exposed to the outer world." See above, Chapter 2.

¹⁴⁹ Woolf, sketch (c.1928-29), *The Waves: The Two Holograph Drafts*, Appendix A.1.

¹⁵⁰ Referring to this passage, Stewart, "Spatial Form and Color in *The Waves*", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 28 (1982), p.93, comments: "Rhoda's hypersensitivity is more often a sign of vulnerability. She sees colors and shapes in acute isolation, rather than as integrated parts of the whole design."

¹⁵¹ It also resembles a natural solar phenomenon known as the "green flash" or "green ray" or "green segment". "According to an old Scotch legend, anyone who has seen the green ray will never err again where matters of sentiment are concerned. In the Isle of Man it is called 'living light.'" See, M. Minnaert, *Light and Colour in the Open Air*, translated by H.M. Kramer-Priest, and revised by K.E. Brian Jay (London, 1940), pp.58, 59, 60: "the green ray is clearest on evenings when the sun shines brightly up to the moment of setting". Rhoda's vision perhaps most resembles the "green segment" which is visible when "the last segment [of the setting sun] becomes green at the extremities, and this green colour shifts gradually towards the centre of the segment."

14.9 Conclusion

This thesis, in exploring Woolf's tropes of light and colour in relation to iconographic colourist and suffragist traditions and contexts, has sought to revise the critical emphasis on aesthetic emotion, psychological volume, and significant form, as characteristic of her Post-Impressionism; and to identify in that dominant discourse, a green oasis, perhaps. A prismatic feminism may be at work in Woolf's Post-Impressionism.

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