

Beauty Writes Literary History: Revisiting the Myth of Bloomsbury

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What was Bloomsbury?

The question, 'what was Bloomsbury', elicits two responses: a catalogue of the people, the place, the moment; but more compelling, and more elusive, the evocation of an ethos.

Bloomsbury is seen to have reinvented beauty and the beautiful soul. If there is a single paragraph that has served as touchstone for this perception, it is G. E. Moore's definitive peroration in the final chapter of *Principia Ethica* (1903):

By far the most valuable things we can know or can imagine, are certain states of consciousness, which may be roughly described as the pleasures of human intercourse and the enjoyment of beautiful objects.¹

Moore's statement, in retrospect, seems the last word on a modern conception of the beautiful that was born in German philosophy in the eighteenth century, fundamentally challenged by 1900 and, since 1903, has headed rapidly towards its demise in the grip of a hermeneutics of suspicion intent on its annihilation. The usual pronouncement on Idealist aesthetics is now that the innocent beholder of the beautiful was always in actuality a politically inflected and socially situated person: beauty must be read against the grain; beauty is always 'symptomatic'. From the mid-twentieth century, beauty has mostly been a suspicious beauty: in the 'compulsive' or 'convulsive beauty' of the *avant garde*, now to be encountered in the street, in objects of the everyday world, and in chance encounters that also uncover a pathological drive towards death. But even by the end of the nineteenth century, the new aesthetics stimulated by physiological psychology challenged Hegel's idea of the beautiful as the pure appearance of Idea to Sense. The Hegelian stance seemed outdated, static, positing a non-problematic conceptualisation of the embodied beholder and her sensory experience of

the artwork. The appeal of Moore in 1903, and even now, is that, read superficially, he seems to revert to a conceptualisation of beauty as pure, formally autonomous, Platonic even, which therefore holds out the possibility of recuperating something lost and precious, beauty rescued as a regulative ideal from the corrosive scepticism of being modern and therefore, inevitably, *suspicious*. This is a powerful appeal. Not only the writers of Bloomsbury, but also their inheritors – Iris Murdoch, Kazuo Ishiguro and Zadie Smith, as well as critics such as Arthur Danto and Elaine Scarry – have felt its call. What is the basis for that appeal? Surely it is that for Moore, the beautiful and the just (or what in modern parlance becomes the ethical) remain necessarily entwined, undiluted by the forces of the ideological, resistant to the violences of unmasking. This might be read as art's theodical appeal: to distil the highest pleasure out of suffering and pain and thereby to confer a kind of justice on the universe: good is beautiful if you look hard enough; bad remains at bottom ugly. That Moore's is a defence of a formally austere beauty, one that follows on Hegel's insistence that art is an expression of intellectual beauty, a mode 'born of the spirit' that finds expression in purity of form, is no barrier, however, for later writers who recognise the possibility of capturing Moore for a less disembodied aesthetic. One of those writers was Virginia Woolf.

Iris Murdoch is perhaps now the best known and last advocate of the belief that, through the encounter with beauty, particularly in the novel, one might be educated into the good. Though Murdoch wrote the first thoroughgoing critique of Moore's ethics, he was also the stimulus for her return to Plato's writings on beauty and the good that developed into the naturalistic ethical framework of her own aesthetics of the novel. Though repudiating his naturalistic fallacy, Murdoch still respects Moore's idealisation of beauty's power as part of the necessary offence of great art – its capacity to shock and to reveal the limitation of the conventional, and therefore to undo customary habits of thought. Art thereby provides an education towards the good.² But Murdoch resists any appeal to a kind of ethereal beauty that

seems set apart from ordinary biological experience. For Murdoch, we live in a world whose reality includes values as part of the ordinary phenomenology of experience, and these values might be understood as the very ground of our picture of what it is to be human: its deepest configuration. Only the kind of passionate attention summoned by art, specifically for Murdoch, the novel, might help us to cultivate moral attitudes which emphasise ‘the inexhaustible detail of the world, the endlessness of the task of understanding ..., the connection of knowledge with love and of spiritual insight with the apprehension of the unique’.³

It is the capacity of beauty, in art or nature, to shake our normal assumptions that makes art so central to Murdoch’s defence of its capacities for moral education. In a famous passage, she writes how:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, and brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important.⁴

Murdoch’s argument, grounded in naturalism, might be seen in retrospect to ally Moore’s reverence for beauty with Roger Fry’s more workaday argument, in *Vision and Design* (1920), that art is grounded in our biological and natural human condition – our sense of rhythm, sight, line, pattern, everything that allows us in evolutionary terms to survive – and, in arousing feeling and emotion through sensuous apprehension, commands our utmost attention to whatever it puts before us. Holding experience through a complex concentration of our entire being, we come to find ourselves by losing ourselves in our attention to the world around us. The kestrel is beautiful, but it hovers in its splendour not in order to provide the beholder with an aesthetic experience, but because it is a predator looking to kill. Though Murdoch sustains Moore’s recognition of the awe-inspiring property of beauty as something

akin to Kant's regulative ideal, she is also a modern and a sceptic, aware that in art beauty may serve as a cover for the violent, the nefarious and the unjust. Murdoch sees Moore's Idealism and she sees the power and the dangers of aesthetic Idealism. But in her more earthbound fashion she shares his belief that beauty is entangled with the good. Admiring Woolf, Murdoch, however, aligned her own art with the great nineteenth-century realists, perhaps fearing that like Moore, Woolf too had stripped the flesh and blood from morality and beauty. Murdoch's perspective too is part of the emergence of what I am calling 'the myth of Bloomsbury'.

Ironically, however, in the immediate aftermath of Moore's writing, the legacy of his analytical style would quickly relegate beauty to the margins of philosophy, especially as the discipline was practised in Cambridge. There were more serious issues to think about: relations between language and logic, the new philosophy of science, categories and theories of types, proofs and verifications of the facticity of the world. Arthur Danto, reflecting on his emergence from the austere years of analytic philosophy, suggests some reasons why – in spite of a pervasive hermeneutics of suspicion, the avant-garde and postmodern assault on beauty, the logical positivist turn in philosophy – beauty still *matters*:

I felt that the passing from artistic consciousness of the idea of beauty was itself a crisis But even if beauty proved far less central to the visual arts than had been taken for granted in the philosophical tradition, that did not entail that it was not central to human life. The spontaneous appearance of those moving improvised shrines everywhere in New York after the terrorist attack of 11 September, 2001, was evidence for me that the need for beauty in the extreme moments of life is deeply ingrained in the human framework. In any case I came to the view that in writing about beauty as a philosopher, I was addressing the deepest kind of issue there is ... beauty is the only one of the aesthetic qualities that is also a value, like truth and goodness. It is not simply among the values we live by, but one of the values that defines what a fully human life means.⁵

Writing to Clive Bell in 1908 as she was laboriously working her way through Moore's *Principia*, Virginia Woolf seems to echo Danto's sentiments. In 1908, Woolf had already

experienced more ‘extreme moments’ than most: in her short life, including the shattering experiences of the death of her mother, the almost insane tyranny and then death of her grieving father, the death of her half-sister and substitute mother, Stella Duckworth, and the death of her beloved brother, Thoby. The further collapse of that dream of childhood as a safe space was experienced in the sexual ‘malefactions’ of her half-brothers, Gerald and George Duckworth.⁶ As she writes to Clive Bell of her experience of reading Moore, one intuitively feels Bloomsbury’s subsequent ethos kindling into verbal life: that beauty expressed in art, and contemplated in philosophy, is not simply one value amongst others, but is *the* value, as for Moore and as Danto insists, that ‘defines what a fully human life means’. Woolf was certainly taking Moore seriously. She writes of how she is ‘splitting [her] head over Moore every night, feeling ideas travelling to the remotest parts of my brain, and setting up a feeble disturbance hardly to be called thought. It is almost a physical feeling, as though some little coil of brain unvisited by any blood so far, and pale as wax, had got a little life into it at last; but had not any strength to keep it. I have a very clear notion of which parts of my brain think’.⁷ Moore’s austere, analytic and seemingly bloodless defence of beauty prompts a passionate and visceral response: Woolf imagines thinking about his argument as *physical feeling*, ideas penetrating the recesses of the body, blood crossing a barrier into the brain, ideas infusing and germinating a little coil so it springs to *life*. Rarely has reading analytic philosophy appeared so erotic, so close to the body. This moment of passionate and yet ironic description of her discovery of Moore, would materialise two years later as ‘Bloomsbury’, a marriage of beauty as the human and artistic with the formal and the philosophical.

Bloomsbury was never a movement in the conventional sense, but it was attached to places, people and a historical moment already in the annals as the end of an era with the death of Edward VII. But Bloomsbury is mainly remembered as an intellectual and artistic group of friends and relations who, though they seem officially to coalesce in that year, were

already bound by ties of family and affection as well as shared interests. That the group came into existence and persisted without any kind of manifesto, self-conscious organisation or pretention to movement status, is perhaps attributable to its performative affirmation of the Moorean ethos of reverence for the beautiful as enshrined in art and aesthetic attitudes, and the seriousness with which it cultivated friendship and personal relationships. Yet it was the tendency to read Moore blandly and simplistically that gave rise to the many caricatures of Bloomsbury, its dissemination as a coterie of eccentric, upper class intellectuals and literati worshipping at the shrine of a departed ideal of the ‘beautiful soul’ of nineteenth-century idealist aesthetics.

1910 was memorable, not least as year of Roger Fry’s invention of the concept of Post-Impressionism, with the exhibition ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ at the Grafton Galleries. . The idea for the exhibition arose out of a chance encounter between Fry, – who had published an essay on aesthetics in 1909 which served, like Woolf’s response to Moore, to put the blood back into that somewhat eviscerated account of beauty – Clive Bell, and Desmond MacCarthy early in 1910. The outcome of that meeting was that Fry and Bell would organise the exhibition, and MacCarthy would write its catalogue.⁸ Bell and MacCarthy already knew each other as members of the exclusive intellectual discussion group, the Apostles, at Cambridge, whose discussions were held in strict Moorean style: highly theoretic, philosophic and abstract. When Bell, Fry and MacCarthy began to talk about their shared interest in new movements in art, Bloomsbury found its own language. Woolf records in her diary that they all stopped talking about truth and reality and started to talk about beauty; Roger Fry, she wrote, put ‘flesh and blood’ on the concept.

Bloomsbury would come under attack many times from that historic moment onwards: in Wyndham Lewis’s savage satire of Venusberg in *Men Without Gods*, in Leavis’s *Scrutiny*, and perhaps most famously in D. H. Lawrence’s more primitive and visceral

expressions of disgust.⁹ But the image of Bloomsbury as a mausoleum to beautiful souls was consolidated in the 1950s by a new generation of writers, lower middle class legatees of the 1944 Education Act. These writers, such as Kingsley Amis and John Wain, added to Henry Green's sense of the high modernists like Woolf as 'cats which had licked the plate clean', by unleashing a new mood of class revolt against what now seemed a privileged and intellectually incestuous coterie of powerful elites.¹⁰ For his first talk on BBC radio in 1950, the novelist Angus Wilson chose as his topic, 'Sense and Sensibility'. The talk was more an attack on Virginia Woolf than a reappraisal of Jane Austen. In a later essay (1978), Wilson acknowledges that at the time he felt antagonism towards Woolf on two grounds: that 'her sort of elitist middle class sensibility or at any rate that of her imitators had been one of the deepest complacencies that had brought England near to destruction', and that 'her technique had disintegrated the novel's form'.¹¹ In this essay, Wilson regrets his earlier stance, but the cruel portrait of Woolf, thinly disguised as 'Mrs Green' (presumably after her own imaginary 'Mrs Brown') and parodying her modernist style, begins by targeting her association with beauty: 'for to her friends and herself she has always "interesting" beauty'.¹² The picture of Bloomsbury as a withdrawn enclave of class privilege hanging onto a discredited aesthetic would re-appear in an even more savage portrait, in what Kenneth Allsop later describes as the 'comic commando warfare' on the Bloomsbury generation, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954).¹³

Aside from the occasional class swipe, however, Bloomsbury's association with beauty has ever since tended more to homage than denigration, no more so than in Zadie Smith's commemoration of Bloomsbury's connection with German Idealist aesthetics, in the portrait of the Schlegel sisters in *Howard's End* (1990). Smith acknowledges how Bloomsbury has come to be regarded as the last moment when it seemed possible to speak unironically of beauty though Smith's *On Beauty* has to work through indirection,

approaching the question through a rewriting of Forster.¹⁴ After 1950, Bloomsbury becomes an object of almost hysterical homage and nostalgic worship but also, as hysterically, of savage dismissal as the dying gasp of an anachronistic leisured class. A robust account of beauty would now require more than Moore's sense of it as an unanalysable category that we simply *know* by intuition whenever we invite or discover its encounter. Much of the continuing fascination with Bloomsbury, however, is the portrayal of Woolf – especially after her suicide in 1941 and continuing in today's 'wound culture' – as a belated and doomed beautiful soul, slain on the altar of art. That hers is a female soul makes her all the more fascinating.

By the 1950s, as this construction of Bloomsbury modernism was emerging, Clement Greenberg took the neo-Kantian formalism initiated by Fry and developed by Clive Bell in the direction of purely conceptual art. Bell had argued in *Art* (1914) that in order to 'appreciate a work of art we need bring with us nothing but a sense of form and colour and a knowledge of three-dimensional space ... very often representation is a sign of weakness in an artist'.¹⁵ Greenberg takes this as his starting point for a new and relentlessly abstract Expressionism that uses the vocabulary of purity, autonomy and form, but now derides its earlier entanglement with beauty. Even as the first wave gathered of the new feminism that would eventually recover Woolf as a political writer, Elaine Showalter, in one of its seminal literary historical studies, would refer to Woolf's 'room of one's own' as the 'grave'; Showalter entirely accepts the construction of Bloomsbury as a mausoleum of withdrawn and ineffectual, self-willed but impotently beautiful souls, who are unable to enter the world through fear of 'besmirchment'.¹⁶ It is the image pictured in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*:

The 'beautiful soul' lacks the power to externalise itself, the power to make itself into a Thing, and to endure being. It lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of

its inner being by action and an existence; and in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world...its light dies away and it vanishes like a shapeless vapour that dissolves into thin air.¹⁷

Hegel's philosophical account of the beautiful soul signals a growing ambivalence towards the spectacle of elevated beauty as an index of the moral or pure that fully emerges in the late nineteenth century. Here, the temptation to realise beauty in art, to aspire to the perfectly closed world of form, is associated with madness, fantasy and degeneration. One might see this failure of beauty's expression or embodiment as culminating in the rise of abstraction, conceptual art and geometric formalism from the late 1950s onward. The earlier *avant garde* suspicion of beauty, and Surrealism's connection of its compulsive and convulsive properties with the pathological and the neurotic, runs alongside a class-based campaign that increasingly views beauty as the expression of a degenerate elite, or its institutionalisation in the 'prettiness' and kitsch of exhausted and commercialised bourgeois custom. But even in the terms of degeneracy, beauty still functions in relation to the moral; just as beauty was once an offence against a stale morality, so the abuse of beauty (as in Kitsch) is still an offence against an aesthetic whose values are irredeemably moralised even as they seek to escape moral conventionalism. In 1918 Dada's manifesto 'Der Kunst ist Tod' announces, with the end of beauty, the death of a cherished bourgeois value.

So Bloomsbury became a target: first of Futurist and other *avant gardes* and of the moral aesthetic of F. R. Leavis, and then, from the 1950s, of the democratising impulses of the post-war generation but used always as synecdoche for a construction of Beauty that becomes after 1945 the symbolic target for a variety of new artistic and political energies..

Bloomsburying: Old and the New Beauty in the Writings of G. E. Moore and Roger Fry

In 1922, at the instigation of Desmond MacCarthy's wife, Molly, who was secretary to the Memoir Club (an outgrowth of the Apostles), Woolf wrote 'Old Bloomsbury', posthumously published in *Moments of Being* (1976). By the 1920s, Bloomsbury was self-conscious of its existence as a group, and Woolf had even appeared in and written for *Vogue* – testimony to Bloomsbury's association with distinctive 'style' or glamour. The significance of 'Old Bloomsbury' for the present essay is that Woolf identifies beauty as the foundation of the New Bloomsbury as it transitions out of the Old. She describes a particular Thursday night discussion of the group that provided the 'germ' from which everything that is Bloomsbury sprang:

We sat and looked at the ground. Then at last, Vanessa, having said perhaps that she had been to some picture show, incautiously used the word 'beauty'. At that, one of the young men would lift his head slowly and say, 'It depends what you mean by beauty'. At once all our ears were pricked. It was as if the bull had at last been turned into the ring. The bull might be 'beauty', might be 'good', might be 'reality'. Whatever it was, it was some abstract question that now drew all our forces Often we would still be sitting in a circle at two or three in the morning The marvellous edifice was complete, one could stumble off to bed feeling that something very important had happened. It had been proved that beauty was – or beauty was not – for I have never been quite sure which – part of a picture It was not only that Moore's book had set us all discussing philosophy, art, religion; it was that the atmosphere ... was abstract in the extreme The young men never seemed to notice how we dressed or if we were nice looking or not.¹⁸

Woolf describes the high-minded, abstract and unerotic intellectual devotion of the group, the Old Bloomsbury, that came into being to debate and interrogate Moore's 'book'. Later, she describes what she now regards (in 1920) as the inaugural moment of the New Bloomsbury:

It must have been in 1910 I suppose that Clive one evening rushed upstairs in a state of highest excitement. He had just had one of the most interesting conversations of his life. It was with Roger Fry. They had been discussing theory of art for hours. He

thought Roger Fry the most interesting person he had met since Cambridge days. So Roger appeared He had more knowledge and experience than the rest of us put together. His mind seemed hooked onto life by an extraordinary number of attachments We had to think the whole thing over again. The old skeleton arguments of primitive Bloomsbury about art and beauty put on flesh and blood.¹⁹

For Woolf, Bloomsbury's real emergence arrives with the catalyst effect of the entry into their lives of the art critic and painter Roger Fry. Now the two poles of Bloomsbury - are in place: the abstract intellection of philosophical thought and the more sensory and embodied quality of the aesthetic. But Moore and Fry complement each other further, each seeing beauty as a power that might furnish liberation from a culture obsessed with varieties of materialist reproduction: for Moore, the power of a reductionist account of human nature in the new Darwinisms; for Fry, the preference of a bourgeois and increasingly commodified culture for a safe but ultimately sterile academician art. Moore tries to demonstrate through philosophical argument that the good is neither reducible to the terms of nature, as in Social Darwinism, or utilitarianism, nor a transcendent category as in the Platonic account: the good is a complex and unanalysable whole made up of the presence of the beautiful object and the appropriate emotional response to it, as in the pleasures of art and the cultivation of friendship. In re-invoking Hume's maxim that 'ought' may not be derived from 'is', Moore strove to correct the naturalistic and fallacious argument whereby Darwinian 'fitness', as a description of what is adapted for survival, had come to be associated with value and quality in varieties of Social Darwinism, 'fitness' taking on a moral as opposed to a neutrally biological hue. In Utilitarianism too, the search for the good, whether of the greatest number or the higher 'pleasure', is, in Moore's eyes, reduced to the 'is' of psychology or biology: 'In short, in this view, to say that a thing is beautiful is to say, not indeed that it is itself good, but that it is a necessary element in something which is: to prove that a thing is truly beautiful is to prove that a whole, to which it bears a particular relation as a part, is truly good'.²⁰ For Kant, in the *Critique of Judgement*, beauty is a bridge to the moral in its capacity to point

indirectly to or embody what cannot yet be grasped in conceptual form.²¹ Moore makes the stronger claim that the beautiful is a necessary component of the good, and the good of the beautiful, in a reciprocal part/whole relation; in effect, the beautiful for Moore simply *is* the good and is, therefore, its own end. Moore's argument revives Kantian autonomy but centres it in the experience of the beautiful as an economy of ends that is not simply a symbol for or bridge to the good, or the ethical, but is its very source and substance.

The New Bloomsbury that Woolf associates with the appearance of Fry found its public embodiment in the exhibition of 1910, but Fry had theorised its aesthetics in 'An Essay in Aesthetics' (1909), collected in *Vision and Design*. What is distinctive in Fry's account is the relation between form and feeling as the controlled expression of an intention that communicates with and elicits a similarly prior but heretofore unrecognised and unexpressed feeling in the spectator. Fry argues that there is always in art a 'consciousness of purpose', a process of empathetic connection facilitated by form itself, the feeling of 'a peculiar relation of sympathy with the man who made this thing in order to arouse precisely the sensations we experience'. In higher art, he suggests, 'where sensations are so arranged that they arouse in us deep emotions, this feeling of a special tie with the man who expressed them becomes very strong'. Art invokes a recognition of 'something which was latent in us all the time, but which was never realised, and that he has revealed us to ourselves in revealing himself'. What emerges as beauty for Fry is a refinement of Moore's unanalysable 'complex' of the consciousness of the beholder caught in rapt attention to the object; for Fry it is the 'perception of purposeful order and variety in an object that gives us the feeling which we express by saying that it is beautiful'. This relation between form and feeling is a consequence of the imperative we feel, once our emotions are deeply aroused, for 'purposeful order and variety in them also'. Fry moves towards Bell's more abstract and non-representational conception of form, away from Moore's mimeticism, when he admits that 'if

this can only be brought about by the sacrifice of sensual beauty we willingly overlook its absence'.²² Thus Fry's argument moves toward a formalist aesthetics identifiable, as Post-Impressionism, the reconciliation of vision with design that is the inspiration for Woolf's most painterly novel, *To the Lighthouse*, whose central symbol appears to stand for the possibility of their reconciliation as living processes through the formal discipline of art. Though Moore's articulation of an idea of beauty made no overt objection to the mimetic, it is simply not a feature in his argument. Fry's position, and, even more resolutely, Clive Bell's, are anti-mimetic. Fry's withdrawal from the mimetic is also politically driven: his formalist turn is propelled by a revulsion against the reproductive sterility of the academician who, purporting to spurn the avowedly commercial artist, still lives off commissions and seeks to pander to and please bourgeois taste. For Fry, this kind of art, rendering a mimetically identifiable world through a lifeless and sterile 'beauty', subjugates the aesthetic to commodity fetishism, to *copying*, not so much the world as a set of dead mimetic conventions. He puts it forcibly: 'as the prostitute professes to sell love, so these gentlemen profess to sell beauty'.²³ One can hardly imagine a more dismissive tone. Clive Bell's aesthetic position, however, is more than simply anti-populist: it is most thoroughly elaborated in his notorious defence of the necessity for a leisure class as the foundation of any proper civilisation in *Civilisation* (1928).²⁴ In this, Bell's more extreme, even caricaturing synthesis of the ideas of Moore and Fry, one finds another source for the later construction of an inward-looking and apolitical Bloomsbury: the image of a self-obsessed intelligentsia enrapt with an elite aesthetic of beauty that plays back its own narrowly class-based values. In Fry, form is represented as the strict logic of an emotion that is discovered to be inherent in the emergent form of the artwork itself; that is his idea of autonomy. Unlike Moore, however, or Bell, and despite his qualifications concerning the sensual, Fry's aesthetic represents for Woolf a welcome connection with the flesh, with blood, biological life, experience. For Fry

had also addressed the necessary grounding of art in the body and in the evolutionary imperative: for ‘nearly all these emotional elements of design are connected with essential conditions of our physical existence: rhythm appeals to all the sensations which accompany muscular activity; mass to all the infinite adaptations to the force of gravity which we are forced to make’, and he continues with a catalogue of ways in which form is an extension into artistic design of those capacities of the body that allow it to flourish in the world, regulate its own biological currents and gather from its environment whatever is necessary for survival.²⁵

While the body is honed toward survivalist attunement to the world, encountering its environment as a field of potential affordances for its own needs, in art that biological imperative is suspended, its forces subdued and disciplined through a formal and teleological commitment worked through the aesthetic medium. Fry is moving towards that modernist conception of beauty in the work of art as a discovery of intention in the formal processes of working through a material that is tied more to a post-Hegelian materialist conception of emergence than to a Platonic and later Cartesian sense of a predetermined intention creating form out of inert matter. And yet it is the aesthetic Ideal of formal autonomy, more recognisable as the position of Clive Bell than of Moore and Fry, that has tended to become synonymous with Bloomsbury’s vision of beauty. That misconstruing of emphasis associates Bloomsbury’s art with the aloof, the inward-looking and the self-defining. It is used along with the involitional quality associated with the ‘beautiful soul’ to create the iconic image of Woolf, in particular, that has, despite decades of feminism and New Historicism, been so hard to dislodge. Yet with Woolf, if we pay attention to the writing rather than the myth of the writer, we find in her fiction and non-fictional work that she is always challenging the idea of beauty as harmonious inwardness and the soul as integral, unified and discrete. Woolf fundamentally challenges the idea of the ‘beautiful soul’, even as she reveals its seductive,

dangerous power in the making of the saint, the sacrificial or self-lacerating feminine, the anorectic, the domesticated Angel. In *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) it is most associated with the traumatised madness of Septimus Smith. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927) it is used to interrogate its seductive and destructive aspects in the relation of the other characters to the iconic beauty of Mrs Ramsay. In an essay on Montaigne contemporary with the composition of *Mrs Dalloway*, Woolf writes how, ‘beauty is everywhere, and beauty is only two fingers’ breadth from goodness Is the beauty of the world enough or is there, elsewhere, some explanation of the mystery?’²⁶ Woolf certainly felt acutely the beauty of the world, but those ‘two fingers’ are pivotal in distinguishing her idea of the beautiful from classic Idealist aesthetics and especially the traditional icon of the Beautiful Soul.

Woolf saw the novel as a genre oriented to the expression of the contradictoriness of life. As a verbal medium, the novel can carry argument and reflect on its own composition, interrogate the aesthetics of the beautiful without compromising the force and power of beauty that it also seeks to convey. In ‘Poetry, Fiction and the Future’ Woolf therefore suggests that it is the novel, rather than poetry, that will be best equipped to express the contradictoriness of beauty in a post-Idealist world. In this new world,

Feelings which used to come simple and separate do so no longer. . . . beauty is now ugly too . . . something that mocks it for being beautiful It is as if the modern mind, wishing always to verify its emotions, had lost the power of accepting anything simply for what it is. Undoubtedly this sceptical and testing spirit has led to a great freshening and quickening of soul.²⁷

In Woolf, both soul and beauty no longer reflect the ‘closed individuality’ of personal consciousness, and exist neither pure and single nor unsullied.²⁸ This is nowhere more acutely expressed than in the bizarre sketch, ‘Street Haunting’ (1927), in which a new modern sense of the beautiful in the grotesque is discovered. As an unnamed *flâneur* sets out on her peregrinations through the London streets, she finds herself metamorphosing into a

giant eye, ‘a central oyster of perceptiveness’, that turns to ‘wrinkles and roughnesses’ the ‘shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves’.²⁹ At first the eye perceives only beauty everywhere, but after ‘a prolonged diet of this simple, sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed, we become conscious of satiety’.³⁰ An encounter with a dwarf in a shoe shop changes the mood: what was formerly illuminated as beauty appears now crepuscular, darkened and deformed. The experience of the eye is recognised to be limited: ‘we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture’;³¹ true composition must include the hidden, the impoverished, the ugly, so the deceptiveness that is also the offence of beauty might be revealed. Henceforth composition must include its own discomposure.

The novel that most fully explores the contradictoriness of beauty, its association with the conventional as well as with the extremity of life, its pain, horror and suffering, is *Mrs Dalloway*, which drew directly on Woolf’s own experience of the beauty and terror of city life immediately after the war, and the mystical heights and tormenting horror of her own psychotic experiences. *Mrs Dalloway* too is fascinated with how changes in affective rhythms, barely discernible to consciousness, may register as changes in the world itself: ‘the leaden circles dissolved in air’, sonorously enter the body that is turned into a membrane so that, for the mad Septimus Smith, the world begins to speak, and what is its message? ‘Beauty, the world seemed to say’.³² This world, for Septimus, at once too near, claustrophobic and stifling, is also far out and distant; what Rezia, his wife, sees as its beauty (“‘beautiful!” she would murmur, nudging Septimus, that he might see’) is for Septimus, who has fallen off its edge, become a ‘relic’, only to be *seen* as if ‘behind a pane of glass ... he could not taste, he could not feel’ (115). The conventional beauty of the world shimmers distantly behind glass, seen but not felt, while a new and sublime power roars into the nerves of his body promising a new and terrible beauty:

so, thought Septimus, looking up, they are signalling to me. Not indeed in actual words; that is, he could not read the language yet; but it was plain enough, this beauty, this exquisite beauty, and tears filled his eyes as he looked at the smoke words languishing and melting in the sky and bestowing on him, in their inexhaustible clarity and laughing goodness, one shape after another of unimaginable beauty and signalling their intention to provide him, for nothing, for ever, for looking merely, with beauty, more beauty! Tears ran down his cheeks. (27)

In Septimus's mad appraisal of beauty, and in Clarissa's fragile sense of herself as merely a fashionable clothes-horse, Woolf explores some of the contradictory social as well as aesthetic meanings of beauty. Septimus is presented as the casualty of a more encompassing distributed mind, a public soul, a vast neural network of forces, threads and pulsions, the soul of a new age of crowds and uncertainties and the infiltration and management of the private. Even the narrative voice takes on the shifting quality of the group, echoing and mimicking standard perceptions, restless and moving, built out of the minute trails, habits, rhythms of custom that enter the body, echo in the mind. What is most private and interiorised is also fashioned out of the voices of the herd, the customary, for Septimus as much as Clarissa. Woolf shows a conventional society being chanted into being, perpetuated in its habits, but poised on the edge of something darker: an age that will marry the crowd with the machine, impose statistically calculated 'norms' and measurements, and construct, through scientific calibration, the deviant and the abnormal. It is a new age of the human herd: the age of fashion and mass spectacle. *Mrs Dalloway* is structured around a series of emotionally charged and ceremoniously ritualised collective gatherings, displays of beauty, which are emblematic and memorialising, enchaining the group through the gathering and amplification of feeling. In all the hat shops and tailors' shops 'strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire ... the surface agitation of the passing car as it sunk grazed something very profound' (15). The things of everyday shift and take on different meaning. Beautiful clothes communicate inclusion, the beauty of fashion, the rituals of the group. Writing about Montaigne, Woolf was thinking there too about the meaning of beauty: its

power to protect against the new violators of the soul, and its dangerous availability for collusion with their forces. Beauty binds and seduces through a million invisible threads; outside the ceremony hovers the new ‘terrible beauty’, the message of the mad soul, Septimus, in dying communicating his message to the incipiently suicidal Clarissa, that the death of the soul is to live as a society hostess, stage-managing leisure, merely preserving the beautiful ritualised spectacle.

Virginia Woolf: More Shoes and Boots and No More Souls of Beauty

Woolf continued to think about beauty. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), she revisits the *temps perdu* of the Stephen family holidays to Talland House in Cornwall. This is a place and time in her memory that escapes the city lights and sounds and is instead washed with the light of the coastal sky, the night-time candles in a house without electricity, and the rhythms of the sea, sonorous, not with the clanking of city bells, but with the echoing laughter and excited voices of children, the animal energies of youth. As in ‘Street Haunting’, although this is a place where the eye of the mind encounters light and beauty, as the scene unfurls, it is composed into something more variegated; underneath, as Mrs Ramsay muses, ‘it is all dark; it is unfathomably dark’.³³ As well as an elegy to her parents, the novel might also be read as Woolf’s mature reflection on Bloomsbury and Beauty, on the aesthetics of Moore, Fry and Bell, on the relations of beauty and the good, and on the place of intentionality and emergence in the creation of art. Despite its geometric structure, with its first and last one-day sections divided by the ten years of ‘Time Passes’, the novel conveys an extraordinary sense of movement, of quick emotion, flashes of response, thresholds opening into the future and vanishing into the past. Above all, it is concerned with processes: of time and inevitable passing, but also of the emergence of artistic design out of the variegated swings of mood, the

terror and exhilaration of life. The central characters, Mr and Mrs Ramsay, Lily Briscoe, are creators, each working in his or her own medium. The novel asks, where does life, thinking and moving, end, and where does the work of art begin? Even Mr Ramsay's imaginary table is brought into being with every fibre of a body that is in constant movement and ever evolving relation with his environment so Mr Ramsay's thoughts are spread into and emerge out of an environment made animistically alive:

He looked; he nodded; he approved; he went on. He slipped seeing before him that hedge which had over and over again rounded some pause, signified some conclusion, seeing his wife and child, seeing again the urns with the trailing geraniums which had so often decorated processes of thought...³⁴

Thinking – as thinking a world into existence, as in the making of a novel - is never isolated introspection, the so-called 'inward turn', that is part of the critical picture of Woolf's introverted 'room of one's own'. Thinking emerges out of a dynamic entanglement of mind, body, environment, and not simply the illuminated inner space of the Cartesian mind with its pictures moving like prisoners in a cave. At times, the walk is a precarious one – leaving the eye that is attuned to the external beauty of the world for the eye that is private, inward, reflective, oriented towards memory, but still identifiable as an embodied mind – to venture along more dangerous routes, off-track and uncharted, bearing no relation to the predetermined route that ordinarily serves for our idea of intentionality. As Lily thinks to herself, 'It was an odd kind of road to be walking, this of painting. Out and out one went, further and further, until at last one seemed to be on a narrow plank, perfectly alone, over the sea'.³⁵ Mr Ramsay also walks through trails laid by his own former thoughts, often stuck, going over the same ground, deepening the same furrows in field and brow. Thinking, like creating, Woolf suggests, is not possible at all without well-trodden paths, boots treading familiar rhythms, providing an unheard background hum, the necessary but mostly unheard

and unseen attunement that provides pre-reflective ground for thinking as creating. Without custom and habit, there might be no creative thought, but without their partial overcoming, no true creativity. Just as Fry put flesh and blood on Moore's austere intellectual beauty, so Woolf puts flesh and blood on this process of austere philosophical thinking. For Woolf, the beauty of art includes an intentionality realised through an embodied and engaged process rather than one of detached impersonality or contemplative awe. This is beauty emerges out of the ordinary. The pause, the conclusion, the slipping into, the foraging and picnicking as Mr Ramsay's thoughts kindle in the landscapes of shore and mind, describe language, thinking, walking, at one and the same time. The geraniums that have adorned thought now bear its impress, as if Mr Ramsay had written thought directly onto their leaves. The familiar landscape through which he walks is 'stuck about' with old thoughts, as if his mind turns inside out to be caught in a net. The landscape is memory. Even his pipe, attuned to the rhythms of the moving body, and the body's rhythms responding to its inhalation, clears a channel in the brain that ends in thought. But how do we separate thinking from moving, from the body and the earth, from accoutrements and instruments? Thoughts, things, movements, the mind, body and environment, are knitted, like the brown stocking, into the texture of a field of thought. This is not presented as the to-be-abandoned hinterland of or prelude to art's real autonomy, enshrined in the beautiful object to be held at a distance; for the novelist, especially for the modern novelist, this is the new post-Idealist apprehension of the experience of beauty as unfathomably bound up with the contradictions and emotions of life.

Woolf extends Fry's aesthetics in actively challenging the view of creativity as a teleological process that involves the transference of an already formulated *mental* 'vision' onto or into a suitably receptive *material* medium, realised as 'design'. This is a conception of the creation of art that reaches back to the *Poetics* of Aristotle and forward to Romantic

and Idealist theories of inspiration, even to the dialectical thinking of Marx with his view of preformed mental intentionality transferred onto the materials of the world as the identification of human intentionality.³⁶

Lily is preoccupied throughout with how she might transfer her 'vision' onto the canvas, but it is only with the gradual abandonment of this view of intentionality that she completes the painting. First the thinking through on a humble tablecloth with a salt cellar; then the crucial emotional negotiation with Mr Ramsay's boots; and then the trance-like state of dissociation in which she allows memories to rise, herself and the world stripped down in a kind of phenomenological reduction. Feeling everything 'queer' and asking 'what does it all mean?', when she returns after Mrs Ramsay's death, Lily makes a decision to resume the painting. But 'she could not see the colour; she could not see the lines', because Mr Ramsay's demand for sympathy intervenes; his self-pity 'poured and spread itself in pools at her feet' (231, 236). Woolf is turning to her preoccupation with shoes and boots once more. As Lily draws back, primly drawing 'her skirts a little closer round her ankles', she sees the boots: 'sculptured; colossal; like everything that Mr Ramsay wore' and, in a reversal of Mrs Ramsay's magic (that had transformed the pot of meat – while they were all talking of boots – into something that partook of eternity), Lily is enraptured by the boots, though ashamed because Mr Ramsay has 'asked her to solace his soul' (236-37). In the moment of shared attention, however, Lily's appreciation of the robust workmanship of the boots and her sense of Mr Ramsay's delight in that appreciation, allows her to recognise his view of himself as a steadfast worker in the Guild of Thought-craft, toiling in his boots across rugged landscapes, inching thought forward.

The image of the table comes at last: 'austere, something bare ... it was uncompromisingly plain' (240). Though Lily may not quite stand in his shoes – the classic motif of empathy – she catches a glimpse of his soul, in the boots, and can at last see his

table. A lifetime of philosophical doubt is now seen etched as beauty in the furrows of his face: ‘What a face. What had made him like that? Thinking, night after night, she supposed – about the reality of kitchen tables ... until his face became worn too and ascetic and partook of this unornamented beauty which so deeply impressed her’ (240). All his gnashings and wailings assume a sudden poignancy. She sees that their lives have shared a joint venture: letting go of the world to risk standing on a ledge, in a strange place, to pursue something vastly difficult, without ever knowing why. Now, though, there is no way ‘of helping Mr Ramsay on the journey he was going’ (239): he is setting sail out to sea. His thinking is not her thinking: but his methodical thinking-as-walking is as present to her in his boots as ‘the residue of her thirty three years’ is present in her painting.

Lily too, facing the painting, has a ‘few moments of nakedness when she seemed like an unborn soul, a soul reft of body’ and, like Mr Ramsay, to be ‘hesitating on some windy pinnacle and exposed without protection to all the blasts of doubt’ (245). She asks herself:

What was the problem then? She must try to get hold of something that evaded her. It evaded her when she thought of Mrs Ramsay; it evaded her now when she thought of her picture. Phrases came. Visions came. Beautiful phrases. But what she wanted was the jar on the nerves, the thing itself before it has been made anything. (297)

But Lily realises that neither she nor anyone else had actually ever *seen* Mrs Ramsay, the woman, not the icon, just as no one had ever *seen* Mr Ramsay’s table: all that they had seen and worshipped and bowed down to was an icon of beauty in a green shawl: ‘She saw, through William’s eyes, the shape of a woman She was astonishingly beautiful But beauty was not everything – it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life – froze it’ (273). Lily reiterates what she assumes are Mr Banks’s thoughts: Banks, the biologist, too, wonders about this *question of beauty*: ‘But was it nothing but her looks? people said. What

was there behind it – her beauty, her splendour? Or was there nothing? Nothing but an incomparable beauty which she lived behind, and could do nothing to disturb?’ (49).

Mrs Ramsay’s beauty creates awe in those around her, is the source of her enigma, but it is also presented as a barrier to knowing, the kind of knowing that depends on intimacy. Not until Lily has stripped Mrs Ramsay of the iconic beauty built so carefully in the first section of the novel, stripped away the conventional reverence for female beauty, its bedazzling aura, its ceremony, can the felt presence of Mrs Ramsay as a flesh and blood woman arrive. Instead of residing in the customary and the conventional, Lily thinks, ‘if they both got up, here, now on the lawn, and demanded why was it so inexplicable, said it with violence, as two fully equipped human beings for whom nothing should be hid might speak, then, beauty would roll itself up; the space would fill; those empty flourishes would form into shape’ (277) Beauty rolling itself up has, all along, been Lily’s anticipation of the fate of her painting: it would be rolled up and flung in the attics, she thinks, wondering why on earth she feels so compelled to create it. For its creation is like walking out on a ledge into the unknown, risking for Woolf, at any rate, envelopment in the suicidal, dredging up memory, estranging the customs of the world as in that process of phenomenological reduction, the Husserlian *époché*, where the flesh of convention is stripped off the world so that a new beauty, more naked, more violent even, more vulnerable, exposes its own emergence out of the contradictions of modern life: out of pain, terror, grief but also exhilaration, joy, energy. Once stripped of the customary and the iconic, Mrs Ramsay appears fully before Lily as she never appeared in life, ‘on a level with the chair, with the table’. And in the ordinariness of the woman who now sits before her, Lily suddenly sees what she has never realised before: ‘her perfect goodness’ (310). In a brilliant turn, Woolf’s novel ironically deconstructs the Cartesian soul as she deconstructs the Idealist aesthetic of the beautiful soul, and then – lo and behold – she reinvents and re-clothes it in the more robust garments of modern life. To

see beauty, modern art must expose beauty's iconicity and its variety of ceremonial uses, must reinvent the ordinariness of experience as the real miracle. Were it not for Mr Ramsay's boots, Lily would not have had her vision, and without all the adjustments of relations of body to brush or pen, canvas and page, horizon and memory, she would not have executed her design. And nor would Woolf – in spite of the myth of Bloomsbury.

¹ G. E Moore, *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 188.

² See 'Metaphysics and Ethics' (1957) in Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (Harmondsworth, 1997), pp. 59-75. Also see 'Vision and Choice in Morality', *Existentialists and Mystics*, pp. 76-98.

³ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 86.

⁴ Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics*, p. 82.

⁵ Arthur C. Danto, 'The Aesthetics of the Brillo Box', in *The Abuse of Beauty: Aesthetics and the Concept of Art* (Chicago, 2003), p. 15.

⁶ Woolf discusses her early life in 'A Sketch of the Past', published in *Moments of Being and Other Essays* (1976). She alluded to some of these events in her letters, diaries and in two biographical essays, 'The Memoir Club' and 'Old Bloomsbury', published in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (1942).

⁷ Quoted in S. P. Rosenbaum, 'The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf', *English Literature and British Philosophy*. Ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago and London, 1971), pp. 316-56, p. 319.

⁸ For a full account of the circumstances, see Peter Stansky's *On or About December 1910* (Cambridge, MA, 1996).

⁹ Dolores LaChappelle, in *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive* (Denton, TX, 1996), pp. 81-7, gives a full account of Lawrence's pronouncements on Bloomsbury.

¹⁰ Henry Green, *Surviving: The Uncollected Prose Writings of Henry Green*, ed. Matthew Yorke (London, 1992), p. 247.

¹¹ Angus Wilson, *Diversity and Depth in English Fiction: Selected Literary Writings*, ed. Kerry McSweeney (London, 1983), pp. 169-79: pp. 174-75.

¹² Wilson, *Diversity*, p.174.

¹³ Kenneth Allsop, *The Angry Brigade*, (London, 1960), p. 29; Kingsley Amis, *Lucky Jim*, (London, 1992), p. 251.

¹⁴ Zadie Smith, 'Love, Actually', *The Guardian*, 1 November 2003.

¹⁵ Clive Bell, *Art*, ed. J. J. Bullen (Oxford, 1987), pp. 27-28.

¹⁶ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ, 1977).

¹⁷ G. F. W. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller and John Niemeyer Findlay (Oxford, 1977), pp. 483-84.

¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'Old Bloomsbury', in *A Bloomsbury Group Reader*, ed. S.P. Rosenbaum (Oxford, 1993), pp. 355-72, pp. 362-63.

¹⁹ Woolf, 'Old Bloomsbury', pp. 368-69

²⁰ Moore, *Principia Ethica*, p. 202.

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- ²¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford, 2007), pp. 228-9.
- ²² Roger Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', *Vision and Design*, ed. J. B. Bullen (Oxford, 1981), p. 21.
- ²³ Roger Fry, 'Art and Socialism', *Vision and Design* (Oxford, 1981), p. 41
- ²⁴ Clive Bell, 'The Artistic Problem', *A Bloomsbury Group Reader*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Oxford, 1993), p. 102.
- ²⁵ Fry, 'An Essay in Aesthetics', p. 24.
- ²⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Montaigne', *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, ed. Leonard Woolf (London, 1967), p. 72.
- ²⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'Poetry, Fiction and the Future', *Collected Essays*, vol. 4, p. 429, 433.
- ²⁸ William James, *Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (1890; New York, 1950), p. 349.
- ²⁹ Virginia Woolf, 'Street Haunting', *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London, 1942), p. 22.
- ³⁰ Woolf, 'Street Haunting', p. 23.
- ³¹ Woolf, 'Street Haunting', p. 28.
- ³² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford, 1998), p. 59. Subsequent references are to this edition, cited by page number.
- ³³ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London, 1960), p. 103.
- ³⁴ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 69-70.
- ³⁵ Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, p. 265.
- ³⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth, 1976), p. 284.