

“WORDS ARE AN IMPURE MEDIUM”: VIRGINIA WOOLF’S APPROPRIATION
OF VISUAL ART

THESIS

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Dedicated to Cynthia Hughes Maus and
Jeanette “Mim” McNamara Hughes.

“We think back through our mothers
if we are women.” ~Virginia Woolf

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CHAPTER ONE

THE CONNECTION BETWEEN PAINTING AND WRITING

Much of Virginia Woolf's work revolves around a central and inescapable contradiction as she attempts to capture a truth through writing which she herself states defies articulation. In the essay "Craftsmanship," originally part of the BBC radio series "Words Fail Me," Woolf argues that words "never make anything useful," and thus "to talk of craft in connexion with words is to bring together two incongruous ideas, which if they mate can only give birth to some monster fit for a glass case in a museum" (*Collected Essays* 2: 245). While an inexperienced reader might accept this statement without question, one must evaluate the irony of using words to accomplish the very useful task of communicating an idea. For Woolf's declaration to be true words must be useless, but if it is true then her argument is invalidated if one can understand the argument itself. The recurrent theme of dissatisfaction with language and the desire to move toward a more accurate way of writing the truth of experience, a moment in a person's life, of translating the reality of the three-dimensional to the page is a problem not simply because the language is inadequate, but because Woolf's chosen form for showing this moment where words fall away is language.

Michael Cunningham, the author of *The Hours*, describes Woolf as "a genius and a visionary, . . . because she knew that everyone, every single person, is the hero of his or her own epic story" (*The Hours* Promotional Material). To show the "epic" nature of

ordinary life, Woolf often magnifies a single day, as in *Mrs. Dalloway* and the first and third sections of *To the Lighthouse* (L), in a technique similar to the way in which portrait painters capture the essence of a subject during a single moment in time by focusing on expression, colors, positioning, and brushstrokes. Through her writing Virginia Woolf explores the boundaries of literature as she integrates painting and writing to create her own artistic style. An active member of the inter-disciplinary Bloomsbury circle and friend, sister, and biographer of artists, Woolf's unique position between two artistic traditions allows her to employ visual and simultaneous characteristics of painting in the verbal and linear form of writing.

“Kew Gardens”

The 1919 short story “Kew Gardens” (KG) is an early example of Virginia Woolf's fascination with color and texture, two characteristics closely related to visual art, an interest that reappears throughout her career. The first paragraph contains nineteen references to nine individual colors, an unusually high density of color imagery that continues throughout the story. As well as the proliferation of color, the structure of “Kew Gardens” shows Woolf's deviation from traditional storytelling. Instead of following the conventions of plot development—introduction, rising action, climax, dénouement, resolution—Woolf structures the narrative around brief glimpses as characters and conversations move past a stationary narratorial point-of-view within a small section of Kew Gardens. Though there are conventional human characters, Woolf also describes a snail's quest to move to the other side of a dead leaf, elevating it to the level of humans' experiences and hopes. While the snail is described from a close or intimate perspective, people are viewed from a distance: “The couple stood still on the

edge of the flower bed, and together pressed the end of her parasol deep down into the soft earth. The action and the fact that his hand rested on the top of hers expressed their feelings in a strange way . . .” (1424). Here Woolf begins with an image—rather than a character, action, or dialog—which she then analyzes in order to create meaning.

The privileging of visual over verbal, complicated by the fact that Woolf renders the image through words, continues as physical form disintegrates into color.

Thus one couple after another with much the same irregular and aimless movement passed the flower-bed and were enveloped in layer after layer of green-blue vapour, in which at first their bodies had had substance and a dash of colour, but later both substance and colour dissolved in the green-blue atmosphere. (KG 1425)

On the surface this dissolution is the couples passing out of the snail’s limited field of vision, but on another level the disappearance may signal Woolf’s early frustration with the limits of language. Christopher Reed identifies blue and green as the colors “Woolf associated with painting” (31). Thus, the “green-blue vapour” and “green-blue atmosphere” become a sign of Woolf’s dissatisfaction with language and desire to integrate visual art into her writing.

The form of “Kew Gardens” resembles an inverse art exhibit. Instead of a traditional art show where people walk past and view inanimate objects, the narrative focuses on one group after another as they walk into view and then fade away. The only character to appear twice in this short story is the snail, who is also the only character described in close detail. Each episode is a small image, a snapshot, or a dot of paint added to the reader’s image of Kew Gardens. Woolf biographer Hermione Lee compares

the adolescent garden scenes of *The Years* to “shimmering in lozenges of light like a painting by Seurat” (39). This association of writing and painting styles can be extended to “Kew Gardens” by interpreting each description, thought, or color as a dot similar to those in George Seurat’s 1884-86 painting *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (Figure 1). Duncan Grant, a member of the Bloomsbury group and Vanessa Bell’s longtime lover, uses pointillism in *On the Roof, 38 Brunswick Square* (Figure 2), his 1912 painting of siblings Virginia and Adrian Stephen and the author’s future husband Leonard Woolf. Woolf’s position in Bloomsbury society allowed her knowledge of and interaction with some of the most influential artists of the time. She collaborated for many years with her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, to create the covers for many of her books, only one way she interacted with the world of visual art. Whether Woolf was conscious or unconscious of this influence, it is clear that painting guides the style and form of “Kew Gardens” and many of her later works.

Vanessa Bell

The relationship between Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf, sisters and artists, provided creative inspiration for both. Growing up in a family that embraced traditional gender roles, the Stephen daughters looked to each other for creative support and nourishment. Bell’s 1927 exhibit of “a few sketches” deeply moved Woolf: “Virginia told her that her pictures were ‘built up out of flying phrases,’ and excitedly praised her spontaneity and lyricism.” Following this discussion, Bell sent Woolf “a description of moths coming into the house at night, which Virginia was haunted by and wanted to turn into a story.” Woolf responded by sending her sister *To the Lighthouse* “and invitations for comparisons” (Lee 535). Four years later, in 1931, Woolf published *The Waves*, a



1 George Seurat, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884-86. From the University of Southern California web site, last accessed on 25 February 2005: <http://www.usc.edu/schools/annenberg/asc/projects/comm544/library/images/221bg.jpg>



2 Duncan Grant, *On the Roof, 38 Brunswick Square*, 1912. From Richard Shone. *The Art of Bloomsbury*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1999. Figure 18.

structurally innovative novel inspired by Bell's moths. Originally titled *The Moths*, *The Waves* follows the lives of six men and women as they circle the central yet invisible character Percival like moths surrounding a source of light. During the late 1920's, the period which included the writing of *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, both Woolf and her sister made great progress in their own creative fields. As Woolf phrased it, "[t]hink of my books, Nessa's pictures" (qtd in Lee 536). Woolf believed that both she and Bell were addressing some of the same issues of representation and truth through their individual mediums.

When Woolf asked her sister to help to design a cover for "Kew Gardens," Bell suggested her painting *A Conversation* (Figure 3), which she thought resembled the short story in "conception and form" (Roe 169). In this work three women, a vase of flowers, and a window blend with little shading or definition, parts come together to represent, as with all paintings and Woolf's simultaneous writing style, a moment in time. As Jane Goldman interprets the piece,

The flowers, divided from the women by the plane of the window seem to be 'the visual equivalent' of their chatter. The women's heads may seem to overlap the flowers; but because of the flatness of the design—the lack of recession—the flowers may also seem to occupy the same picture plane as the women; so 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. (148)



3 Vanessa Bell. *A Conversation*, 1913-16. From Jane Goldman. *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1998. Figure 10.

Based on this analysis, the similarities Bell saw between her painting and “Kew Gardens” become apparent. One sister magnifies the importance of flowers, as the other focuses on a snail. Both use rich colors—specifically reds, whites, browns, and grays—to achieve their goals. Despite her admiration, Woolf did not see *A Conversation* as the perfect match to her story. In a letter to Bell, she wrote, “I am greatly tempted to write ‘Variations on a Picture by Vanessa Bell’ I wonder if I could write those Three Women in prose” (L III 498 qtd in Goldman 148). Woolf felt that there was a story contained in *A Conversation* that “Kew Gardens” did not address. She believed that the painting contained some truth that her story could not touch: Bell’s visual representation of a moment surpassed the capabilities of her story.

As well as inspiring each other and working together on joint projects, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell at times chose each other as subjects for their works of art. Woolf’s most famous interpretation of Bell is the artist Lily Briscoe of *To the Lighthouse*. While Woolf explored variations in style and form during the late 20’s and early 30’s, her elder sister began to experiment with representation in her own art decades earlier. Bell’s 1912 painting *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair* (Figure 4) is similar to *The Waves* in that the empty traditional center of each work—Woolf’s missing features and Percival’s absence—moves the outline and form of the works into focus. According to art historian Richard Shone, “[t]he featureless but slightly modelled face, though in part a result of Bell’s increasing avoidance of detail in her work, also suggests Woolf’s impatience and her elusive mobility of expression” (99). Similarly, in Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse*, Lily Briscoe, the representation of Vanessa Bell, tries to articulate her theory of art by



4 Vanessa Bell. *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair*, 1912.
From Richard Shone. *The Art of Bloomsbury*.
Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1999. Figure 32.

saying, “But this was one way of knowing people, she thought: 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” (195). Speaking to Richard Shone in 1965, Leonard Woolf declared Vanessa Bell’s 1912 *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair* to be ““more like Virginia in its way than anything else of her”” (99). Viewed within the context of Lily Briscoe’s statement and Leonard Woolf’s evaluation, this work emblemizes the sisters’ creative pursuits as they tried to move past traditional mimesis toward a deeper way of knowing their subjects.

Writing and Painting

In *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf uses Lily Briscoe’s memory of a statement by Charles Tansley to articulate a connection between painting and writing as masculine fields. Within the context of the novel the statement shows Lily Briscoe’s awareness that her art will not be accepted, but the fact that the character makes reference to both painting and writing shows Woolf’s association of the two genres; each time Lily Briscoe considers opposition to her art she mentions attacks on both fields. Despite this, she is able to see past this criticism to ask, “Women can’t write, women can’t paint—what did that matter from him [Charles Tansley], since clearly it was not true to him but for some reason helpful to him, and that was why he said it?” (L 86) Woolf addresses this same masculine need for validation in *A Room of One’s Own* (R) in a passage dealing with books written by men that proclaim the inferiority of women: “Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size” (35). Here Woolf also links words and images,

but in this instance women become the objects that reflect, losing their independence as they bolster the self-images of the men in their lives.

Woolf covers this issue of the enlargement of the male ego again in *To the Lighthouse*, as Mrs. Ramsay's unconventional, visual experience of literature enables a magnification of her husband similar to that mentioned in *A Room of One's Own*. "[Mr. Ramsay] wondered if she understood what she was reading. Probably not, he thought. She was astonishingly beautiful. Her beauty seemed to him, if that were possible to increase . . ." (L 121). Woolf's use of omniscient point of view allows the reader access to Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts as she reads from the book of poetry:

And she opened the book and began reading here and there at random, and as she did so she felt that she was climbing backwards, upwards, shoving her way up under petals that curved over her, so that she only knew this is white, or this is red. She did not know at first what the words meant at all. (L 119)

While this is not a traditional understanding of the literature that Mr. Ramsay would consider valid, it is clear that Mrs. Ramsay interacts with the material intuitively and holistically in a way much closer to visual art than linear academic writing.

In the 1934 essay "Walter Sickert" Woolf writes, "Words are an impure medium; better by far to have been born into the silent kingdom of paint" (CE 2: 237). This statement alludes to her apparent dissatisfaction with literature as an independent or isolated art form, an interpretation that gains credibility when one considers that Mrs. Ramsay's reaction to the book of poetry is very similar to a description in the same essay where a viewer flies "from colour to colour" while looking at one of Sickert's paintings.

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 if a rocket fell through the night and lit up greens and browns, grass and trees, and there in the grass is a white bird. Colour warmed, thrilled, chafed, burnt, soothed, fed, and finally exhausted me.

(235)

Though it is possible that one of the many artistic intellectuals of the Bloomsbury circle made such a statement at a dinner party, it is much more likely that Woolf herself is speaking through a fictional character. Despite the fact Woolf associates verbal or linear thought with male characters and visual or inter-dimensional thought with female characters in *A Room of One's Own* and *To the Lighthouse*, a male character articulates this description; clearly she does not intend to confine visual interpretation to women.

The fundamental distinction between Woolf's experimental writing and the linear style of academia provides the latitude for multiple interpretations. In the words of Sue Roe, "The difference between the painter's brush and the writer's . . . is that the writer may, as we travel through the linear compulsion of the sentence, give us nowhere else to look" (169-70). At times Woolf manages to use her pen as a painter's brush, providing alternative explanations for a character's behavior in a way that invokes the flexibility of visual interpretations. Thus the next step toward understanding Woolf's work in terms of its relationship with other artistic fields is to examine her view of the standards she rebelled against.

Conventional Writing

For Woolf traditional writing and scholarship are forever tied to her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. In male-dominated society, linear thought, which is remarkably similar to reading words from a page, is the only measure of intelligence. Mr. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse* mirrors Leslie Stephen in his detachment from family. He must analyze and grade every experience in order for it to have value. The fact that Mr. Ramsay is a scholar allows Woolf to overtly criticize the masculine academic system for its absolute endorsement of verbal intelligence and writing at the expense of visual, spatial, and personal forms of communication. Both the literal father and the literary father view life as a natural progression toward enlightenment, a quest to the unattainable letter “Z.”

Mr. Ramsay recognizes his own failings as an academic and intellectual. Despite his devotion to traditions of learning, he knows that he will never reach a moment of illumination:

It was a splendid mind. For if thought is like the keyboard of a piano, divided into so many notes, or like the alphabet is ranged in twenty-six letters all in order, then his splendid mind had no sort of difficulty in running over those letters one by one, firmly and accurately until it had reached, say, the letter Q. (L 33)

The relationship between Mr. Ramsay’s imagined thought process and the alphabet is especially important in light of Stephen’s work on the mammoth *Dictionary of National Biography*. During his tenure, Stephen edited twenty-six volumes of the series and wrote

nearly 400 individual biographies (Hussey 270). This colossal tribute to the established authors of the canon is exactly what Woolf tries to escape in her experimental writing.

Even Mr. Ramsay, the staunchest supporter of linear thought, recognizes that there is another way of thinking:

he could see, without wishing it, that old, that obvious distinction between the two classes of men; on the one hand the steady goers of superhuman strength who, plodding and persevering, repeat the whole alphabet in order, twenty-six letters in all, from start to finish; on the other the gifted, the inspired who, miraculously, lump all the letters together in one flash—the way of genius. (L 34)

This recognition reiterates Mr. Ramsay's earlier thought that he would never reach the letter "Z." Rather than dwell on this inability, which clearly bothers him, he instead focuses on how other perceive him. Mr. Ramsay fantasizes about being the leader of a doomed mountain climbing expedition. He imagines setting his shoulders against the freezing wind and arranging himself in a position so that any search party will view him as "the fine figure of a soldier" (L 36). It is this same inaccurate view of death that causes Mr. Ramsay to romanticize the drowning of a crew of fishermen and repeatedly murmur "We perish . . . each alone" (L 165). This patriarchal view of learning and writing as an individual struggle is counter to the simultaneous and visual approach of Modernism in general and Bloomsbury and the Stephen sisters in particular.

In *Three Guineas*, Woolf addresses the uniting power of images as she discusses pictures of the Spanish Civil War: "Photographs are not arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye" (TG 10). These images of

death and destruction are so intense that they lead to a shared cultural experience. Woolf believes, “When we look at those photographs some fusion takes place within us; however different the education, the traditions behind us, our sensations are the same; and they are violent” (11). Instead of a worldview where each man (gendered language intentional) struggles in solitude to leave a mark on the world, Woolf sees intellectual pursuits as a way to bring individuals together. Mr. Ramsay, the fictional version of her father, laments that “[h]is own little light would shine, not very brightly, for a year or two, and then be merged in some bigger light, and that in a bigger still” (L 35), while Woolf herself writes novels, essays, and short stories that reflect Modernist and Formalist theory in an effort to add her flame to a larger light.

Visual Understanding

In the 1927 essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf writes of “[t]hat cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art . . .” (CE 2:224). While this seems to be an indictment of artistic fusion, it is necessary to remember that Woolf is multifaceted, contradictory, and, above all, facetious. When reading Woolf, one must remember she is not an author confined by traditional definitions of genre. This statement actually praises the interdisciplinary tendencies of the novel, tendencies that Woolf joyfully exploits throughout her career.

The narrator of *A Room of One's Own* jokes about authorial intrusion and the flexibility of truth by saying, “As I have said already that it was an October day, I dare not forfeit your respect and imperil the fair name of fiction by changing the seasons and describing lilacs hanging over garden walls” (R 16). This flexibility of voice that allows Woolf to address the reader directly is a style of writing more akin to interpreting a

painting than traditional writing where an author makes a declaration of fact and then bases the rest of the work on that truth. Instead of creating a definitive truth for each work, Woolf gives the reader options for interpretation. Even the identity of the narrator remains unfixed. In a parenthetical statement to the reader, the narrator says, “call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is not a matter of any importance” (R 5). Explicating a painting gives one the license to create a name or history for a character based on visual evidence, license that Woolf uses in her fiction to describe characters with suggestions or interpretations rather than declarations. Such writing is unconventional because names are one of the most basic elements of verbal communication. Since Woolf is not attempting to follow the established rules of writing, she leaves this information undefined and instead focuses on temporary, visual, or “in scene” aspects of characterization such as description, dialog, location, and action, starting with a moment or concrete detail.

Written English requires a linear form to be understandable, but in Woolf’s writing things become webbed. Rather than moving in a singular linear progression from the dawn of writing to the end of human life, writers influence each other in multiple ways. Whitworth believes that Woolf’s technique comes from the age in which she wrote: “The breaking of a sequence . . . is common to many modernist works. The reader is encouraged to interpret the works as if every word and image were simultaneously present” (154). This change in style flows perfectly into Woolf’s use of the written word to create verbal images. She creates scenes and characters where event “A” does not automatically lead into event “B” as Mr. Ramsay of *To the Lighthouse* would expect, but rather small pieces of information about a character or situation combines through stream

of consciousness narration to give the reader a picture “likely to contain more truth than fact” (R 4).

Woolf explicitly addresses the mingling of the fields of painting and writing in her essay “Walter Sickert.” Based on the anecdotal arguments of *A Room of One’s Own*, *Three Guineas*, and many of Woolf’s numerous essays, I extend the narrow or literal reading of this essay from praise of a specific artist and exhibition to a larger desire to integrate two seemingly separate fields of art. In this same essay Woolf categorizes authors by color palette according to her overall impressions of their works:

Pope has no great range of colours; he is more draftsman than colourist; clear washes of indigo, discreet blacks and violets best suit his exquisite sharp outlines—save that in the *Elegy to an Unfortunate Lady* there is a mass of funeral black; and the great image of *The Eastern Kings* glows, fantastically, if you like, dark crimson. Keats uses colour lavishly, lusciously, like a Venetian. In the *Eve of St Agnes* he paints for lines at a time, dipping his pen in mounds of pure red and blues. Tennyson on the other hand is never luscious; he uses the hard brush and the pure bright tints of a miniature painter. *The Princess* is illuminated like a monk’s manuscript; there are whole landscapes in the curve of the capital letters.

(CE 2: 242)

Woolf does not mean that “Eve of St. Agnes” contains a large number of red or blue images, but rather that both words and colors invoke emotions and that Keats’ poem creates sensations similar to a painting dominated by those hues. This same connection between language and color causes Sue Roe to describe Woolf’s writing as “stripped and

unpeeled, set on fire; her colours are dark and stark, her style is expressionist, showing a mind blowing open. The imagery is graphic, intensely visual” (164-65). I agree with Roe that the latent colors of Woolf’s works are at times “dark and stark,” but these colors simply provide a grounding framework; there are also inescapable, vivid colors of natural growth and fruitfulness that contrast the gloom.

As the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own* sits next to a traditionally trained scholar, she compares his academic way of gathering information to her own more visual and intuitive form of research.

[I glanced] with envy at the reader next door who was making the neatest abstracts, headed often with an A or a B or a C while my own notebook rioted with the wildest scribble of contradictory jottings. It was distressing, it was bewildering, it was humiliating. Truth had run through my fingers. Every drop had escaped . . . I had unconsciously, in my listlessness, in my desperation, been drawing a picture where I should, like my neighbor, have been writing a conclusion. (R 30-31)

Here Woolf again uses the alphabet as a symbol of female exclusion from academia. Despite the narrator’s apparent frustration with her organizational pattern, this is not a criticism of a circular or intuitive arguments. Woolf’s Socratic style allows her to appear to criticize the form of her argument, but she then reverses the reader’s expectations as she successfully arrives at a conclusion as to why women are the most studied topic of academic research, and thus validates her form of reasoning.

Integration

To study Virginia Woolf's integration of art and literature one must first consider her theory and publishing on the subject. True to her writing style, and unfortunately for beginning critics, it is difficult, if not impossible, to pin down what Woolf thinks about the connection between the two fields. Surely the relationship interested her, for she was a central part of the famous interdisciplinary artistic circle of Bloomsbury, published numerous essays on the subject, created the painter Lily Briscoe as a central subject of *To the Lighthouse*, and wrote a mammoth biography of artist Roger Fry. Despite, or perhaps because of, the ample evidence of her fascination, it is impossible to create one sentence that encompasses Woolf's appropriation of painting. Perhaps it is best to follow the strategy of Woolf's essay "Craftsmanship" in adding a revised title, "A Ramble Round Words" (CE 2: 245), and, instead of hoping to find a single statement to sum up the author's complicated relationship with painting, to examine individual works and statements in an effort to see not only how Woolf believed the two fields could merge but also how she accomplished this integration in her own novels.

One way to analyze Woolf's persistent fascination with art is to explore an area in which her work seems to push the limits of the form of writing: her almost painterly use of color. To understand Woolf's image-centered artistic technique in its relation to her success as a writer, this thesis will examine three of Woolf's most visually intriguing novels: *To the Lighthouse* (1927), *Orlando* (1928), and *Between the Acts* (1941). This is not to say that her other works lack visual or literary merit, but rather to recognize that from *Mrs. Dalloway* onward, Woolf found and then became comfortable in her own unique visually artistic voice in a way that is not as clearly evident in her earlier novels.

For the purpose of this analysis, *To the Lighthouse* will represent Woolf's most literal translation of visual art, *Orlando* will show her experimentations with illustrations and visual rhetoric, and *Between the Acts* will provide closure as visual and verbal art come together in a theatrical retelling of the history of England.

CHAPTER TWO

THE ART OF *TO THE LIGHTHOUSE*

Of all Virginia Woolf's novels, *To the Lighthouse* is the most logical place to begin a discussion of the author's relationship with painting. Woolf built the structural form of this novel around principles of visual balance, and the character of Lily Briscoe provides a fictional locus for some of the author's feelings about her and her sister's struggle to produce art. *To the Lighthouse* is similar to a family portrait in that it is a recreation of the author's own life, an attempt to capture the essence of her deceased parents, and a series of immortalized moments analogous to photographs. Both the fictional painting and the novel itself exorcize the ghosts of the past by allowing author and character to articulate their inner conflicts with the deceased: "And as she dipped into the blue paint, she dipped too into the past there" (L 172).

In her notebook Woolf first imagined the form of *To the Lighthouse* as a novel that would read as "Two blocks joined by a corridor" (qtd in Lee 467). In form, these "two blocks" represent the first and third sections, "The Window" and "The Lighthouse," while the "corridor" is the second section, "Time Passes." The first and third sections show the complexities of the Ramsay family through vivid descriptions of two individual days eleven years apart. This way of using specific details to imply a character's larger life is closely akin to the idea of paintings showing a specific moment, which then allows the viewer to extrapolate something larger based on a single image. Even the language

Woolf uses to describe these two sections, “Two blocks,” connects back to painting as square or rectangular objects bring to mind the shape of an artist’s canvas. This balanced novel reflects the influence of formalism and Woolf’s friend and mentor Roger Fry.

In her book *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual*, Jane Goldman compares the three part structure of *To the Lighthouse* to an eclipse:

The movement of an eclipse . . . suggests that of an elegy in its transition from light to darkness to light again; and the three parts of *To the Lighthouse* echo this “triadic” 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; “The Lighthouse,” again suggestive of illumination, this time artificially generated rather than passively received, describes one (post-war) day leading to vision and enlightenment. (169)

Partially based on Woolf’s own accounts of an eclipse that she witnessed as a child, this interpretation stresses the importance of images in the novel. Woolf’s graphic design for *To the Lighthouse* logically developed into the motif of painting and visual art that continues throughout the work.

The bracketed passages of “Time Passes” further the visual similarities between *To the Lighthouse* and painting as the corners and sides of each pair of brackets imply a rectangular shape. In the unusual narrative structure of this section, the visually based descriptions of the condition of the vacation home take precedence over the major events

in the characters' lives, which, at least according to literary conventions, are the basis of fiction. Most of western literature uses brief descriptions of scenery and setting that interrupt dialog and plot development; Woolf reverses this accepted order by focusing on physical setting and allowing only a few sentences summarizing conventionally important plot developments—the publication of a book, family deaths, and World War I—to interrupt her writing style. Because of this inversion, the artistic descriptions of nature's encroachment serve as the center of the narrative while the bracketed sentences, which become extraneous details by virtue of the size and shape, work in a visual and descriptive way. Goldman sees a similar correlation between brackets and painting in "The Lighthouse" when "[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 alive still) was thrown back into the sea.]" (L 180) According to Goldman, "The boy's cutting of the fish may represent the artist's act of creation: cutting out a square of nature and framing—the square brackets themselves acting as a frame" (180). This idea of small specific images naturally leads into Woolf's larger artistic design.

Woolf saw *To the Lighthouse* as "All character—not a view of the world" (qtd in Lee 467), but as she faces the ghosts of her parents in order to finally lay them to rest, she inadvertently comments on societal changes within Edwardian England. Though she wished to base this work on specific characters rather than a larger picture of the world, the amount of change that occurs in the eleven years of the "Time Passes" section necessitates a change within the Ramsay family. The pre-war life of "The Window" cannot exist after the nearly unspeakable personal and national traumas—in a novel where Woolf magnifies small events and days, these events receive only a few brief

concrete sentences—of the deaths of Mrs. Ramsay, Prue, and Andrew and communal trauma of World War I. The disintegration the Ramsay family experiences during the condensed time of this section reflects, despite Woolf's stated intentions, the loss of a generation, a common theme of modernist literature. This tension between the individual and the representative is similar to that encountered in interpretations of historical paintings. Though the subject of a historical portrait may have been a specific man or woman, as time passes future generations of viewers may interpret the subject's clothing and appearance, the setting and background of the painting, and the artist's very style of brushstroke as emblematic of the time period. Thus the artist's subject, a personal relationship that connects to Woolf's desire to accurately portray her parents, can become the face of an age.

In the essay "Walter Sickert," arguably Woolf's most powerful treatise on the relationship between painting and writing, Woolf quotes Sickert's self assessment, "I have always been a literary painter, thank goodness, like all decent painters." She then goes on to justify her own interpretation of Sickert's works as visual stories and even novels (CE 2: 243). Woolf's willingness to view another's work as crossing boundaries of medium and genre allows for a wider interpretation of her own. With this license, I propose that several central images of *To the Lighthouse* are, in fact, Woolf's attempt to "translate"—a usage of the word coined by Roger Fry for his own modernist reinterpretations of classical pieces of art—into language the visual styles of collage, religious iconography, still life, and post-impressionism.

Collage as Deconstruction

The very first image of *To the Lighthouse* is James Ramsay cutting apart a magazine: “sitting on the floor cutting out pictures from the illustrated catalogue of the Army and Navy Store, [he] endowed the picture of a refrigerator, as his mother spoke, with heavenly bliss” (L 3). Though literary critics tend to focus on the parent-child relationship in this scene and to interpret James’ cutting as an act of anger that he cannot direct toward his father, I see this as Woolf’s reference to the emerging art form of collage. In her biography of artist Roger Fry, Woolf praises Paul Cezanne and Pablo Picasso—the cubist painter who created the first collage in 1912, only fifteen years before Woolf’s publication of the first edition of *To the Lighthouse*—as the ones who “had shown the way; writers should throw representation to the winds and follow suit” (149).

One of the most important aspects of Picasso’s innovative paintings and collages is his integration of music and visual art. His interest in representing a separate field of art through his chosen medium echoes Woolf’s own attempts to incorporate painting in her writing. Picasso’s 1912 *Guitare, partition, verre* (Figure 5) shows his use of both collage and the form of a guitar; “music and musical instruments have long been recognized as a central theme of Cubist subject matter” (Kachur 253). The vivid shades of aqua and orange strengthen the connection between Woolf and Picasso because they, as well as the bold and graphic print of the wallpaper background, are similar to the design preferences of the Omega Workshop—a shop that included both Woolf’s sister Vanessa Bell and Roger Fry, the subject of Woolf’s 1940 biography, and that was known for its



5 Pablo Ruiz Picasso. *Guitare, partition, verre*, 1912. From Texas A & M University web site, last accessed on 25 February 2005:
<http://www.tamu.edu/mocl/picasso/works/1912/opp12-37.html>

emphasis on interior design. As Picasso uses paper, sheet music, wallpaper, and newspaper to create a collage of a guitar, he touches on some of the same elements of design surrounding Woolf. Picasso's use of a newspaper is an inclusion of language in that both the shape and meaning of words add to the overall effect of a collage as a representation of a musical instrument and the sound that it creates; conversely, Woolf uses language to achieve some of the same links between art and writing as a way to accurately embody human life.

In her pivotal essay "Walter Sickert," Woolf describes a scene of cutting similar to Picasso's collage technique. At a dinner party, the guests "fetched a book of photographs from Sickert's paintings and began cutting off a hand or a head, and made them connect or separate, not as a hand or a head but as if they had some quite different relationship" (CE 2: 236). This playful act of first dismembering and then reassembling a painting rejects accepted spatial laws—a head must attach to a neck, a hand is the proper way to end an arm—in favor of new ways of interpreting and, consequently, recreating any object or subject.

During the first scene of *To the Lighthouse*, James' positive feelings toward his mother give way to anger at his father. Mrs. Ramsay then tries to distract her son by finding something else for him to cut: "All she could do now was to admire the refrigerator, and turn the pages of the Stores list in the hope that she might come upon something like a rake, or a mowing machine, which, with its prongs and its handles, would need the greatest skill and care in cutting out" (L 15). This attempt to pacify James works only temporarily, because as Mrs. Ramsay cleans up the clippings she reflects that James will remember that afternoon for the rest of his life: "No, she thought, putting

together some of the pictures he had cut out—a refrigerator, a mowing machine, a gentleman in evening dress—children never forget” (L 62). Both James’ sense of anxiety and his act of cutting the paper foreshadow the loss and destruction of “Time Passes.” As James removes an object from its background, he changes the spatial relationships within the picture. This absence of the expected subject predicts the vacancy of the house, which then allows for a shift in focus from the characters to their surroundings. This same fascination with an empty or missing center is the focus of Woolf’s 1922 novel *Jacob’s Room*, which chronicles a young man’s life by describing his room and, as discussed in chapter one, her 1931 novel *The Waves* and Vanessa Bell’s 1912 painting *Virginia Woolf in a Deckchair* (Figure 4).

In the *Selected Letters of Vanessa Bell*, Woolf’s sister contemplates a way of painting with large swaths of unmixed color comparable to the large chunks of paper in Picasso’s collages:

I am trying to paint as if it 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. It’s amusing to make these experiments even if they don’t succeed. (qtd in Goldman 145)

Rather than forcing colors to mix, both Bell and Picasso work with large chunks of each color or texture to communicate their ideas. In terms of writing, this technique is comparable to Woolf’s stylistic choice to keep each of the three sections of *To the Lighthouse*, “The Window,” “Time Passes,” and “The Lighthouse,” distinct. Jane Goldman writes, “The range of colours [in *To the Lighthouse*] suggest [sic] a Post-

Impressionist mosaic of oppositional planes” (172). Each separate narrative adds to the whole so that the innovative form emphasizes the isolated, disjointed, and transitory nature of family life.

Just as fear and change disrupt even the happiest moments in the Ramsays’ life, so too does the artistic evolution of collage contain negative aspects of control. As Mrs. Ramsay says, “Let us find another picture to cut out” (L 30), she uses the revolutionary and rebellious new art form of collage as a type of domestic busywork designed to distract James and maintain hierarchical stability. Woolf reproduces her mother Julia Stephen’s way of keeping peace by deferring to her husband and the traditional gender roles of the author’s early childhood. It is this type of sedation that causes Woolf to fight against what she calls “The Angel in the House,” the female figure who stifles creativity and must be conquered before a woman can produce art. Woolf describes this phantom in her essay “Professions for Women.” Like Mrs. Ramsay, whom both Woolf and Bell identify with their biological mother (Lee 474), The Angel “was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily” (CE 2:285). This is the phantom Woolf believes every female artist must kill in order to create (286).

Maternal Consecration

To emphasize the distinctive goals and interests of modernism and post-impressionism, Virginia Woolf refers to classical art styles in order to highlight her innovations and those of her contemporaries. The recurring image of Mrs. Ramsay holding James on her lap connects to the Renaissance heritage of Christian iconography. The cultural significance of images of the Virgin Mary holding the Christ Child amplifies

the importance of glimpses of Mrs. Ramsay holding James to the extent that other characters imbue this sight with religious significance. This pseudo-idolatry reinforces imperialistic tendencies to look at western women as precious flowers men must fight to protect and diminishes Mrs. Ramsay's individual identity by making her a symbol of the patriarchal church.

In the first quarter of *To the Lighthouse* there are eight individual descriptions of Mrs. Ramsay and James that in some way include religious imagery (L 30, 33, 36, 42, 44, 47, 47, and 52). The image of mother and child provides the men of the novel with a sort of validation, or even "consecration," to use Mr. Ramsay's phrase:

Knitting her reddish-brown hairy stocking, with her head outlined absurdly by the gilt frame, the green shawl which she had tossed over the edge of the frame, and the authenticated masterpiece by Michael Angelo, Mrs. Ramsay smoothed out what had been harsh in her manner a moment before, raised his head, and kissed her little boy on the forehead. (L 30)

The gilt frame surrounding Mrs. Ramsay's head acts as a halo strengthening her connection to the Virgin Mary. At the same time, the picture within the frame, "the authenticated masterpiece by Michael Angelo," refers back to the very tradition that Woolf is emulating. Jane Goldman agrees that the inclusion of this specific detail "sanctions" Woolf's "classical mother-and-son composition" (L 173). The green shawl may represent the shade of aqua usually used in iconography of the Madonna. Even the names of the birds, Mary and Joseph (L 81-82), outside Mrs. Ramsay's window (which again acts as an implied frame) continue the character's association with the Virgin Mary.

As Mr. Bankes watches Mrs. Ramsay knitting, the vocabularies of religion, painting, and domesticity come together in a way that reaffirms the social system that places man in a position of authority:

why that woman pleased him so; why the sight of her reading a fairy tale to her boy had upon him precisely the same effect as the solution to a mathematical problem, so that he rested in contemplation of it, and felt, as he felt when he had proved something absolute about the digestive system of plants, that barbarity was tamed, the reign of chaos subdued. (L 47)

Mr. Bankes' response to this sight is especially significant because it is involuntary. Mrs. Ramsay "pleased him so," but it is the idea of her, rather than her as an individual, that enables him to subdue the chaos of the world. The idea of a domesticated woman reading to her son appeals to Mr. Bankes because her role as wife and mother reassures him that British society will continue. His response to Mrs. Ramsay and James is unconscious, just as is Mrs. Ramsay's unintentional thought, "We are in the hands of the Lord?" Both reactions are so socially ingrained that they become automatic, but this does not make them true. Because Mrs. Ramsay becomes irritated with her own reaction, "The insincerity slipping in among the truths roused her, annoyed her" (L 64), one might imagine that she would not approve of her family and friend's idolization; however, her devotion to her husband's appearance of superiority and her commitment to her role as a mother combined with her covert manipulation of the household make it likely that she is the artist of the correlation between religious ideals of womanhood and her own appearance.

Mr. Ramsay's view of his wife and son is affected by romantic and religious ideals based on emotional responses rather than the logic he so values. Mr. Ramsay imagines himself to be a great hero, an embodiment of masculine valor, who "gazes at his wife and son, who are very distant at first gradually come closer and closer, till lips and book and head are clearly before him . . . and bending his magnificent head before her—who will blame him if he does homage to the beauty of the world" (L 36). The idea of paying homage to an image, a representation of "the beauty of the world" again stresses the importance of mother and son as symbols rather than individuals. Though all the characters physically inhabit the same house, during two glimpses of the pair the viewer is separate from the subjects by a symbolic picture frame: a window. Lily Briscoe sees "Mrs. Ramsay sitting with James in the window" (L 47) and Mr. Ramsay "looked at his wife and son in the window" (L 33). In these instances the window, also the name of this first section of *To the Lighthouse*, acts as a physical picture frame that works to distance the viewers, and consequently the readers, from the mother and child as individuals. Thus, through distance, the details of mother and son fade and the characters become representative in a way that logically leads to Lily Briscoe's non-representational post-impressionist painting.

Many of Woolf's contemporaries shared her interest in the ways that a new generation of artists could reconstruct traditional forms of painting. In the form of Lily Briscoe's painting, Woolf offers viewers an alternative to or a reinterpretation of the classical images of the Madonna and Child in *To the Lighthouse*. This replicates the artist Roger Fry's desire to "[translate]' masterpieces into Postimpressionist terms" (Reid 197). Fry himself created a post-impressionist replica of Raphael's *Bridgewater*

Madonna (Figures 6 and 7). According to Panthea Reid, Vanessa Bell asked her sister to review the Omega Workshop's exhibition of such "translations." Such activity may have led Woolf to believe "that simplifications of form could, after all, convey emotions" (197), and consequently include through the form of Lily's painting both traditionally accepted images of Mrs. Ramsay and James and her own versions of Omega artists' translations in *To the Lighthouse*.

Post-impressionism

Lily Briscoe transforms the ideal womanhood of Renaissance religious paintings into a post-impressionistic interpretation of mother and son: "But the picture was not of them, she said. Or, not in [Mr. Bankes'] sense" (L 52). Despite the challenges presented to a female artist by a world that feels, as Charles Tansley told her, "Women can't paint, women can't write" (L 48), Lily Briscoe manages to explore her own artistic vision. To do this the artist, Woolf's representative within the text, must interpret Mrs. Ramsay, and consequently Julia Stephens, as an individual rather than a symbol of womanhood. Though there have been many paintings of the Madonna and Child, men have created almost all of them, including Roger Fry's "translation" of Raphael's *Bridgewater Madonna*. The experiences of male artists as they paint a mother and child are vastly different from the experiences of female artists. As Goldman puts it, "In Lily's painting, and Woolf's novel, both the subject and object of the artist's gaze is feminine" (169). Lily Briscoe as an artist and Woolf as a novelist must avoid the clichés of portraying a mother and child in order to describe their subject accurately. Like Mrs. Ramsay's involuntary declaration, "We are in the hands of the Lord?" (L 64)—a repetition of a phrase she does not mean—a painting that follows the style and technique of an



6 Roger Fry, *Bridgewater Madonna*, 1917.
From Panthea Reid. *Art and Affection: A Life of Virginia Woolf*. New York: Oxford U P, 1996.
Figure 46.



7 Raphael. *Bridgewater Madonna*, 1508-09.
From the Breast Feeding Art Gallery web site,
last accessed 27 February 2005:
<http://www.geocities.com/HotSprings/Spa/3156/mother3.htm>

“authenticated masterpiece” risks portraying the subjects according to tradition rather than in the way the artist intends.

Lily Briscoe is acutely aware that her way of interpreting and recording Mrs. Ramsay is not acceptable according to the standards of either religious iconographers or popular painters, but she does not compromise her vision in favor of popular pastels:

She could have done it differently of course; the colour could have been thinned and faded; the shapes etherealized; that was how Paunceforte would have seen it. But then she did not see it like that. She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral. (L 48)

Nor is she willing to follow the romantic and idealistic style of the masterpieces of Michael Angelo and Raphael: "She simplifies, abstracts, and adjusts her image until it attains the independence from its model that makes it neither a substitute for the unattainable Mrs. Ramsay nor a symbol of 'universal veneration,' but significant in itself as an arrangement of form" (Reed 30-31). Lily's determination to first record and then remember Mrs. Ramsay naturally mirrors Woolf's own desire to portray her mother accurately.

Because the character Lily Briscoe is a representation of Woolf's sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, the theme of artistic struggle within *To the Lighthouse* seems to apply to both the fields of painting and writing. The inclusion of a younger and less successful version of Bell allows Woolf to recreate the childhood experience for both women. Though Woolf is very interested in ways that she can combine art forms, as Goldman points out, "Bell . . . is less certain of inter-artistic analogies: for [Bell] writing

is ‘all to do with life.’” She believes that “the visual arts [are] a retreat from life” (166). This is at odds with Woolf’s desire to, in the words Lindsay Staniforth, “recreate and interpret the eternal enigmas of life” (26)

According to Lily’s vision, “Mother and child then—objects of universal veneration, and in this case the mother was famous for her beauty—might be reduced . . . to a purple shadow without irreverence” (L 52). Though she is the subject of Lily’s painting, Mrs. Ramsay does not take the younger woman’s artistic pursuits seriously: “Lily’s picture! Mrs. Ramsay smiled. With her little Chinese eyes and her puckered up face, she would never marry; one could not take her painting very seriously; she was an independent little creature, and Mrs. Ramsay liked her for it; so, remembering her promise, she bent her head” (L 17). In the final pages of *To the Lighthouse* Mrs. Ramsay reappears briefly. She is not a ghost or a figment of Lily’s imagination; as Beth Rigel Daugherty explains, she is

simply *there*, resurrected. . . . In that powerful moment, Woolf fuses her personal, feminist, and artistic aims to restore her mother, a woman destroyed by the patriarchal myths of Mary and Eve, to her own identity and thus transforms a woman who worked to perpetuate the patriarchal society into the personal, feministic, and artistic heritage she herself needs. (289)

Here Woolf the author and Lily the character are able to see Mrs. Ramsay without the painful history of gender roles and disappointment. In this instant the dead woman ceases to be “The Angel in the House” and becomes a source of positive inspiration.

Though Woolf states that it is finished, she does not include a description of Lily's painting.

Quickly, as if she were recalled by something over there, she turned to her canvas. There it was—her picture. Yes, with all its greens and blues, its lines running up and across, its attempt at something. It would be hung in the attics, she thought; it would be destroyed. But what did it matter? she asked herself, taking up her brush again. She looked at the steps; they were empty; she looked at her canvas; it was blurred. With a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second, she drew a line there, in the center. It was done; it was finished. Yes, she thought, laying down her brush in extreme fatigue, I have had my vision. (L 208-09)

The final image of the novel can only exist due to the passage of time and loved ones that occurs in "Time Passes." Because of this dependence, I believe that though Lily's painting and its relationship to Woolf's own process of writing is fascinating, the central theme of the work is not the creation of the work itself, but rather the artistic changes, both within the Modernist movement and Lily Briscoe herself, that allow the creation to take place.

Still Life

Many scholars have examined the dinner party of *To the Lighthouse*, focusing on everything from the meal to the seating arrangement to the British socio-economic structure of the time period. I propose that the dinner party scene, specifically the centerpiece and Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts, shows a distinct and unmistakable connection

to the artistic genre of Dutch still life and works to prepare the reader for the dissolution of “Time Passes” and, ultimately, the completion of Lily’s painting.

As Mrs. Ramsay looks at the dinner table, the tangible and socially acceptable product of her own creative process, she sees an arrangement that almost exactly mirrors the seventeenth-century painting *Still Life with Fruit and Flowers* by Balthasar van der Ast and Ambrosius Bosschaert (Figure 8):

Now eight candles were stood down the table, and after the first stoop the flames stood upright and drew with them into visibility the long table entire, and in the middle a yellow and purple dish of fruit. . . . Rose’s arrangement of the grapes and pears, of the horny pink-lined shell, of the bananas, made her think of a trophy fetched from the bottom of the sea, of Neptune’s banquet, of the bunch that hangs with vine leaves over the shoulder of Bacchus (in some picture) (L 97)

Mrs. Ramsay’s vivid description contains the grapes and shells of *Still Life with Fruit and Flowers*, and her own thought process draws a connection between the sight before her and a painting somewhere.

As well as content, the table setting correlates with the genre of still life because of tone and meaning. A common feature of these paintings is some type of flaw, such as decomposition, a misplaced utensil, or a spilled glass. Despite the lush and appealing table setting, the artist includes some sort of the reminder that life is transient. Rather than describe a wilted flower in the arrangement or a glass dropped by a character, Woolf focuses on Mrs. Ramsay’s feelings of anxiety regarding the loss of a piece of fruit:



8 Balthasar van der Ast and Ambrosius Bosschaert. *Still Life with Fruit and Flowers*, 1620-21. From the Web Museum, Paris web site, last accessed 26 February 2005:
<http://www.ibiblio.org/wm/paint/auth/ast/flower-fruit-rijks/flower-fruit-rijks.jpg>

No, she said, she did not want a pear. Indeed she had been keeping guard over the dish of fruit (without realising it) jealously, hoping that nobody would touch it. Her eyes had been going in and out among the curves and shadows of the fruit, among the rich purples of the lowland grapes, then over the horny ridges of the shell, putting a yellow against a purple, a curved shape against a round shape, without knowing why she did it, or why every time she did it, she felt more and more serene; until, oh, what a pity that they should do it—a hand reached out, took a pear, and spoilt the whole thing. (L 108-09)

Instead of showing a single moment altered by imperfection, the form of the novel allows Woolf to show a moment, one that a character believes is perfect, marred by the action of another. Closely tied to entropy, the principle that things will gradually move from a state of order to a state of disorder, this style of painting fits with Mrs. Ramsay's earlier thought upon looking at James, "he will never be so happy again" (L 58). This sense of transience is evident in *Still Life with Fruit and Flowers* in the stem of lifeless flowers in the vase, the spiders, butterflies, and insects crawling across the table, and the mold or mildew spots on the piece of fruit partially covered by the grape leaves. Just like the Ramsay family, the tableau will never be this well preserved again. Due to the passage of time the fruit will rot, the flowers wither, and the life forms eat, defecate, and die. In the same way, the beautiful scene of the dinner party is temporary and imperfect, and its very mutability gives way to the changes of "Time Passes."

After the dinner party, Mrs. Ramsay leaves the dining room: "And directly she went a sort of disintegration set in" (L 112). Just as many still lifes contain flaws to

remind viewers that life is temporary, in Christian terms, that Christ could return at any time, the threat of the hand snatching the pear finds culmination in the deaths of Prue, Andrew, and Mrs. Ramsay. In “Time Passes” the dissolution foretold first by James’ cutting and then by Mrs. Ramsay thoughts takes place within the abandoned house:

Tortoise-shell butterflies burst from the chrysalis and pattered their life out on the windowpane. Poppies sowed themselves among the dahlias; the lawn waved with long grass; giant artichokes towered among roses; a fringed carnation flowered among the cabbages. . . . Let the wind blow; let the poppy seed itself and the carnation mate with the cabbage. Let the swallow build in the drawing room, and the thistle thrust aside the tiles, and the butterfly sun itself on the faded chintz of the arm chair. (L 137-38)

The unbridled fecundity of this description resembles another seventeenth-century Dutch still life, *Vase of Flowers* by Jan Davidsz de Heem (Figure 9). In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf writes, “let . . . the carnation mate with the cabbage,” a genetic impossibility that tells the reader that not all natural laws remain in effect during “Time Passes.” According to the National Gallery of Art, there are thirty-one individual plant species in this work, a diverse array of flowers that cannot naturally bloom simultaneously. This pictured impossibility may imply either some sort of outside influence such as an act of God or a greenhouse or, and this is more appropriate in light of Woolf’s similar technique, a passage of time condensed into a single image.

Though difficult to see in reproductions, like *Still Life with Fruit and Flowers*, *Vase of Flowers* contains a large number of guests who would be unacceptable at a



9 Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Vase of Flowers*, 1660. From the National Gallery of Art web site, last accessed 25 February 2005:
<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pimage?45814+0+0+gg47>

conventional dinner party or in a flower arrangement. “Near the bottom, a salamander stares hungrily at a spider, while a snail, moth, and ants crawl on the marble shelf. All these creatures symbolize night and decay. On the white poppy at the top, a caterpillar and butterfly evoke the idea of rebirth from a cocoon or tomb” (National Gallery of Art). The poppy that appears in both works is often associated with sleep and death, as seen in the poem “In Flanders Fields the poppies grow” by John McCrae and the *Wizard of Oz*.

The disorganization of “Time Passes” gives way to a sort of rebirth in “The Lighthouse.” In her essay “Killing the House of the Angel: Spatial Poetics in Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*,” Mary Beth Pringle proposes that social changes of World War I and the disintegration of the Ramsay family is necessary for Lily Briscoe to finish her painting. To support her argument, Pringle cites Pablo Picasso’s statement, “Every act of creation is ultimately an act of destruction because to create something you must first destroy something that someone previously held dear” (qtd in 306). This declaration connects back to James’ cutting as a form of collage making. James destroys the commercial images of the Army and Navy catalogue—a subject choice that may predict World War I and an action that anticipates the natural world’s destruction of the house and family that allows Lily to create (generally a verb reserved for God or men) an image inspired by mother and child that avoids visual and social clichés praising maternal beauty and purity.

Though the dinner party scene and allusions to still life occur near the center of *To the Lighthouse*, it is their style and meaning that provide a new way to understand the entire book. Lily moves the salt shaker and understands the structure of her work during the dinner party scene. Because of the passage of time and the death of Mrs. Ramsay,

events that follow the tone and meaning of a still life, Lily, and by implication Woolf, is able to finish her work. The novel's themes of mortality and nature are most visible in relation to this genre of painting, which fits with Woolf's idea that *To the Lighthouse* should be a new form, an elegy in prose, and, I propose, a series of paintings in words.

CHAPTER THREE

THE VISUAL RHETORIC OF *ORLANDO*

The connection between the realms of art and writing in *Orlando* is just as important as in *To the Lighthouse*, though not as easily discernable. Both works are profoundly concerned with the role of the artist as a creator of original art and a biographer who tries to capture a subject. As Laura Marcus phrases it, “*To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, on the surface such different fictions, share a sense of the complex relationships between model and copy, fictional and biographical representations, and a focus on time, memory, historical rupture and sexual identities” (222). A novel disguised as biography, *Orlando* continues Woolf’s experimentations with chronological time and visual art, and introduces photography, a type of art that seems to present the truth of a moment, but can actually be used to manipulate the viewer.

Originally published only a year apart, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and *Orlando* (1928) both focus on specific daily occurrences in the lives of artists who each seem to produce only one work. After describing mundane daily life, the fictional biographer of *Orlando*, and by implication Woolf, chooses to undermine the inclusion of such details by proposing the very way of writing used in *To the Lighthouse*: “a conclusion . . . , one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement ‘Time Passed’” (O 98). While a casual reader might interpret this statement at face value, after all the task of a proper biographer is to focus on the monumental and historical

events deemed important by a masculine society, a reader familiar with Woolf's work will recognize the playful reference to her earlier novel. Later in *Orlando*, the biographer condenses decades of British history into approximately a page, and then adds, "all of which is properly enclosed in square brackets, as above, for the good reason that a parenthesis it was without any importance in Orlando's life" (O 256). This echoes Woolf's style in the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse* where the primary narrative focuses on the events in the empty vacation home with only brief intrusions of bracketed sentences to describe what is going on in the outside world. Three of these informative interludes—Mrs. Ramsay's death, Prue's marriage, and Andrew's death—fit with a description of the passage of time in *Orlando*: "A coffin was borne into the chapel. A marriage procession came out of it. Armed men with helmets left for the war" (O 319). These similarities regarding Woolf's way of showing chronological progression in both novels, a theme I linked to painting in Chapter Two, suggest that, though it is less prominent than in *To the Lighthouse*, art is essential to the form of *Orlando*. In the form of illustrations, art guides the reader's interpretations of the text and challenges the preconceptions that images can only convey fact. This connects back to Woolf's statement in *A Room of One's Own* that fiction is "likely to contain more truth than fact" (4); as a fictional biography of Vita Sackville-West, and of the 1920s as a whole, *Orlando* is able to come closer to the essence of Woolf's subject because the book itself is a work of art capable of expressing the truth that factual representations, photographs, may lack. In this sense, the central work of art in *Orlando* is not the "The Oak Tree" but rather Woolf's creation of the novel, the translation of portraiture into language.

As the young boy Orlando sits under a tree, he experiences a visual type of time where “image followed image” (O 19). This resembles the way Lily sees Paul and Minta’s married life: “Their lives appeared to her in a series of scenes; one on the staircase at dawn” (L 172). Lily then goes on to imagine specific images and events in the couple’s life, but she remains aware that her snapshots are not objective truth: “Not a word of it was true; she had made it up; but it was what she knew them by all the same” (L 173). Orlando has a similar experience while walking home in the company of Mr. Pope: “Lamp posts lit with oil lamps occurred every two hundred yards or so, but between lay a considerable stretch of pitch darkness” (O 204). This way of interpreting life as a string of pictures or moments partially contradicts Woolf’s description of reality in “Modern Fiction”: “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; but a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (CE 2:106). Though the images come one after another in both *To the Lighthouse* and *Orlando*, a style that seems to advocate traditional linear thought, Woolf is not saying that a simultaneous and visual way of understanding the world should be translated into a linear series. Although Lily and Orlando process images individually, their order is not significant. Each brief vision contributes equally to the whole in a way that contrasts with the progressive and linear way of thought associated with Mr. Ramsay.

After becoming a woman, Orlando feels alienated from the male dominated literary tradition: “Ignorant and poor as we are compared with the other sex . . . armoured with every weapon as they are, while they debar us even from a knowledge of the alphabet” (O 159). This disenfranchisement is vastly different from her feelings of

freedom and entitlement as a young male poet. When the female Orlando tries to write, a blot of ink derails her creative process: “It was some infirmity of the quill, she supposed; it was dry or split. She dipped it again. The blot increased. She tried to go on with what she was saying; now words came” (O 238). Orlando cannot find the words to express her thoughts, so she turns to an unconscious form of sketching. The poet’s frustration is strikingly similar to that experienced by the narrator of *A Room of One’s Own*. In both cases a female writer attempts to express herself through language and instead looks down to find that she has produced a piece of visual art. Orlando declares writing impossible and then inadvertently produces a poem. “Nothing more repulsive could be imagined than to feel the ink flowing thus in a cascade of involuntary inspiration” (O 239). This event recalls Mrs. Ramsay’s unintentional declaration “We are in the hands of the Lord,” and more importantly her frustration at being “trapped into saying something she did not mean” (L 63). In both cases the characters unconsciously spout “mellifluous fluencies,” which they, and one can assume Woolf, feel are “worse than no[t] thinking at all” (O 243). This patriarchal control of language that leads one woman to defer to God and another to spout, in her own words, “the most insipid verse” (O 238) is represented by the very conventions of the biography, a genre that Woolf both honors and satirizes in *Orlando*, first emulating the conventional form and then undercutting tradition by manipulating the genre for her own purposes.

Family Tradition

To understand the unique way that Woolf utilizes visual rhetoric in *Orlando*, one must recognize the rich family traditions from which she draws. Virginia Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was traditional, linear, verbal, academic scholarship personified. Just

as his fictional representation, Mr. Ramsay, struggles to get to the letter Z, Stephen edited the initial twenty-six volumes of the mammoth *Dictionary of National Biography*. Woolf seems to resent this work that honored predominantly male contributors to British history. In a diary entry from December 1923, she writes, “the DNB crushed [my brother Adrian’s] life out before he was born. It gave me a twist of the head too. I shouldn’t have been so clever, but I should have been more stable, without that contribution to the history of England” (qtd in Cooley 72). Woolf even makes teasing reference to her father’s masterpiece in *Orlando* as her biographer persona complains, “The true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute” (O305-06). In contrast to Stephen’s long and unrelenting work, Woolf again satirizes her father as Orlando declares, “‘I will write,’ she said, ‘what I enjoy writing’; and so had scratched out twenty-six volumes” (O 175). Though the *Dictionary of National Biography* was a major influence on Woolf’s theories regarding traditional biography and how such a genre could be translated into fiction, it was not her only inspiration.

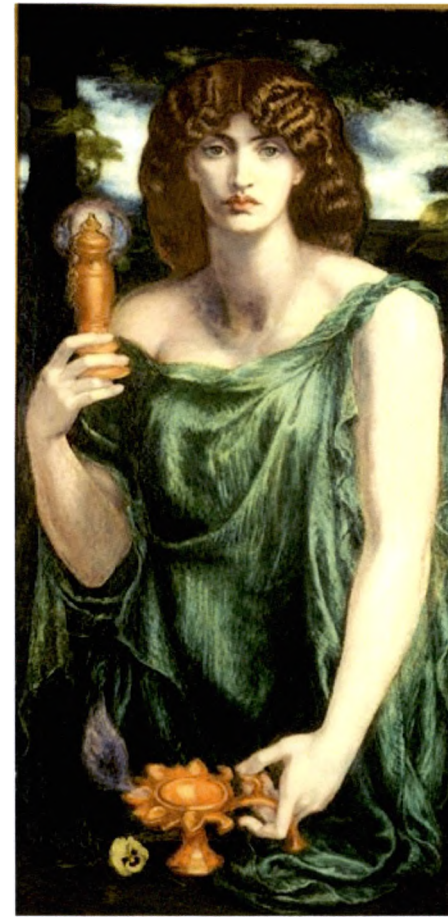
In the last chapter I analyzed Lily Briscoe as a representation of Woolf’s sister Vanessa Bell; however, few things in Woolf’s writing have only one meaning. In the final section of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily feels Mr. Ramsay’s demand for sympathy and avoids falling into the traditional female role of comforter: “Oh Mr. Ramsay! Dear Mr. Ramsay! That was what that kind old lady who sketched, Mrs. Beckwith, would have said instantly, and rightly. But no” (L 152). Goldman interprets this scene as a clear sign of Woolf’s “distinction between the submissive art of the Victorian aunt and the defiantly silent art of ‘Mrs. Bell’” (179). Though Goldman is correct that Woolf is referencing two

different schools of female creativity embodied by her sister and her great-aunt Julia Margaret Cameron, the idea that this shows Woolf's 'distinction' and, by implication, preference between the two forms forces an author who refused to be confined by binary oppositions into an either/or position. Understanding the character Lily Briscoe as a culmination of the suppressed talents of previous generations of female artists in a form that pays tribute to the current generation and Vanessa Bell allows for Woolf's redemption and recreation of her foremothers through her art in much the same way as her character reclaims Mrs. Ramsay. If we accept Lily Briscoe as a multifaceted representation of female artists that includes aspects of Cameron and Mrs. Ramsay as Julia Duckworth Stephen, then Cameron's 1872 *Head of Mrs. Herbert Duckworth* (Figure 10) anticipates Lily's painting.

A family tradition of works that refer to or quote famous paintings—or in the case of Cameron's illustrations to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King and Other Poems*, visual art that alludes to literature in an inversion of Woolf—supports my claims from Chapter Two. Interestingly, Helen Wussow proposes that "Cameron's photograph of Julia Duckworth may be a quotation from another image" (5). Describing *Head of Mrs. Herbert Duckworth*, Wussow writes, "She [Julia Duckworth] gazes straight on at the viewer, and her pose and haunting eyes recall works by Pre-Raphaelite artists, such as *Mnemosyne* (1881) by Dante Gabriel Rossetti" (5) (Figure 11). Despite Cameron's tendency to uphold patriarchal culture, there is a difference between a woman's photograph of another woman and a man's painting of a woman, as evident in Lily Briscoe's painting in comparison to the "authenticated masterpiece."



10 Julia Margaret Cameron, *Head of Mrs. Herbert Duckworth*, 1872. From the National Gallery of Victoria web site, last accessed on 4 March 2005:
<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/cameron/841560phfa.shtml>



11 Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *Mnemosyne*, 1881. From the Rossetti Archive web site, last accessed on 4 March 2005:
<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s261.rap.html>

In the 1929 *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf again brings up issues of traditional art forms in a post-war world. She asks, "When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other's eyes that romance was killed?" (R 15) The premise of this argument is Woolf's hypothetical question, "I went on to wonder if honestly one could name two living poets now as great as Tennyson and Christina Rossetti were then" (R 14). On the surface this statement seems to mean that Woolf believes that writers of her generation lack the intensity of expression of Tennyson and Rossetti. Extending this idea to the previous generations and to Julia Margaret Cameron, who is in some small way connected to both poets, would seem to show Woolf's preference of the past over the present, but we must remember Woolf's arguments are rarely straightforward. In *Orlando* the writer and critic Nick Greene reappears after a three-hundred-year absence to complain about the writers of the 1920s. He laments that "all our young writers are in the pay of booksellers. They turn out trash that serves to pay their tailor's bills. It is an age," he said, helping himself to hor d'oeuvres, 'marked by precious conceits and wild experiments—none of which the Elizabethans would have tolerated for an instant'" (O 278). His attack loses much of its venom when contextualized by Nick Greene's statement during the late sixteenth century that "the great age of literature is past; the great age of literature was Greek; the Elizabethan was inferior in every respect to the Greek" (O 89). This leaves Woolf's statements regarding the quality of her peers' and her own writing open for interpretation.

Orlando shows a fusion of Woolf's family heritages of visual art and academic biography. With this in mind, it is easy to see how some critics perceive a dichotomy between the feminine creativity of Vanessa Bell and Julia Margaret Cameron and the

masculine linear thought of Leslie Stephen, but father—like daughter—complicates things with his foray into illustrated private, family biography in *The Mausoleum Book*. Unlike Stephen's impersonal and hypothetically objective entries on public figures in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, *The Mausoleum Book* focuses on Stephen's personal relationship with his late wife Julia Duckworth Stephen and his interpretation of her relationship with their children. As Erika Fletcher eloquently phrases it, "By recording his memories in *The Mausoleum Book* . . . Leslie Stephen could pass these associations [of his wife's primary purpose of motherhood] on to his children, a legacy which would *embalm* his memory of Julia's kindness and beauty" (40; emphasis mine). Though the photographs of Julia Stephen with her children are not doctored in the ways made possible by modern technology, they are still a form of manipulation. Leslie Stephen's choice to place a photograph of his deceased wife holding the toddler Virginia in the center of the page shows his decision to focus on the socially approved role of motherhood (Figure 12). Woolf objected to this simplified version of her mother her essay "Reminiscences," saying, "You will not find . . . any semblance of a woman whom you can love" (qtd in Fletcher 42). This family history provides the background for Woolf's experimentations with representation in *Orlando*.

Historical Objectivity

Unlike her father's respectful and emotionally distant approach to his subjects in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, Woolf uses *Orlando* to explore a personal biography of a living subject. In many ways death sterilizes the messy complexities of an individual's personality and life, as illustrated by Stephen's "embalming" of Julia



12 Leslie Stephen, *Mausoleum Book* page 36, no date. From Erika Flesher. "Picturing the Truth in Fiction: Re-visionary Biography and the Illustrative Portraits of *Orlando*." *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Mark Hussey and Vera Neverow. New York: Pace U P, 1997. 41.

Duckworth Stephen in the *Mausoleum Book*. Woolf addresses this issue from a different perspective in the essay “Craftsmanship” where she writes about the power of new words:

Even words that are hundreds of years old have this power; when they are new they have it so strongly that they deafen us to the writer’s meaning—it is them we see, them we hear. That is one reason why our judgments of living writers are so wildly erratic. Only after the writer is dead do his words to some extent become disinfected, purified, of the accidents of the living body. (O 248)

If a person’s words have this quality, then so too must a human life. In the most optimistic terms, only after time has passed can the emotions surrounding the dead begin to fade so that the true character becomes more apparent. In more realistic terms, it is impossible for words to recreate a moment in time or the truth of a person. As the fictional biographer of *Orlando* admits,

To give a truthful account of London society at that, or indeed at any other, time is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it—the poets and the novelists—can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma—a mirage. (O 192)

This statement again shows Woolf’s frustratingly circular style: she proclaims that it is impossible to write “a truthful account,” yet she continues to try.

Gender further complicates these issues of representation because, traditionally, society has reserved the positions of subject, biographer, and artist for men while woman have been relegated to the role of object or muse as in the cases of Leslie Stephen's photo album of his deceased wife and the majority of iconographic representations of the Virgin Mary. As Smith says, "if language is always (at least) one step away from the thing itself, and woman occupies the space of object/thing (in culture), then woman is always one step away from herself as well" (3). In one way the early years of *Orlando* are strikingly different from this formula: Woolf is a female author writing about a male poet who then becomes a female poet. However, a close reading of the first pages of *Orlando* shows that, though Woolf is the actual author, the fictional biographer is male: "Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet" (O 14-15). This odd statement manages to create a persona that disavows both the actual author's sex and her profession as novelist rather than biographer. As Cooley interprets this passage, "Woolf satirizes not only the biographical conventions of her literary fathers, but also the social conventions as well. It is clearly the responsibility of the female to bear the great man and of the male to record his life" (75-76). Woolf's goal in *Orlando* is not simply to reverse the traditional biographer-subject relationship but to renegotiate the power structure of this genre of writing through the androgyny and gender flexibility of both parties.

Conventional biographers attempt to distance themselves from their subjects in the name of objectivity. In *Orlando* this distance is impossible, not only because the character Orlando is based on Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West, but also because

Orlando's unexplained longevity does not allow her to be "disinfected" by death and time. In contrast to this purposeful proximity of biographer and subject, the character Orlando experiences a sense of separation from her own past and home:

But everywhere were little lavender bags to keep the moths out and printed notices, 'Please do not touch,' which, though she had put them there herself, seemed to rebuke her. The house was no longer hers entirely, she sighed. It belonged to time now; to history; was past the touch and control of the living. (O 318)

Unlike traditional biographies of people who are lost to the readers through either distance or death, Orlando moves forward to the present time and loses her own connection to the past. Smith proposes "that the novel is fundamentally concerned with loss, but loss that is recuperated, made a success of" (12). As Lily Briscoe's loss of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse* eventually helps her artistic development, Orlando's loss of the freedoms of her original sex does not incapacitate her creativity.

Orlando is not a traditional biography that aims to present truth precisely because, as well as the obvious fantastical elements, through Woolf's revision, Orlando, the fictional version of Sackville-West, is able to keep her house and land. According to Smith, "*Orlando* becomes a narrative of seduction, a seduction of the other, a rewriting of the self (for both Woolf and Sackville-West), and a representing of history" (5). This female recreation of history anticipates Miss La Trobe's interpretation of British history in *Between the Acts*.

Illustrated Biography

Though Orlando repeatedly deviates from traditional biography, there is nothing overtly avant-garde about Woolf's inclusion of illustrations. Just as Leslie Stephen uses photographs in *The Mausoleum Book* to direct the way his children remember their mother, Virginia Woolf uses visual rhetoric in *Orlando* to influence readers. As well as being self-importantly humorous, the asterisked footnotes, table of contents and manipulatively labeled illustrations satirize the genre of biography. Woolf, under the guise of the fictional male biographer, includes footnotes to clarify discrepancies between sources and omit information that is available from many other sources. The visual meaning of an asterisked footnote is that things are not as they seem. Usually this means that an issue has multiple interpretations and the author is clarifying other points of view so that the text can be as close to objective truth as possible: in *Orlando* the effect is exactly the opposite. The fictional biographer writes, “*The captain must have been mistaken, as a reference to any textbook of literature will show; but the mistake was a kindly one, and so we let it stand” (O 167). Instead of being comforted by the quality of Woolf's research and reminded of her impartiality in presenting facts the reader remembers that this is, in fact, a work of fiction. Woolf again uses this device to critique actual biographies:

Then the little gentleman said,

He said next,

He said finally,*

...

*These sayings are too well known to require repetition, and besides they are found in his published works. (O 202)

The first three lines may be a commentary on the preferred way to preface a quotation in academic writing: the introductory clause. Whatever their intent, the actual footnote again reminds the reader that this biography is fictional. Not only does Woolf create a fantasy world at times inhabited by historical characters, she includes partial citations to ambiguous sources that further confuse the “reality” of *Orlando*.

In order to write a novel that closely mimics the form of a biography, Woolf creates an actual table of contents for *Orlando*. This act of emulation, as with the many characteristics that tie *Orlando* to the genre it imitates, calls attention to the politics of representation and biography. Woolf’s manipulation of photographs should cause the reader to question the visual rhetoric used by conventional biographers. As Flesher says, “Woolf uses photography’s uniquely dual status as both art and documentation precisely for its greater power to rework patriarchal systems of documenting history” (39). Because the use of photography is so much a part of biography, *Orlando*’s illustrations fulfill their expected role and parallel the novel at large as a fictional representation of actual people. As Wussow writes,

[The] oscillations are never ending as the viewer watches “Orlando on her return to England” shift back and forth between “being” Orlando and Vita Sackville-West. Of course, “Orlando on her return to England” is neither; it is simply a reproduction of a photograph taken of Vita Sackville-West in an instant to mark a fleeting occasion. (4)

Though the majority of illustrations in *Orlando* depict actual events taken out of context, like *Orlando on her return to England*, Woolf intentionally staged at least one photograph, an action that shows her dual role as a biographer who records what happens and an author who creates the story herself.

According to Fletcher, Woolf and her sister Vanessa Bell dressed and photographed Bell's daughter Angelica in period costume to create the illustration *The Russian Princess as a Child* (Figure 13). Though this information seems unambiguous, there is some debate as to whether the actual subject of this photograph is Angelica or Julian Bell. Woolf thanks both her niece and nephew in the acknowledgements of *Orlando*, and the blurry illustration allows for flexibility of interpretation. As Fletcher points out, this illustration, like the footnotes, reminds the reader that *Orlando* is not a traditional or objective biography: "The historically impossible use of a photograph to depict a girl alive during the Renaissance is only the first step in the image's interrogation of photography's claim to referentiality" (43). Besides continuing the caricature of biographic conventions, especially the *Dictionary of National Biography*, this staged photograph is reminiscent of Julia Margaret Cameron's work. Cameron's *The Princess* (Figure 14) approaches the same subject matter from a different perspective, using a book, a symbol of learning, rather than a costume as the most visible prop in her illustration for Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Regardless of this difference, both photographs show the Victorian interest in costume photography and this similarity shows Woolf's connection to, and perhaps satire of, the visual tradition of her mother's family. Considering this connection, Woolf's manipulation of assumed truth, i.e. a photograph in a biography accompanies the text to provide the reader with additional



The Russian Princess as a Child

13 Vanessa Bell, *The Russian princess as a Child*, no date. From Virginia Woolf. *Orlando*. San Diego: Harvest-Harcourt. 1928. 54-55.



14 Julia Margaret Cameron, *The Princess*, 1875. From the National Gallery of Victoria web site, last accessed on 4 March 2005:
<http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/cameron/96540606phid.shtml>

information and is there to present fact not to direct the reader's interpretation, is even more convoluted than Fletcher proposes. Instead of, "Angelica [masquerading] as Sasha, the fictive character who loosely corresponds to Vita's lover, Violet Trefusis" (43), the addition of Cameron's work means that this single illustration is also a picture of Angelica dressed as the character Sasha, based on Violet Trefusis, used as evidence in a fictional biography, taken in a historically inaccurate medium, in the style of Cameron's photographs of female friends and relatives dressed as historical and mythological characters, which were themselves used to illustrate a book of poems. This exercise in attempting to describe a single image again shows the inability of language to communicate many of the subtleties of visual art.

Image and Word Combine

In *Orlando* Woolf continues to explore issues related to translating the physical world into an artistic medium. Just as Lily Briscoe struggles with the best way to paint her vision of Mrs. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, Orlando looks for a way to record his/her experience of the natural world:

He was describing, as all young poets are for ever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself. . . . After that, of course, he could write no more. . . . Green in nature is one thing and green in literature another. . . . The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre. (O 16-17)

Here the reality of the thing itself, specifically the color, stops Orlando from rendering the image into language. Woolf reminds the reader of this problem with language when

Shelmerdine calls out, “Orlando,” and then the narrator intrudes to describe to the reader multifaceted or multicolored nature of words that does not translate to the page: “(and it must be remembered that when bright colours like blue and yellow mix themselves in our thoughts, some of it rubs off on our words)” (O 260).

Though Woolf is not entirely satisfied by the power of words to transmit the truth or essence of a moment, she does not recommend a total move to visual art. She is not an author who wishes to be a painter, but rather a writer who hopes to make the most of her medium by incorporating any elements that will make her creations more real. She describes the positive aspects of words in terms reminiscent of painting: “the spoken story was never so well rounded or so finely coloured as the written” (O 29). Jack Stewart touches on the difficulty of using art in writing, specifically in a work which draws, at least in part, on the traditions of biography and history. As Stewart says, “History aspires to the objective truth of verified facts, art to the subjective truth of ordered impressions” (71). This is the root of the problem when Orlando attempts to express beauty to a band of gypsies by using their phrase “How good to eat!” (O 142). The literal gypsies expect language to act as it does in history, to chronicle events that have already occurred or to describe future events in terms that do not conflict with their experience of the world. Because there is no word for beauty, Orlando improvises by using a phrase that is not literally true; since the gypsies have never seen someone enjoy eating sky, they believe Orlando is crazy and begin to ostracize her. The language of art and personal interpretation of the world that Leslie Stephen removed from his own biographical writing is precisely what gives Woolf’s experimentation in *Orlando* color and interest.

As Orlando becomes increasingly obsessed with marriage she describes societal pressures for conformity in terms that can be interpreted to refer to the artistic movements of her time: “she had in mind, now that she was at last able to collect her thoughts, the effect that her behaviour would have had on *the spirit of the age*” (O 264, emphasis mine). Though the shift Orlando observes is, in part, economic and social changes that lead to an increased emphasis on heterosexual relationships, her reaction to the ring society has convinced her leads to happiness is to focus on the colors she associates with the new age and then attempt to write what she sees:

Violets, oranges, reds, and blues broke through the interstices of the leaves and sparkled in the emerald on her finger. She was distracted between the two. She looked at the paper and looked up; she looked at the sky and looked down. Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult! (O 285)

Thus in this passage, Woolf frames Orlando’s reaction to societal pressures as “the spirit of the age” within the artistic “sprit of the age,” brighter colors of the 1910s and 1920s visible in the artistic movements of post-impressionism, expressionism and fauvism.

Stewart claims, “Virginia Woolf is re-creating the spirit of the age through a flow of sensuous impressions” (72). When Orlando describes the dress of women walking down a street, she, in effect, characterizes social changes in clothing and presentation of self and artistic changes in color pallet:

How narrow women had grown lately! They looked like stalks of corn, straight, shining, identical. . . . The dryness of the atmosphere brought out the colour in everything and seemed to stiffen the muscles of the cheeks. It

was harder to cry now. People were much gayer. . . . Curtains and covers had been fizzled up and the walls were bare so that new brilliantly coloured pictures of real things like streets, umbrellas, apples, were hung in frames or painted on wood. (O 297-98)

This passage shows an awareness of artistic movements such as expressionism and fauvism that is unsurprising when one considers Woolf's place in Bloomsbury society. August Macke's *Lady in a Green Jacket* (Figure 15) shows many of the same expressionist elements that fascinate Orlando. By pointing out similarities in color and subject I do not intend to imply that Woolf is "quoting" this specific painting as she did in *To the Lighthouse*, but rather that both Woolf and Macke drew inspiration from the same "spirit of the age."

Orlando's interest in changing artistic styles of representation may be a veiled critique of Sackville-West's writing. While Woolf experiments with method and form in every novel and reflects the techniques of the writers and painters surrounding her, Orlando clings to the style of the past, spending three centuries perfecting a single poem written in the Elizabethan style. The length of Orlando's life allows the character to experience many changes, but once she finishes her single work, it is published for posterity and there is no room for revision or modification. A permanent work like Orlando's poem or Lily Briscoe's painting will always remain at least one step removed from the truth of the experience because, while a real moment is temporary, their forms do not allow flexibility.

The scene in *Orlando* I connected with most during my first reading is the image I find myself coming back to now: "The old bumboat woman, who was carrying her fruit



15 August Macke, *Lady in a Green Jacket*, 1913. From David Britt. *Modern Art: Impressionism to Post-Modernism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999. Page 145.

to market on the Surrey side, sat there in her plaids and farthingales with her lap full of apples, for all the world as if she were about to serve a customer, though a certain blueness around the lips hinted the truth” (36). Originally, I thought my interest was due to the sheer intensity of the description, but upon rereading, the woman’s situation is all the more shocking because it is described so matter-of-factly, now I understand that this image caught my attention because it is one of the first signs of Woolf’s change from permanent art to temporary art. Created by accident and at great cost to the subject, the tableau of the dead woman entertains King James in much the same way Mrs. Ramsay holding James comforts Mr. Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*. As mother and child are separated from the viewer by glass and framed by a window, ice separates the drowned woman from the king. In both novels the positions of subject, viewer, and creator of the moment belongs to men, while the object is a woman with little or no control over the situation. These scenes are temporary, despite the fact Lily paints her own version of the “objects of universal veneration” and Woolf records both images in a permanent novel; Mrs. Ramsay dies and the ice melts, freeing the nameless woman’s body. Orlando acts as a bridge between the permanent art of painting in *To the Lighthouse* and the momentary beauty of theater in Woolf’s final novel, *Between the Acts*.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FUSION OF FORM IN *BETWEEN THE ACTS*

In her final novel *Between the Acts*, Virginia Woolf again uses several of the techniques that support an association of her early short story “Kew Gardens” with visual art. As Miss La Trobe, the central artistic figure of *Between the Acts*, orchestrates her pageant of British history, colorful butterflies descend on the actors:

There were pools of red and purple in the shade; flashes of silver in the sun. The dresses attracted the butterflies. Red and silver, blue and yellow gave off warmth and sweetness. Red Admirals gluttonously absorbed richness from dish cloths, cabbage whites drank icy coolness from silver paper. Flitting, tasting, returning, they sampled the colours. (B 62-63)

As well as invoking the visual intensity of “Kew Gardens,” this passage also mentions the cabbage white butterflies that appeared throughout the “Time Passes” section on *To the Lighthouse*. Symbols of change, these butterflies signify the transient nature of human life in *Between the Acts* as their color ties the novel to Woolf’s long-term interest in translating the essence of visual experiences into language.

In previous chapters I have addressed a few of Woolf’s attempts to integrate theories of artistic movements, including formalism, into her writing. Art influences *Between the Acts* because the novel itself is built around Miss La Trobe’s theatric production—a genre of art that combines visual art and language. However, it differs

from Woolf's earlier works in that the structure of *Between the Acts* lacks the strict organization advocated by formalism. Christopher Reed compares this dissolution of form "to the neat trilateral symmetry of *To the Lighthouse*." According to Reed,

the formal structure of *Between the Acts* is left radically incomplete, an abruptly truncated triptych with a first "act" of one hundred pages set in the family, then a second (even longer) that is a pageant, followed by an abbreviated return to the situation of the first, which ends almost before it begins. (35)

Though this novel lacks the sophisticated structure of some of Woolf's earlier works, the arrangement retains symmetry. As Mary Steussy Shanahan writes, in *Between the Acts*, Woolf achieves "a fragile harmony wrought from opposites and sustained through a recognition of internal compliments: love and sex, order and violence, art and nature" (123). This precarious balance makes sense considering the historical context of Woolf's writing.

Woolf produced the majority of her writing between the national traumas of the world wars. This chronological position influenced her work; pieces from Woolf's productive period of the 1920s, such as *To the Lighthouse* and *Mrs Dalloway*, reflect the modernist desire to come to terms with the massive loss of life during the "Great War," while later works, specifically *Three Guineas* and *Between the Acts*, show the author's increasing preoccupation with the threat of fascism. The immediacy of war and Woolf's own emotional instability profoundly influence *Between the Acts*. Within the context of a generation who believed they could very well be witnessing the end of their way of life—a fear visible in the novel when Giles responds to the words "Present Time. Ourselves,"

with the pessimistic statement “Let’s hope to god that’s the end” (B 177)—Woolf’s desire to finish *Between the Acts* before madness incapacitated her mirrors the internal contradictions of her creation. The negative images of rape, Giles’ violent crushing of a toad and snake, and the cyclic intrusions of German war planes oppose the hope inherent in an act of creation. Though Woolf wrote in her diary that she found it difficult to believe that June 1941 would come—and as Reid points out, it didn’t come for her (453)—publishing a work that balances celebration and death, collective memory and individual life anticipates future readers, an audience for the work of art. Most importantly, at least in terms of my argument, *Between the Acts* is a fusion of visual art and literature first because of its reliance on the central image of a play, a genre that itself combines language (text) and image (performative aspects), and second because in this final work Woolf combines many of the same images that made her earlier pieces so visual—the colors of “Kew Gardens,” the paintings of *To the Lighthouse*, and the multiplicity of a subject’s identity from *Orlando*.

Play, Poetry, and Image

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf claims that the novel is the form of writing used by the majority of female writers because, while theater and poetry were well established genres by the time women became economically and socially able to write, “The novel alone was young enough to be soft in [their] hands” (80). Though this statement is based on Woolf’s own opinion rather than verifiable fact, there can be no doubt that she herself found the form of the novel best suited to her needs. This is not to say that Woolf was interested in only the form of the novel, rather she was most comfortable working in prose, and she did not hesitate to integrate other types of art into her writing.

Judith Shakespeare, the renowned playwright's fictional sister whom Woolf creates in *A Room of One's Own*, had to run away from home to avoid a forced marriage; just like her brother she tried to make her fortune in London, but, because her sex disqualified her from her chosen field, she ended up pregnant with the child of Nick Greene (who also appears in *Orlando* spouting his contempt for the current generation of writers), and eventually "killed herself one winter's night and now lies buried at some cross-roads" (R 50). This account of what Woolf believed would have happened were "the heat and violence of the poet's heart . . . caught and tangled in a woman's body" (50) sets the stage for the central artistic creation of *Between the Acts*.

Miss La Trobe's pageant allows author and character access to the male dominated field of theater. The play is only a village festival, with local residents as actors and livestock that disrupt several scenes, but these are slight imperfections that cloak the revolutionary nature of a woman writing and directing her own interpretation of British history. Because of these apparent flaws and Miss La Trobe's focus on courtship and marriage instead of wars and political upheaval, the audience at Pointz Hall and some of Woolf's readers miss the subversive nature of both the play and novel. As in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf adopts a deferential tone, having her character produce a small rural masque rather than a work to rival Shakespeare, and thus avoids the strength of diction that made *Three Guineas* so unpalatable to critics who enjoyed her earlier treatise on many of the same issues.

The plays are not the only instance of Woolf's appropriation of other types of art in *Between the Acts*, the author's final novel, a form she herself described as a "cannibal" (CE 2:224). In the first scene of *Between the Acts* Woolf shows the power of words to

create visions. Mr. Oliver's recitation of lines from Byron causes Isa to imagine a scene: "Isa raised her head. The words made two rings, perfect rings, that floated them, herself and Haines, like two swans down stream" (B 5). This is the same power evident in *To the Lighthouse* when a book of poetry causes Mrs. Ramsay to envision herself swinging from flower to flower. In this way Woolf manages to show the power of words, invoke a reaction reminiscent of visual art and painting, and utilize poetry, an art form that she believed was inhospitable to female writers (R 70).

Woolf borrows from the genre of poetry in more subtle ways as she infuses the sentences of *Between the Acts* with alliteration: "The flat fields glared green yellow, blue yellow, red yellow, then blue again. The repetition was senseless, hideous, stupefying" (B 67). As Christopher Ames explains, "As delightfully silly as the wordplay often becomes, it never grows gratuitous because Woolf has embedded it within the play of music and drama and thus of all art" (401). The numerous bird images of *Between the Acts* may be another way Woolf places her novel in the context of Greek literature and poetry, a tradition in which birds symbolize literary inspiration and the gods. Eileen Barrett believes that the frequent appearances of sparrows and Isa's repeated thoughts of rape allude to the Greek myth of Philomela and Procne. In this legend Philomela is raped and her tongue removed by the husband of her sister Procne. Philomela overcomes this silencing by weaving her story into a tapestry, and as revenge Procne kills her son, her husband's heir. The gods then intervene, and "Philomela becomes a nightingale and Procne a swallow" (Barret 26). Especially noteworthy in this Greek myth is the message of Philomela's tapestry; though it is not included in Woolf's adaptation the climax and

denouement of the myth are possible only because the mute woman is able to use visual art to communicate what she cannot say with words.

Visual art first appears in *Between the Acts* as Mr. Oliver gives Mrs. Manressa and William Dodge a tour of Pointz Hall, paying special attention to a pair of paintings. In this scene Woolf again plays with some of the issues of visual rhetoric raised in *Orlando*, the man and woman, ancestor and “lady,” are presented as a pair, despite the fact that “[i]n real life they never met” (B 36). Barrett points out that Woolf’s description of the area surrounding the pair as empty and silent alludes to the poem “Ode to a Grecian Urn”: “The unknown ‘lady’ signifies, of course, the namelessness of women in patriarchal society. Keats immortalizes a male vision of romance while Woolf reminds us of what happens to the woman who is perpetually immortalized in male art” (20-21). Again, this raises many of the same issues mentioned in connection to the novel *To the Lighthouse*, i.e. how does sex influence art when almost all traditional images of women are produced by men? In light of this history of exclusion, Miss La Trobe’s successful retelling of the history of England is all the more impressive.

Freshwater

Between the Acts is not Virginia Woolf’s only experimentation with theater. Begun in 1923 and then rewritten in 1935, Woolf’s short play *Freshwater* (F) connects the historical figures Julia Margaret Cameron and Alfred Lord Tennyson—both mentioned in Chapter Three as influences on *Orlando*—with some of the central themes of *Between the Acts* in a form similar to Miss La Trobe’s pageant. In the final act of *Freshwater*, the fictional Tennyson recites a line of his own poetry that Woolf also quoted in *A Room of One’s Own*: “She is coming, my dove, my dear; / She is coming my

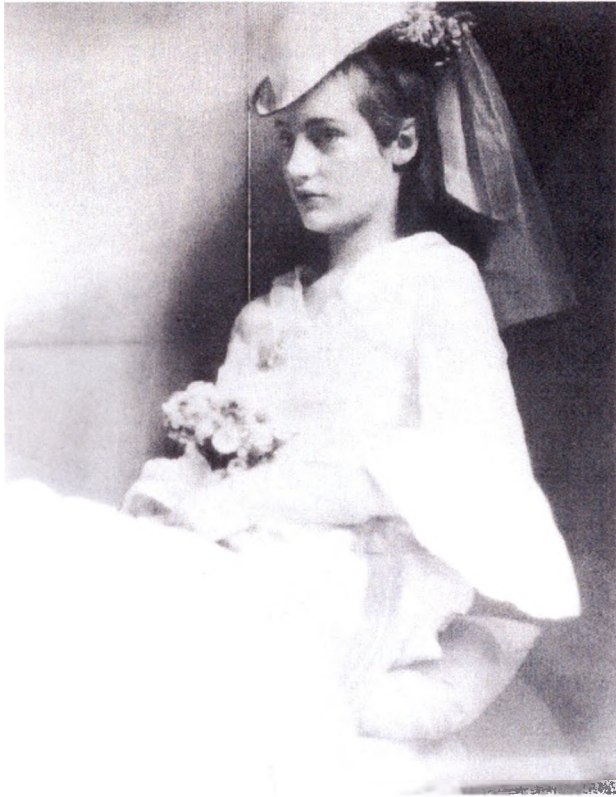
life, my fate; / The red rose cries, ‘she is near, she is near’” (F 44, R 12). Woolf’s repeated use of these lines shows her sustained interest in both Tennyson’s poetry and his influence on literature and art, a continuity of theme that at times coincides with her ventures into visual art.

The issues of representation, costuming, and the audience’s knowledge of a character’s true identity discussed in relation to *Orlando* also appear in *Freshwater* before reaching fruition in *Between the Acts*. Woolf cast her production with family members and friends, and then performed *Freshwater* for the Bloomsbury circle that would have recognized the identities of all the actors. While in *Orlando* the illustrations move first from Orlando, as pointed to by the illustration title, to Vita, as the viewer recognizes Vita Sackville-West and then back and forth, the original audience of *Freshwater* must have first recognized the actors and then accepted their fictional identities as characters in the play.

Critics can consult literary works hundreds of years after they are written; plays can disappear after one or two performances. Even if a play stays in print and accessible to the public, every production, every individual performance, is an individual event that can never be reproduced exactly. After a small 1935 performance, *Freshwater* disappeared completely until 1973. It was performed in America for the first time in 1974 for an audience of approximately 75 guests in accordance with Quentin Bell’s conditions that “there would be no news coverage, photographing or tape recording and that it would include only amateurs” (Ruotolo 105). The 1923 and 1935 versions of *Freshwater* were first published in 1976 thanks to Editor Lucio Ruotolo. This issue of availability reflects the temporary and elusive nature of theater. Though Vanessa Bell’s casting list has

resurfaced, there is still some ambiguity as to the identities and even sexes of some of the original actors. Woolf's niece, Ann Stephen, believes her father, Adrian Stephen, played the part of Tennyson, while Bell's notes list her son Julian in this role. Bell also shows that Ann Stephen played the part of John Craig, while Stephen herself "is certain that she did not play a man" (F 48). This inconsistency mirrors some of the confusion surrounding the identity of the sitter for Bell's photograph *The Russian princess as a Child*, where the subject posing as Orlando's lover Sasha may be either Bell's son Julian or her daughter Angelica.

The *Freshwater* character Ellen Terry, originally played by Angelica Bell (Figure 16), speaks about a similar multiplicity of roles: "Sometimes I'm Modesty. Sometimes I'm Poetry. Sometimes I'm Chastity. Sometimes, generally before breakfast, I'm merely Nell" (F 24). Here again the lines between play, novel, and family become blurred when one considers that in this scene Angelica plays the character Ellen Terry posing for Julia Margaret Cameron, who is played by her mother, Vanessa Bell. This scene is also a recreation of actual events because Julia Margaret Cameron did in fact photograph Ellen Terry (Figure 17). As I showed in Chapter Three, Bell's illustrations in *Orlando* are comparable to Cameron's illustrations of Tennyson's works. This reenactment of Cameron's work is not a simple tribute; just as the novel *Orlando* both praises Vita Sackville-West and slyly insults her writing, *Freshwater* is playfully critical of the photographer it seems to honor. Mrs. Cameron, as she is called in the play, slaughters a turkey so that its wings can be used in a photograph of Angelica dressed as Ellen dressed as the Muse: "The turkey has become part and parcel of my immortal art" (F 14). This satire of Victorian style shows the Bloomsbury desire for artistic change. Without this



16 Vanessa Bell, *Angelica Garnett in the role of Ellen Terry*, no date. From Virginia Woolf. *Freshwater*. Ed. Lucio P. Ruotolo. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976. Fly page.



17 Julia Margaret Cameron, *Ellen Terry*, 1864. From Lucio Ruotolo. "In Pursuit of Freshwater." *Virginia Woolf and the Arts: Selected Papers from the Sixth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*. Ed. Mark Hussey and Vera Neverow. New York: Pace U P, 1997. 107.

need to differentiate their work from previous generations, this loose-knit circle of friends could not have produced works that challenged accepted paradigms of form.

A comical scene in *Freshwater* provides a clue as to contradictions and the proliferation of fish imagery in *Between the Acts*. The character based on painter George Fredrick Watts contemplates the best way to show the seemingly contradictory ideas that “Modesty is always veiled” and “Modesty is always naked” (F 17). To do this he wants to wrap Ellen in a sheer fabric covered with stars. Watts justifies his decision to Tennyson by reading aloud from an unnamed text, “The Milky Way among the ancients was the universal token of fertility. It symbolised the spawn of fish, the innumerable progeny of the sea, and the fertility of the marriage bed” (F 18). In a comic turn similar to the ironies of *Between the Acts* where over time a chapel becomes a larder and in the kitchen the servants call Sung Yen the cat Sunny (B 32), Watts cries, “Horror! Oh Horror! I who have always lived for the Utmost for the highest have made Modesty symbolise the fertility of fish!” (F 18) This juxtaposition of high and low imagery continues in *Between the Acts*.

Elizabeth, Shakespeare, and La Trobe

The Elizabethan Romance of Miss La Trobe’s pageant calls attention to the local playwright’s relationship to Shakespeare. As the audience wonders, “Where they about to act out a play in the presence of Queen Elizabeth? Was this, perhaps, the Globe theatre?” (B 88) the connection to Shakespeare reminds the reader of Judith Shakespeare of *A Room of One’s Own* and Woolf’s promise:

if we live another century or so—and I am talking of the common life
which is the real life and not of the little separate lives which we live as

individuals—and have five hundred a year each of us and rooms of our own; if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think . . . then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down. Drawing on her life from the lives of the unknown who were her forerunners, as her brother did before her, she will be born. (R 117-18)

Though *Between the Acts* (1941) was published only twelve years after *A Room of One's Own* (1929), a fraction of the century Woolf said is needed for there to be change, Woolf's archetype of the female artist has made significant progress.

The description of the area Miss La Trobe uses as an improvised stage, "The lawn was flat as the floor of a theatre. The terrace, rising, made a natural stage" (B 76), echoes a famous line from Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (the very play which inspired the name of the central character in Woolf's *Orlando*): "All the world's a stage, / and all the men and women merely players" (2.7.139-40). These two lines are especially pertinent in light of the way reflections of the audience become a part of the final act of Miss La Trobe's pageant. Despite the fact that Miss La Trobe's production does not rival the work of Shakespeare, she is able to create a play within a play (a technique Shakespeare often used) within a pageant that is then performed for a fictional version of Shakespeare's patron. Woolf then manages to package these three frames within a fourth—the novel.

Miss La Trobe casts the working class Eliza Clark as Queen Elizabeth, a decision that supports Shanahan's claim that *Between the Acts* is a novel based on contradictions:

She was splendidly made up. Her head, pearl-hung, rose from a vast ruff. Shiny satins draped her. Sixpenny brooches glared like cats' eyes and

tigers' eyes; pearls looked down; her cape was made of cloth and silver—in fact swabs used to scour saucepans. *She looked the age in person.* (B 83; emphasis mine)

The representative Elizabethan age “in person” remains partially Eliza Clark—a woman strong enough to “haul a tub of oil with one sweep of her arm” (83) and “licensed to sell tobacco” (83), a commodity discovered in the colony named “Virginia” for the Virgin Queen. Ronnie Mirkin eloquently explains this contradiction in appearance: “While the Queen’s natural body was subject to infancy, infirmity, old age and death, her body politic was immortal” (76). Toward the end of her life, Queen Elizabeth began to iconize herself as an immortal goddess even as the very cosmetics that made her skin appear flawless caused major health problems. Thus, Eliza Clark, who herself is named in honor of the “Good Queen Bess,” plays the role of a mortal and aging woman (who Woolf describes in *Orlando* as “so worn and old” (25) playing the role of a goddess.

Their Place in Time

After the initial introduction to the characters of *Between the Acts* and the three clearly theatrical skits—the “Elizabethan romance,” “Restoration comedy,” and “Victorian melodrama” (McWhirter 799)—Miss La Trobe confronts the audience with their own reflections. Upon realizing that they themselves will be the next act of the pageant the audience mutters, “‘Ourselves. . . .’ They returned to the programme. But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans, yes; the Victorians, perhaps; but ourselves; sitting here on a June day in 1939—it was ridiculous. ‘Myself’—it was impossible” (B 178-79). As the cast members fill the stage carrying reflective surfaces, the audience cannot help but respond:

Ourselves! Ourselves!

Out they leapt, jerked, skipped. Flashing, dazzling, dancing, jumping.

Now old Bart . . . he was caught. Now Manresa. Here a nose . . . There a skirt . . . Then trousers only . . . Now perhaps a face. . . . Ourselves? But that's cruel. To snap us as we are, before we've had time to assume . . .

And only, too, in parts. . . . That's what's so distorting and upsetting and utterly unfair. (B 184)

Though many would assume that a reflection is an objective representation, this belief that the audience's images are "distorted" mirrors the ideas of manipulation of image presented in relation to *Orlando*.

This pluralistic idea of the self as a complex entity that defies traditional representation appears in the first pages of *Between the Acts* when Mrs. Swithin reads "an Outline of History" and then imagines,

Rhododendron forests in Piccadilly; when the entire continent, not then, she understood, divided by a channel, was all one; populated, she understood, by elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanodon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend. (B 8-9)

This description brings together the visual world of art (Mrs. Swithin's vivid images of the primeval forest) and the verbal world of academics (the Outline of History that triggers the entire vision). Like this binary opposition of word and image, Shanahan believes that Woolf uses this prehistoric reality to highlight the incongruities in

“civilized” society on the brink of war: “Fascinated by paradox, the author forges *Between the Acts* from opposites and incongruities which, ultimately arranged in an intricate and elaborate counterpoint, realize a unity more comprehensive than that in any of the earlier novels” (131). This juxtaposition of prehistoric and present time naturally leads to a dichotomy of the changing nature of specific moments in time versus the realities that remain constant from one generation to the next.

In between the historical scenes of the pageant, Woolf and Miss La Trobe use a chorus of peasants to show the continuity of time: “*Digging and delving, the villagers sang passing in single file in and out between the trees, for the earth is always the same, summer and winter and spring, and spring and winter again; ploughing and sowing, eating and growing; time passes*” (B 152; Woolf’s emphasis). Here the repetition of the seasons reminds the audience of the generations of laborers prior to the industrial revolution and provides the gentry of Pointz Hall with an opportunity to disassociate themselves from the working class. The egalitarian Mrs. Swithin then eliminates, or at least reduces, this distinction by proclaiming, “‘The Victorians . . . I don’t believe,’ she said with her odd little smile, ‘that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently’” (B 174-75). This sense of the timeless nature of humanity counters the temporary art form of theatre on which Woolf chose to build *Between the Acts*.

Moment

In preparation for the writing of this chapter I discussed theater with an amateur actor who shared a line a director once told him: “Theater is more human and alive than any other art form because every performance ends.” The absence of a citation seems

rather fitting: A single statement triggered a train of thought, and now that the initial moment is over only the insubstantial memory remains. Coincidentally, like the bird imagery and the Keats poem mentioned earlier in relation to *Between the Acts*, I do believe the thought is Greek (a theater professor suggested that it might come from Aristotle). Whatever the original source, Woolf approached this same topic in *Between the Acts*. As the guests begin to leave, the moment of communion ends and the narrator says, “In another moment it would be beneath the horizon, gone to join the other plays” (B 213). This is especially pertinent due to Woolf’s repeated reminders of the importance of the characters’ place in time, “Ourselves.”

As the pageant begins, Woolf returns to a technique of *Orlando* and writes, “At this very moment, half-past three on a June day in 1939 they greeted each other” (B 75). This should remind the reader of Woolf’s assertion that Orlando, a seemingly immortal character, had become part of the author’s generation: “Orlando leapt as if she had been violently struck on the head. Ten times she was struck. In fact it was ten o’clock in the morning. It was the eleventh of October. It was 1928. It was the present moment” (O 298). This raises a question as to how an author or director can possibly portray an event or time in which he or she is involved, or even, how can an artist show something to the audience as it happens? Woolf writes of the “present moment” as the play reaches its final act: “The hands of the clock had stopped at the present moment. It was now. Ourselves” (B 186). Throughout *Between the Acts* the boundaries between play and audience are indistinguishable. Shanahan believes that this “ready interweaving of action and action-imitated suggests not that art and reality are interchangeable, but that art is as intrinsic to man [sic] as is the baser side of his [sic] nature” (134). The very arrangement

of the novel, interspersing short plays with audience dialog and interaction, challenges established conventions that separate art from viewers. Consequently, the dissolution of the boundaries within the novel also works to bring the reading audience closer to the art of *Between the Acts*.

According to traditional standards, Miss La Trobe's play is not completely successful. As seemingly random sentences of conversation float through the grounds of Pointz Hall someone asks, "if we're left asking questions, isn't it a failure as a play? I must say I like to feel sure if I go to the theatre, that I've grasped the meaning . . . Or was that, perhaps, what she meant?" (B 200) There is not a single correct interpretation of the pageant as a work because there cannot be an objective interpretation of a moment as it is being experienced. The insufficiency of language to communicate the necessary emotions further complicates this issue. Over and over the outdoor stage, untrained actors, and homemade costuming hinder communication and understanding. As the chorus of villagers wanders in and out between the trees, the spectators sees that "[t]hey were singing, but not a word reached the audience" (B 78). This happens again as religion enters the play: "Now the priest, whose cotton moustache confused his utterance, stepped forward and pronounced benediction" (B 92). According to most standards, these breaks in communication with the audience would imply failure, but Woolf is clear that the series of plays is ultimately a success.

At times Miss La Trobe herself questions the success of the pageant:

Hadn't she, for twenty-five minutes made them see? A vision imparted
was relief from agony . . . for one moment . . . one moment. Then the
music petered out on the last word *we*. . . She hadn't made them see. It

was a failure, another damned failure! As usual. Her vision escaped her.

(B 98; Woolf's emphasis)

Despite this pessimistic interpretation, there are notable victories. Isa rejects the very assumptions that the work is a failure as she thinks, "Did the plot matter? . . . The plot was only there to beget emotion. There were only two emotions: love; and hate. There was no need to puzzle out the plot" (B 90). This willingness to accept the play as Miss La Trobe's "gift" (209) is the first sign that the writer/director is far more successful than she realizes. Just as the director feels most disappointed with her creation, unexpected clouds rain down on the audience: "Down it poured like all the people in the world weeping. Tears. Tears. Tears" (B 180). As Barrett interprets this event, "If the audience cannot respond to the emotion La Trobe stirs in them, nature will simulate that response" (33). I interpret this in a far less supernatural way, as David McWhirter writes, *Between the Acts* has two separate audiences, the audience who views the play at Pointz Hall and the audience who reads the novel: "we [the readers] see the dancers as well as the dance, a double vision effected in part by Woolf's habitual blurring of the boundaries between the 'artificial' world of the pageant and the 'real' world that ostensibly contains it" (798). Not only do the actors and audience blend based on their interactions between the acts of the play, they blend together for the reading audience as characters within the novel. Because of this, the purifying rain is not meant to show nature's approval of the play to the first audience, but rather is Woolf's way of showing the secondary audience the power of Miss La Trobe's work.

Mutability

Miss La Trobe decorates the pageant of *Between the Acts* with “garlands of red and white paper roses left over from the Coronation” (B 27). These paper flowers emphasize the novel’s place in history because the residents of Pointz Hall most likely used them to celebrate the coronation of Edward VII or George VI in 1936. If the flowers are left over from the second coronation of 1936, then as well as invoking general feelings of respect and security based on the succession of the monarchy, the flowers also forecast the future reign of George VI’s daughter, Queen Elizabeth II. Named for the “Virgin Queen,” whose iconography appears in both *Between the Acts* and *Orlando*, the presumptive heir Her Royal Highness The Princess Elizabeth, as the current Queen of England was known both on the June day in 1939 and in 1941 when Woolf completed the novel, is an unnamed symbol of hope during the political turmoil of the second World War.

The paper garlands continue the theme of contrast proposed by Shanahan; The ceremonial colors red and white juxtapose sexual innocence and experience, contradictory traits contained within a single body of the Virgin Queen who was expected to be the wife and mother of a nation. The roses also have historical significance as the symbols of the warring houses of York (white rose) and Lancaster (red rose), which then became emblems for the new House of Tudor, founded by Henry VII, the grandfather of Queen Elizabeth who used the red and white roses to signify balance and compromise.

As the Miss La Trobe declares through the mouth of the character Phyllis, “*The bud has flowered; the flower has fallen*” (B 95). Since the paper flowers are unnatural, they, like the youthfully pictured Queen, defy the natural order of birth and death, bloom

and decay. The paper flowers may also reference actual faux flowers produced by the Omega Workshop as part of Roger Fry's interest in interior design. Fry's 1919 *Still Life with Omega Flowers* (Figure 18) shows obviously unnatural paper flowers in an arrangement reminiscent of the traditional still lifes. Though it is impossible to determine whether Woolf was consciously aware of this similarity when she wrote *Between the Acts*, the use of artificial flowers invokes many of the same themes referenced in connection to the still lifes of *To the Lighthouse*: Woolf contrasts the precarious nature of human life with the permanence (or in the case of the paper flowers semi-permanence) of artistic creation.

Her final novel, *Between the Acts* may be the closet Woolf ever came to the elusive letter "Z." Shanahan describes it as "a commentary on war, civilization, and, ultimately, on art" (128), a statement I would like to expand to explain the relationship between Woolf's writing and the field of visual art. Because she is profoundly interested in representing the truth of a single moment, Woolf often borrows techniques, subjects, and even colors of different artistic movements and mediums. The inherent differences between writing and visual art, especially in terms of duration, enrich Woolf's works, emphasizing her fascination with artistic creation, transience, and time.

Woolf attempts to capture the ephemeral essence of a temporary situation through integrating visual art into written language. She is not satisfied with any single medium, so she mixes visual and verbal art to best record the intensity of a moment. Like the Dutch still life painters of the 1600s, Woolf records the intensely visual scenes—often involving food, flowers, and insects, all imagery associated with still lifes—that her texts



18 Roger Fry, *Still Life with Omega Flowers*, 1919. From Richard Shone. *The Art of Bloomsbury*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton U P, 1999. Figure 61.

preserve as symbols of the transitory nature of human life. We cannot separate this method of recording from the passage of time because turning a moment in time into art is, as in the case of Leslie Stephen's *Mausoleum Book*, a type of "embalming." The flowers of Jan Davidsz de Heem's *Vase of Flowers* will never wilt, just as the created flowers of the Omega Workshop can never die, and the characters of Pointz Hall never age past the June day in 1939. When Giles says, "Let's hope to god that's the end" (B 177), his wish in a way comes true; the world of the novel will not continue beyond this day. Because of this protection from time, as Shanahan says, art and civilization, the records left behind by previous generations as in the case of the Roman roads as the beginning of *Between the Acts*, provide Woolf's novels with color and structure.

Woolf confronts mortality, both individual and societal, in *To the Lighthouse* as she chronicles the changes in her portraits of Ramsay family before, during, and after World War I. Through her references to the art of the past and of her contemporaries, Woolf stresses her generation's place in time as she reminds readers that ultimately their time too will pass. Based on one of Woolf's letters, Wussow writes, "She compares her work to Vanessa's visual art and suggests that her words are the 'paint' into which she must mix 'dozens of snapshots' of her subject" (1). This shows the preservative and documentary nature of Woolf's work by focusing on her relationship with art. In *To the Lighthouse* the artist Lily Briscoe paints a picture profoundly influenced by the deceased Mrs. Ramsay. Woolf's composition of this novel stresses concern for the past and the documentary nature of art as a way to preserve what has been, or will be, lost.

Woolf's focus shifts in *Orlando* from painting to photography, raising questions of authenticity and the reliability of visual evidence. By mentioning this change in

emphasis I do not mean that Woolf is no longer interested in painting, but rather that in this novel and *Between the Acts* she experiments with different types of art and adds some of the characteristics of new genres to her repertoire. While *To the Lighthouse* addresses the brevity of life, Orlando's unusual longevity, the sanitized preservation of her home, and the permanence of her captured image in the novel's illustrations reflect the unnatural durability of art.

In *Between the Acts* Woolf uses theater, the artistic fusion of language and image to record the contradictory impulses of destruction and preservation. Miss La Trobe's work of art will last for only an afternoon, mimicking the frailty of human life. Despite the threat of death, the characters, and Woolf, are able to create a piece of art that brings together the "impure medium" of words and the "silent kingdom" of images in a way that is both transitory within the form of the novel and permanent as a printed text. Lily Briscoe explains her artistic choices in *To the Lighthouse* in a way that encapsulates the connection between words and art in Woolf's writing: "She saw the colour burning on a framework of steel; the light of a butterfly's wing lying upon the arches of a cathedral" (L 48). In this sense language, writing style, word choice, and text are the framework for the burning color of visual art, a marriage of art forms that allows Woolf to come as close as possible to a permanent record of a temporary moment.

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