

**HUMILIATING MODERNISM: LITERATURE, SHAME, AND
THE PUBLIC IN THE NOVELS OF MAY SINCLAIR,
WYNDHAM LEWIS, AND VIRGINIA WOOLF**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

		Page
Acknowledgements		iii
Abstract		iv
INTRODUCTION	Shame and Symbolic Capital in the Modernist Literary Field	1
CHAPTER 1	Worse Than Death: Culture, Commercialization, and Shame in the Novels of George Gissing and May Sinclair	44
CHAPTER 2	On Idealism: Modernism and Spinsters in May Sinclair's <i>Mary Olivier: A Life</i> and <i>The Life and Death of Harriet Frean</i>	99
CHAPTER 3	Naked Truth: Wyndham Lewis and the Shame of Being an Enemy in <i>The Apes of God</i> and <i>Snooty Baronet</i>	156
CHAPTER 4	Dress of the People: Body, Fashion, and Common Readers in Virginia Woolf's <i>Orlando</i> and <i>Between the Acts</i>	218
CONCLUSION	Humiliating Modernism	285
BIBLIOGRAPHY		295

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that some British modernist writers, such as May Sinclair, Wyndham Lewis, and Virginia Woolf, have established a particularly ambivalent mode of relationship with their contemporary public world, an ambivalence registered, in their experimental novels, as recurrent moments of shame and humiliation.

Opposing the increasing commercialization of cultural production in Britain since the late-nineteenth century, these modernists attempt to find certain possibilities of public engagement in an ideal of reciprocal exchange. But this ideal exchange, which has traditionally been sustained by the code of honour and its social conventions such as duelling and gift-giving, suffers a gradual eclipse by the modern market exchange, and this crisis unavoidably implicates modernist authorship into the shame of commodification. This predicament in turn compels modernism to develop a poetics of shame and humiliation which negotiates unstable boundaries between the public sphere and the private institutions. This is most clearly expressed in tensions between a modernist urge towards nakedness and a simultaneous resistance against its ultimate exposure.

Chapter 1 compares some novels of George Gissing and those of the early May Sinclair in terms of their diverse reactions to the commercialization of literature in the late-nineteenth century.

Chapter 2 turns to the later phase of May Sinclair and examines her modernist experiments, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1920) and *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922), in terms of their explorations into the shame of spinsterhood.

Chapter 3 reveals certain limits of Wyndham Lewis's satirical stance against his contemporary public by tracing dialectics of shame and shamelessness in *The Apes of God* (1930) and *Snooty Baronet* (1932).

Chapter 4 sheds light on how Virginia Woolf's vision of organic community is destabilized by conflicts between the common naked body and modern fashion in *Orlando* (1928) and *Between the Acts* (1941).

Reading some important modernist novels from the viewpoint of shame and humiliation, this thesis contributes to current debates on the problematic relations between modernism and public culture in a new and original way. By attending to these modernists' moments of humility, this thesis ultimately affirms their passions for artistic innovations.

INTRODUCTION

Shame and Symbolic Capital in the Modernist Literary Field

RICHARD

[*Looks away again; in a lower voice.*]
 That is what I must tell you too.
 Because in the very core of my ignoble
 heart I longed to be betrayed by you
 and by her—in the dark, in the
 night—secretly, meanly, craftily. By
 you, my best friend, and by her. I
 longed for that passionately and ignobly,
 to be dishonoured for ever in love and
 in lust, to be...

ROBERT

[*Bending down, places his hands over
 RICHARD's mouth.*] Enough.
 Enough. [*He takes his hands away.*]
 But no. Go on.

RICHARD

To be for ever a shameful creature and
 to build up my soul again out of the
 ruins of its shame.

--James Joyce, *Exiles*, 88.

1. Autonomy and Heteronomy

At his first appearance, Richard Rowan, the central character of Joyce's only play, *Exiles* (1916), seems to have just settled back in Dublin after his long stay in Italy. It transpires that his absence was a form of self-exile, mainly

motivated by a discord with his now deceased mother, who did not accept Richard's common-law marriage with Bertha.¹ His unconventional marriage and his rejection of Catholicism have been accompanied by a determination to take the consequences of ostracism from family, from society, and even, from the nation as a whole. In terms of his career as a writer, however, nine years of his exile in Italy have also been a period of fruitful concentration on his work, which seems to have been finally published around the same time as his return to Dublin. The perfection of his art is conditioned by his intransigent will to sever all communal bonds which have tied him down to the point of his origin. It is as though, as an artist, Richard had to strip himself of any conventional associations in order to affirm his spirit of aesthetic autonomy. As Stephen Dedalus famously declares in *A Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man* (1914): "I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can."² But Richard Rowan has already undergone what Stephen only desired at the end of the novel. Indeed, Richard's autonomy as an artist is such that he appears to be completely nonchalant even with the sales and reception of his book. When Robert Hand, his oldest friend and now a successful journalist, informs Richard of the high opinion it has received from a vice-chancellor of a certain Dublin university, a person who might also give him a chance to gain the

¹ James Joyce, *Exiles* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), 22-25. Hereafter abbreviated to *E*.

² James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. Seamus Deane (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 268-9.

honour of professorship, his only reaction is to say: "I shall smoke a cigarette. Thirtyseven copies have now been sold in Dublin." "You have your iron mask on today," replies Robert, appositely (*E*, 44).

But behind his iron mask, we soon encounter a mystery at a deeper level in the mind of this fiercely independent artist. Later in the same day, during his tense conversation with Robert, Richard confesses to a strange desire to be a cuckold betrayed by his wife and his best friend, "to be dishonoured for ever in love and lust," as quoted above in the epigraph. Why does he feel this strange desire to be betrayed? Are we not to see a contradiction between the claim of his art towards freedom and autonomy, and the object of his desire to be ashamed and dishonoured? Especially when, according to Bernard Williams, shame is an emotion often condemned as a sign of heteronomy, willing or unwilling subjection of our moral autonomy to the viewpoint of others?³ The problem of his shame is in the paradox between aesthetic autonomy and emotional heteronomy, a paradox in the very core of Richard's self and the process of its renewal. Are they not mutually exclusive? If not, how are they combined in the constitution of the identity of artist at this point in history? If autonomy and heteronomy are in reality compatible, what are the broader implications of this shame of being an artist when we try to understand a work of art which is driven by a certain constitutive contradiction? These are the questions I would like to pose and answer in

³ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially Chapter 4 "Shame and Autonomy", 75-102. Also see, Steven Connor, "The Shame of Being a Man," *Textual Practice* 15:2 (2001), 211-30, 221.

my thesis on British modernist literature.

We might be able to generalize the case of Richard Rowan to that of modernism as a whole insofar as we regard modernism as a particular phase of art and literature as they evolved in the historical development of Western print culture. The phylogeny of Richard as an artist, i.e. his progressive separation from home, fatherland, and church, parallels the ontogeny of art and literature as a distinct institution. According to Pierre Bourdieu, this is a historical process of autonomization whereby the field of cultural production has gradually freed itself from the external sources of legitimacy such as church, state, monarchy and aristocracy. This was made possible by the constant growth of a public of possible consumers and attendant increase of the number of cultural producers. “The ending of dependence on a patron or collector and, more generally, the ending of dependence on direct commissions, with the development of an impersonal market, tend to increase the liberty of writers and artists.” Yet this liberty was obviously a contradictory one, as art was now fully exposed to the impersonal logic of the marketplace from which it was once protected by means of personal patronage. “By an apparent paradox, as the art market began to develop, writers and artists found themselves able to affirm the irreducibility of the work of art to the status of a simple article of merchandise and, at the same time, the singularity of the intellectual and artistic condition.” The emergence of the pure theory of art as art was strictly correlated with the emergence of art as a commodity in the marketplace. As a consequence, art had to become “symbolic goods,” or “a two-faced reality, a commodity and a symbolic

object.” Aesthetic autonomy is possible only by deliberately “dissociating art-as-commodity from art-as-pure-signification, produced according to a purely symbolic intent for purely symbolic appropriation, that is, for disinterested delectation, irreducible to simple material possession.”⁴

Bourdieu suggests further that, in the modern period, the two-faced reality of art as symbolic goods has caused the field of cultural production to split into two sub-fields, each organised around competing principles of autonomy and heteronomy. The one, the field of restricted production, is ruled by principles intrinsic to artistic production such as technical excellence and innovativeness. In this field, the works are produced not immediately for the larger public, but primarily for the inner community of producers who can discern a true subtlety of qualitative difference. The other, the field of large-scale production, is ruled mainly by the degrees of wider appeal and economic success which are increasingly seen as principles extrinsic to artistic production per se. There, the works are produced following the established demand of the largest public in order to maximize profit gained through large-scale consumption. These two fields are always in conflict, and as the pressures of the commercial marketplace increase, the field of restricted production tends to entrench its autonomy by refusing any heteronomous principles:

Thus, at least in the most perfectly autonomous sector of the field of

⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 113-4.

cultural production, where the only audience aimed at is other producers (as with Symbolist poetry), the economy of practices is based, as in a generalized game of ‘loser wins,’ on a systematic inversion of the fundamental principles of all ordinary economies: that of business (it excludes the pursuit of profit and does not guarantee any sort of correspondence between investments and monetary gains), that of power (it condemns honours and temporal greatness), and even that of institutionalized cultural authority (the absence of any academic training or consecration may be considered a virtue).

This field of aesthetic autonomy is in fact “the economic world reversed,” where “an interest in disinterestedness,” or even an inability to gain commercial success, might be transvalued as a means to confer credibility to one’s symbolic goods and thus can be employed as a strategy to increase one’s symbolic capital.⁵

In the British literary scene, the field of large-scale cultural production has started to take shape definitely by the latter half of the nineteenth century. While its objective conditions were prepared by the expanding population and increasing literacy (owing to the legislation concerning elementary education in 1870), technological advances in the field of printing and transportation made possible the faster reproduction and wider distribution of cheap printed

⁵ Bourdieu, *ibid*, 39-40.

matters.⁶ The appearance of *Tits-Bits* (1881) is often taken to be the key historical point in the rise of ‘new popular journalism,’ followed by numerous illustrated magazines and mass circulation papers, most notably and notoriously the *Daily Mail* (1896). The demise of the expensive ‘three-decker’ and the consequent loosening of the control by circulating libraries are taken to mark the transition from the custom of book-borrowing to that of book-buying in the 1890s, driving the fiction industry to increase the production of cheap novels, a trend which continued well into the twentieth century.⁷ Yet the emergence of the large-scale market was chronically beset by an anxiety about its increasingly impersonal reading public. Whereas popular reading had been often associated with political and moral dangers in the first half of the nineteenth century, “the problem of the mass reading public became predominantly one of literary culture” in the latter half of the century.⁸ For some high-minded novelists such as George Gissing, George Meredith, and Henry James, the doubt about the compatibility between wider appeal and literary value must have been ratified by the emergence of “best-sellers,” such as Marie Corelli and Hall Caine, in the late-nineteenth

⁶ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing, and Zola* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 86-8.

⁷ Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914* (Secker & Warburg: London, 1989), 25-38. For the twentieth century conditions, see, Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 12-41, and also see my chapter 3 on Wyndham Lewis.

⁸ Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 367-8.

century. “‘Popular’ has clearly become a very dirty word indeed unless it is used to indicate a certain level of success attained after years of neglect: to describe oneself as an ‘unpopular author’ has ceased to be simply a factual statement of poor market expectations (though that may still be involved) and has become a boast.”⁹ This point marks the formation of the sub-field of restricted cultural production in Britain.¹⁰

Set in this historical juncture, we might consider modernism as the high point of the conflict between the field of restricted production and the field of large-scale production. Indeed, in his seminal study, Andreas Huyssen has recommended us to see modernism and mass culture as simultaneous developments from the same cultural situations of the late-nineteenth century. But according to him, the relation between modernism and mass culture is that of the “great divide” and a stark dichotomy. It is “the anxiety of contamination” which separates the one from the other: “the nightmare of being devoured by mass culture through co-option, commodification, and the ‘wrong’ kind of success is the constant fear of the modernist artist, who tries to stake out his territory by fortifying the boundaries between genuine art and inauthentic mass culture.”¹¹ John Carey has similarly claimed that the

⁹ Peter Keating, op. cit. 386. Keating also points out that the term ‘best-seller’ itself was coined around the late-nineteenth century.

¹⁰ About the opposition between the two sub-fields in the British literary scene of this period, see, Peter D. McDonald, *British Literary Culture and Publishing Practice 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Largely following the framework of Pierre Bourdieu, McDonald rewrites the opposition at issue as that between ‘purists’ and ‘profiteers’ (14).

¹¹ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), v

emergence of modernist concerns with autonomy is a direct consequence, an anxiety-ridden reaction to the emergence of mass reading public after the 1870 educational legislation. According to him, “the principle around which modernist literature and culture fashioned themselves was the exclusion of the masses, the defeat of their power, the removal of their literacy, the denial of their humanity.” Modernists achieved these aims by deliberately cultivating difficulty, rewriting ordinary mankind as the masses, and thus converting their fear and anxiety to contempt and disgust.¹²

Perceptive as these studies were in trying to situate modernism back in its original historical contexts, Huyssen and Carey have regrettably undervalued the real complexity in the process of negotiations between the literary production and the reading public, and its crucial mediations by the marketplace in the early-twentieth century. Subsequent studies have therefore tried to reconsider “the critically suppressed relationship between canonical modernists and the commercial marketplace.”¹³ Such studies are often informed by the emergence of interests in the history of print culture, in order “to investigate the effect of material conditions of the production and transmission of the texts on the practice of authorship.”¹⁴ A basic assumption shared by these studies is that modernists might have been less

ii , 53.

¹² John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), 21.

¹³ Kevin Dettmar and Stephen Watt, eds. *Marketing Modernism: Self-Promotion, Canonization, and Rereading* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 3.

¹⁴ Ian Willison, Warwick Gould, and Warren Chernaik, eds. *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), x ii .

idealistic than they were often imagined, well aware of their practical involvement with the impersonal marketplace. We need to revise the stark dichotomy between modernism and mass culture. Thus, according to Mark Morrisson, Anglo-American modernism, especially in its early phase, was far less pessimistic about the mass cultural phenomenon of cheap periodical booms. Rather, we should understand modernist little magazines, such as the *Egoist*, *Little Review*, and the *Masses*, as responding to “the possibility of appropriating some of the institutions and the newly emerging mass publishing world to create counterpublicity, counterpublic spheres whose ultimate aim was to influence the dominant public sphere.”¹⁵ In his study about the publishing history of *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*, Lawrence Rainey has claimed that modernists were more disillusioned in their later phase, and performed “a tactical retreat into a divided world of patronage, collecting, speculation, and investment, a retreat that entailed the construction of an institutional counterspace securing a momentary respite from a public realm increasingly degraded.”¹⁶ Whether modernists embraced the mass cultural tactics of marketing and self-promotion (as in Morrisson), or they tamed the trend of commodification by dovetailing it into the pre-modern system of patronage (as in Rainey), modernism should be understood properly as an attempt at striking a middle-ground between art and the marketplace.

¹⁵ Mark S. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905-1920* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 11.

¹⁶ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elite & Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 5.

This is not only because modernists had to secure a means of publication, whether commercial or non-commercial, by which their works could address the public sphere, but also because literature was increasingly practiced on a professional basis in the modernist literary field. Even the most high-minded of modernists often faced a pressing necessity to earn money by means of writing.¹⁷ Seen from this angle, as Bourdieu reminds us, the distinction between the field of restricted production and the field of large-scale production is nothing more than “a limiting parameter construction,” with a diverse range of intermediary positions between them.¹⁸ If not in theory then certainly in practice, it is often difficult to dissociate the two-faced reality of symbolic goods, art as a commodity and art as a symbolic object.

Moreover, most modernists were not as fortunate as Gustave Flaubert, their recognised predecessor, who had a backing of private capital in his disinterested devotion to art. For instance, John Stanislaus Joyce, James’ father, once held a well-paid position in the office of the Collector of Rates in Dublin; by the time James became 9 or 10 years old, however, John had lost his job because of the office’s privatization, and was given only one-fifth of his previous income as a yearly pension.¹⁹ Degradation of the family is one

¹⁷ See, Joyce Piell Wexler, *Who Paid for Modernism? Art, Money, and the Fiction of Conrad, Joyce, and Lawrence* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 1-20. David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1-15, 127-137.

¹⁸ Bourdieu, *op. cit.* 127.

¹⁹ Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 34.

of the early episodes of disillusionment for Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, when he travels with his father Simon to Cork to attend the auction of his property. After the auction, Stephen accompanies Simon in his boozing from bar to bar, suffering a secret yet intense shame. “One humiliation had succeeded another: the false smiles of the market sellers, the curvettings and oglings of the barmaids with whom his father flirted, the compliments and encouraging words of his father’s friends.”²⁰ This was the point from which modernism often emerged.

Consider the writers who will be central to my discussions. May Sinclair was originally from a middle-class family in Liverpool, and her father was part-owner of shipping business which was reasonably successful. Yet when May Sinclair was 7 years old, her father’s business already started its path towards bankruptcy, and the family was forced to move frequently as a consequence. By the time Sinclair published her first novel, *Audrey Craven*, in 1897, she was supporting her widowed mother and commercial writing was a flat necessity. As Sinclair self-deprecatingly wrote in a letter to her friend, who objected to art and literature from a religious ground, “she had ‘sold [herself] unto Belial.’”²¹

Wyndham Lewis’s father was a veteran of the American Civil War and an idle debauchee with some rich relatives, but before Lewis turned 10 his parents started living separately. Lewis spent most of his twenties as an

²⁰ Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 99.

²¹ Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 16-22, 67.

unproductive art student supported by his mother's shaky laundry business and frequent borrowings. In 1909, before fashioning himself a rebel avant-gardist, Lewis even tried to pot-boil by writing a mass-market fiction, which his literary agent J. B. Pinker soberly judged "not marketable."²² In the novel, later posthumously published as *Mrs. Duke's Million* (1977), Evan Royal, the hero of the piece, bemoans the fate of his adventurous spirit trapped in schemes of mercenary deception: "As it is, something sordid always enters into his schemes—namely, the humiliating necessity to make them pay!"²³

As for Virginia Woolf, she was certainly a daughter of Leslie Stephen, an eminent Victorian man of letters. After his death in 1904, Woolf was quick to start her journalistic career, but with the costs of her occasional mental illness and maintenance of the Hogarth Press, it was partly her husband Leonard Woolf's wise investments of their capital which supported their household until Virginia Woolf started to be able to earn enough by her pen alone in 1926.²⁴ Even then, Woolf confessed to her diary in 1918: "I'm one of those who are hampered by the psychological hindrance of owning capital."²⁵ Earning by writing was required of her, if not by pressing practical necessity, then certainly by equally serious professional morality.

In these circumstances, modernist concerns with aesthetic autonomy

²² Paul O'Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 15-25, 96-7.

²³ Wyndham Lewis, *Mrs. Duke's Million* (London: George Prior, 1977), 118.

²⁴ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), 556-8.

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 1 1915-1918*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 101.

cannot afford to exclude certain degrees of commercial prudence. Their impassioned search for symbolic capital did not blind their eyes to heteronomous principles at work which unavoidably shaped the conditions under which they made strategic choices about subject matter, style, tone, and audience. Nor was the “generalized game of ‘loser wins’” able to maintain its spell over its participants in these practical circumstances. The passive suffering of an unrecognised artist, starving to death in a garret like Gissing’s characters such as Edwin Reardon and Harold Biffen, had become by this time a familiar pathos of a romantic alienation, perhaps no longer appealing or effective as a model of modernist authorship.²⁶ After all, as Michael North wonders: “Isn’t the purported death of the author simply the last and most extreme move in a long literary campaign to free the writer from contingency, since death meant freedom from everyday reality for symbolist writers from Mallarmé to Yeats?”²⁷ By contrast, the shame and humiliation associated with modernist authorship bespeak the realities of these writers’ immersion into the contingent nature of aesthetic value. By examining these emotions, we can shed light on modernist reflection on the uncertainty of value as it is inextricably involved in the process of appraisal by the modern commercial marketplace and its impersonal reading public. It is exactly at the moment of intersection between autonomy and heteronomy, and a consequent loss of

²⁶ See, Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 14.

²⁷ Michael North, “Authorship and Autograph,” *PMLA* 116:5 (October 2001), 1377-1385, 1383.

authorial control, that the shame of modernism starts to appear.

2. Honour and Shame

In the chapters that follow, I shall analyse moments of shame and humiliation in the works of these modernist writers as the sites where they reflect on the production of artistic value, production that is in constant dialogue with the commercial marketplace and its reading public. But my claim is not merely that modernism passively suffers shame and humiliation as a consequence of its inevitable intersection with the modern literary marketplace. I shall also contend that, to a certain extent, shame and humiliation constitute active principles by which the modernist writers explore the possibilities and limitations of their formal, linguistic, and stylistic innovations. This argument naturally entails thinking about ambiguous relations between shame and conventions, not least because it is only with reference to certain period conventions that we can adequately gauge the historical realities of modernist claims to originality.

We can begin to consider these conventions by returning briefly to Richard Rowan's confession of his desire for shame in *Exiles*. We should first remember that this confession is made in his dialogue with Robert Hand, an old friend who has now become a successful journalist, a prime agent of modern commercial publication with which Richard as a highbrow writer is unavoidably struggling. Indeed in an earlier moment when Robert describes the past history of Richard's elopement with Bertha, he employs "the language

of people whose opinions [he doesn't] share," a language Richard sardonically calls that of "[Robert's] leading articles" (*E*, 45). After listening to Richard's confession, Robert speaks back to him with a certain air of determination, asserting that this is "a moment which will free [both of them] from the last bonds of what is called morality" (*E*, 89). As Richard instantly understands, this is a proposal for a duel between the two, presented as the only possible means to repair the sense of shame which has been occasioned by Robert's adulterous approach to Bertha. But Richard flatly rejects this dramatic proposal without much hesitation, as if he preferred not to rescue the shameful situations which involve all three of them. In this play, the writer carries out his struggle with the journalist not by engaging in a direct combat, but by evading the conventions of honour which his opponent upholds.

As a matter of fact, the duel is a traditional practice, a ritualized form of combat between two opposing individuals to settle a dispute over the point of honour. It is characterised by elaborate regulations which dictate every step of its performance: from an initial event which puts one's honour in jeopardy, appointment of seconds, issuing of a challenge and its acceptance, negotiations about choice of weapons (pistol, sabre, or épée) and other conditions, until the actual exchange of blows in a field. Although the origins of duelling are sometimes sought in medieval customs such as judicial trial by combat and chivalric tournament, historians argue that the duel assumed its definite shape only after the Renaissance period. It was not a 'feudal vestige' of primitive aggression. On the contrary, according to Makku Peltonen, the duel of honour in its early modern form was popularized

through the spread of manner books written in Renaissance Italy as a “part of the theory of courtesy and civility.” In courtly societies where mutual exchanges of honour and politeness established courtiers and gentlemen as a unified group of rough equals, the duel was sanctioned as “the only polite response to an impolite word or deed, and thus the only proper means of restoring gentlemanly civility.”²⁸ It decreased the level of violence by subjecting raw vendettas to a discipline of elaborate regulations. The subsequent history of the duel first saw the spread of its social scale beyond the small circle of courts, and then it underwent distinct courses of development in each unique national tradition. In Britain, the duel had disappeared as early as the 1840s partly because the long tradition of social mobility deprived it of its social ground, but mainly because legislation provided adequate amounts of pecuniary compensation for private disputes such as libelling and adultery.²⁹ In Germany, by contrast, the state-oriented process of modernization kept the strength of the military caste of traditional aristocracy, which tenaciously preserved duelling as a serious and lethal practice even until in the early twentieth century.³⁰ It was in nineteenth century France that the duel of honour acquired its widest possible social basis. In post-revolutionary France, where the old nobility and the new bourgeoisie progressively amalgamated, the practice of duelling had also

²⁸ Makku Peltonen, *The Duel in Early Modern England: Civility, Politeness and Honour* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 13, 315.

²⁹ V. G. Kiernan, *The Duel in European History: Honour and the Reign of Aristocracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 204-37.

³⁰ Kevin McAleer, *Dueling: The Cult of Honor in Fin-de-Siècle Germany* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994).

undergone a process of “*embourgeoisement*.” In a society where the difference of ranks and honours was removed, civilian duels prospered because, theoretically, anyone was able to challenge anyone to a duel. As Robert A. Nye points out, these duels (called “first-blood” duels) were rarely murderous, and they were even used to resolve disputes of public nature such as those among journalists and politicians, not least because they had a sensational mass appeal in the culture of newly developed press publicity.³¹

Although literary uses of the duel are legion, what concerns us here is this variety practiced in nineteenth century France with the widest possible eligibility and a curious aspect of potential promotional effects. Julien Sorel in Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et Le Noire* (1831), originally from a family of local carpenters, has nevertheless nurtured a Napoleonic ambition of social climbing by means of fiercely thorough self-education. When he is still a secretary of the Marquis de La Mole, Julien by chance challenges a chevalier for a duel on the basis of his coachman’s insult. The chevalier accepts it, and Julien suffers a bullet wound on his arm in the duel. After this, the chevalier starts to befriend Julien and fabricates a rumour about Julien’s illegitimate but noble origin to dignify the duel fought between the two. This episode consolidates Julien’s honour, and in turn makes M. de La Mole, his employer, recognise Julien’s worthiness as a possible social equal.³² Half a century after Stendhal’s Julien, in Guy de Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami* (1885), the duellist is

³¹ Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Code of Honour in Modern France* (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), 133, 187-200.

³² Stendhal, *Red and Black*, trans. Robert M. Adams (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1969), 213-18.

a grub-street journalist, Georges Duroy. Before the duel, his status among the staff of *La Vie française* is still uncertain, sometimes writing for its leading articles but more often for its gossip column. But one day the rival newspaper *La Plume* accuses Duroy's article of misinforming about the arrest of a certain woman, which turns out to be a ridiculous quarrel between her and a butcher over the weight of cutlets. A duel ensues between Duroy and his rival journalist, while he is aware of the absurd triviality of the cause of their dispute. No harm results, but he is lauded for defending "the flag of *La Vie française*," henceforth established as its principal staff member. Duroy even makes it his speciality "to rail against moral decline, a new weakness of character, the demise of patriotism, and the anaemia affecting the French sense of honour" from the high ground of his own 'proven' honour.³³

It seems that Joyce was keenly aware of these French conventions of the promotional duel when he made Robert challenge Richard in *Exiles*. In his notebook for the play, Joyce writes that Robert's motive is a "decrepit prudence with some chance of fighting before the public a drawn battle" (*E*, 150). His proposal is inseparable from his character as a journalist who is

³³ Guy de Maupassant, *Bel-Ami*, trans. Margaret Mauldon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 113-129. No less than three years after this, George Moore in his half-autobiographical *Confessions of a Young Man* exploited the same literary device à la Maupassant. The hero, after his long stay in Paris, tried to boost his obscure career as a minor journalist and failed novelist by challenging an aristocrat for a duel on the ground of political dispute and thus promoting his "notoriety," but it bathetically failed simply because it was difficult to appoint seconds from urban Londoners who had not engaged in a duel for about half a century by that time. See, Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, ed. Susan Dick (Montreal and London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1972), 184-92.

very conscious of any chance of self-publicity. Even though Richard instantly rejects Robert's proposal, the problem for the play is that there are certain apparent similarities between Richard and Robert. As we have seen, Richard has tried to affirm his free spirit of aesthetic autonomy by breaking conventional sanctions of marriage, family, religion, etc. Meanwhile, Robert fashions himself a self-declared "disciple" of Richard (*E*, 52), but the result is an unashamed affirmation of animal passion and promiscuity, a desire to cut a dashing figure of heroism out of immorality, as is evident in the words of his challenge:

A battle of both our souls, different as they are, against all that is false in them and in the world. A battle of your soul against the spectre of fidelity, of mine against the spectre of friendship. All life is a conquest, the victory of human passion over the commandments of cowardice. Will you, Richard? Have you the courage? Even if it shatters to atoms the friendship between us, even if it breaks up for ever the last illusion in your own life? There was an eternity before we were born: another will come after we are dead. The blinding instant of passion alone—passion, free, unashamed, irresistible—that is the only gate by which we can escape from the misery of what slaves call life. Is not this the language of your own youth that I heard so often from you in this very place where we are sitting now? Have you courage? (*E*, 89)

Thus Robert becomes a compulsive womanizer, who preys even on his best

friend's wife. While Richard acknowledges this rhetoric as "the language of [his] youth," his problem now appears rather to make his artistic liberty compatible with a certain form of community, rejecting Robert's masculine honour by saying "longing to possess a woman is not love" (*E*, 79). Richard indeed tries to relinquish possessive love by giving a "complete liberty" to Bertha (*E*, 66), and even encourages her affair with Robert. But Richard also justifies this act of giving as a voluntary release which paradoxically solidifies the tie between the two, as he says: "when you give, you have given it. No robber can take it from you.... It is yours then for ever when you have given it" (*E*, 56; ellipsis mine). What is more, Joyce implies a certain homosexual desire in Richard, a desire to be united with Robert vicariously, "carnally through the person and body of Bertha as they cannot, without dissatisfaction and degradation" (*E*, 157). Richard's radical experiment with the act of giving entangles him into the complication of adultery and vicarious homosexuality, a relation he both desires and is ashamed of.

The complexity of Richard's shame suggests that the mere rejection of the honour code does not extricate modernism out of the gravity of its influence, however degraded the idea of honour might have become by this time through its association with modern publicity. Modernist shame in this instance is negatively correlated with the conventions of honour as a form of their aberration. We can ratify this point by considering another contemporary use of the duel in Wyndham Lewis's *Tarr* (1918). Lewis's interests in the honour code are explicit in his earlier essay, "Our Wild Body" (1910), in which he writes: "The principal significance of the body to a

gentleman...is connected with honour. Honour is that code in the upholding of which he must never be found wanting. This life must be thrown into the balance at every moment, that honour should prevail, and be the constant guardian of its principle in himself.”³⁴ Yet by the time Otto Kreisler, an ungifted German art student, challenges Soltyk, a Polish art-dealer, for a duel in *Tarr*, honour appears to have become an empty word which can be exploited freely in order to give vent to a random resentment. Kreisler claims that Soltyk blemished his honour in an affair concerning a certain beautiful lady. But the true reason of Kreisler’s vengeful passion is that Soltyk intervened between him and the rich friend he used to sponge for money, thus condemning him to a humiliating life of abject destitution. “His honour *must* be satisfied. He would accept nothing less than reparation by arms. Such was Kreisler, but he was *himself* very cynically.” Meanwhile, Tarr, the eponymous hero, remains an onlooker, wondering: “Tarr himself of course could have taken refuge in the fact that Englishmen do not duel.—But what would have been the next step, this settled, had he been in Soltyk’s shoes?”³⁵ This is in no way a vain speculation, given that Tarr’s girlfriend was raped by Kreisler and Tarr himself was recently insulted. But Tarr cannot provide any good answer to the problem, until Kreisler commits suicide after he has accidentally killed Soltyk in the meeting which became a violent fracas rather than an orderly duel. Honour can never “prevail” in

³⁴ Wyndham Lewis, *The Complete Wild Body*, ed. Bernard Lafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1982), 256. Ellipsis mine.

³⁵ Wyndham Lewis, *Tarr: the 1918 Version*, ed. Paul O’Keeffe (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1990), 256-8. Emphasis in original.

Kreisler's chaotic psychology, which T. S. Eliot appropriately described as "a study in humiliation."³⁶ Yet in fact, behind Kreisler's blatant humiliation lies Tarr's silent humiliation, which is left without any means to avenge itself, short of the conventional (but for him unavailable) duel sanctioned by the code of honour.

Joyce's *Exiles* and Lewis's *Tarr* provide a set of clear-cut contrasts which suggests a certain shared pattern. Both works deal with a possible duel between an artist figure and a commercial figure: in the former, between the writer and the journalist, in the latter, between the art student and the art dealer. In both, the duel does not materialize, although for different reasons: in the former, because the writer has rejected it, in the latter, the art student has been too brutal to be contained in its elaborate regulations. They equally reveal that the conventions of honour are no longer adequate as a solution to the plights of shame and humiliation. To explain this, we might first refer to their contemporaneity with the Great War, as it is often argued that both the code of honour and the practice of duelling died a sudden violent death in the battlefield of France, where mere personal courage turned out to be vain.³⁷

Although we cannot undervalue the multiple impacts of the Great War, this

³⁶ T. S. Eliot, "Tarr," *Egoist* 1:8 (September 1918), 106.

³⁷ Robert A. Nye, op. cit. 216-28. On the other hand, William M. Reddy insists on the continuing relevance of honour in Western society even after the Great War in his study, *The Invisible Code: Honor and Sentiment in Postrevolutionary France, 1814-1848* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). Another study which emphasizes the same point is William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

possible explanation merely reduces the struggle of modernism to a displaced reflection of the actual warfare. I rather claim that, in spite of their exploitation by publicity, the code of honour still provided certain redemptive but ultimately delusive potentials for the shame of modernism. As Julien Pitt-Rivers elucidates, the honour code in traditional societies provides “a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual through his aspiration to personify them.” It is certainly true that the vocabularies of honour and shame can provoke a fierce competition among individuals towards reputation and recognition. “This competition occurs, nevertheless, within a framework of moral values that public opinion upholds. The point of honor... imposes a code for the distribution of honor that contains conflict within boundaries set by the ethical code of the community.”³⁸ It is this unique synthesis between individual agonistic struggles and communally sharable values that the code of honour appears to promise.

In this respect, it is inaccurate to claim that the war had completely swept away the ideal of honour from Western societies at this point of history. In fact, one of the most enduring modern reappraisals of the honour conventions was published after the end of the Great War in France, Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* (1925). In this seminal anthropological study, Mauss describes the morality of honour as an integral part of the customs of gift exchange in ‘archaic’ communities such as Melanesia, Polynesia, and the Northwest

³⁸ Julien Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” in *Honour and Shame: The Value of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1965), 19-78, 22. Julien Pitt-Rivers, “Honor,” in *The International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 1968), 503-511, 508. Ellipsis mine.

Indians of America. According to Mauss, the system of gift exchange must be sharply distinguished from that of modern market exchange where utilitarianism of abstract, ‘individual interest’ thrives. Mauss urges that the transfers of goods by means of gift-giving should be seen as “‘total’ social phenomena”—a type of economy firmly embedded in the social totality of institutions which modernity crucially separated, such as law, politics, morality, religion, and even, aesthetics.³⁹ In such undifferentiated communities, individuals are not yet abstracted from the fabric of community, and they participate in the system of exchange as parts and representatives of group “collectivities” (*G*, 6). Just as an individual is deeply entangled in a community, a person and a thing are also inseparably intermingled. Thus, it follows that “to make a gift of something to someone is to make a present of some part of oneself” (*G*, 16). A gift is in reality a “pledge” of the giver to the recipient, and it has a function of creating a spiritual bond and mutual contract between the two parties involved. For the same reason, the system of gift exchange is underlain by a set of three fundamental obligations which each participant strictly observes: that of giving, accepting, and reciprocating (*G*, 50-4). The principles of reciprocity and obligations are the norm for this gift exchange to happen within and between communities.

It is for this reason, Mauss claims, that in these communities “exchanges and contracts take place in the form of presents; in theory these are voluntary,

³⁹ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W. D. Howells (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 3. Hereafter abbreviated to *G*.

in reality they are given and reciprocated obligatorily” (*G*, 3). It is especially with reference to a Northwest Indian custom called “potlatch” that Mauss elucidates the role of honour in this system of gift exchange. “Potlatch” is a seasonal ritual in which various tribes of Native Americans gather down to spend winter together and during which tribal chiefs generously exchange gifts and feasts with each other. But this apparently generous exchange is in fact a “war of property,” “a competition to see who is the richest and also the most madly extravagant” (*G*, 47). It is “a struggle between nobles to establish a hierarchy amongst themselves from which their clan will benefit at a later date” (*G*, 8). A chief who pays back his obligations most extravagantly gains the highest of honour and obligates others in return. As such, Mauss concedes, the gift exchange performed in this spirit of rivalry can be “only a polite fiction, formalism, and social deceit” (*G*, 4). Pierre Bourdieu also emphasizes: “Generous exchange tends towards overwhelming generosity; the greatest gift is at the same time the gift most likely to throw its recipient into dishonour by prohibiting any counter-gift.” Bourdieu therefore concludes that the exchange of gift and counter-gift functions just like “the dialectic of challenge and riposte” in the contest of honour. It has “the structural ambivalence which predisposes them to fulfil a political function of domination,” if not by means of direct violence, then certainly by indirect exercise of power.⁴⁰ Yet in spite of all this, Mauss affirms the exchange of gift and honour as a morally laudable

⁴⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of the Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 14.

practice, since “To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality” (*G*, 17). For Mauss, this is indeed the crucial lesson of his research into the gift exchange for his war-stricken contemporaries: these supposedly ‘primitive’ people know “how to oppose and give to one another without sacrificing themselves to one another. This is what tomorrow, in our so-called civilized world, classes and nations and individuals also, must learn” (*G*, 106).

The exchange of gifts was significant for Mauss for the exactly same reason that the practice of the duel was important for the early modern courtiers and gentlemen: within the field of competition for distinction, it removes the direct violence of rivalry by containing it within the framework of socially shared values. This was even more urgent for Mauss since he believed that the laissez-faire competition of utilitarian capitalism had driven the European nations to the use of unbridled violence in the mass carnage of the Great War. In the highly speculative conclusion to his book, he even tried to see some remnants or revivals of this group morality of honour (what he called “habits of ‘aristocratic extravagance’” [*G*, 88]) in newly emergent systems and institutions as diverse as experiments in state socialism, the insurance schemes of corporate associations, and formations of professional groups. Yet as Mary Douglas observes, his attempt “to use the theory of the gift to underpin social democracy” poses a question rather than solves it, because his hypothesis requires us to think over how the spirit of honour and obligations can survive in the modern market economy where the principle of

self-interests supposedly thrives.⁴¹ And in fact, it poses a similar question to literary studies. A book as monumental as Mauss's *Gift* had justly inspired a series of influential French thinkers, such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Georges Bataille, and Jacques Derrida. Meanwhile, as Mark Osteen has noted, studies that have tried to apply the notion of art as a "gift" have had a proclivity to idealize or sentimentalize the spirit of gift as an expression of free and disinterested creativity.⁴² Not only does such a view undervalue the aspect of "the structural ambivalence" inherent in its connection with the honour code, it also overlooks the entanglement of art and the marketplace in the period of high modernism.

Instead, I argue that the modernist work of art can be called a "gift" only insofar as it is also considered as a gift of uncertain quality precisely because of its status as a gift situated within the modern market society. Notions such as 'art as gift' and 'poetic honour,' of course, belong to a long tradition of Western literary history. Yet to show that the conventions of gift and honour are also relevant to the period of modernism, in my first chapter I shall travel a little backward chronologically and examine proto-modernist novels of George Gissing and May Sinclair which lament the decadent commercialization of literature. It is exactly by resorting to the code of honour and its morality of reciprocity that Sinclair manages to imagine a re-enchantment of the commercial world by means of innovative literary

⁴¹ Mary Douglas, "Introduction" to Mauss, op. cit. x i x .

⁴² Mark Osteen, "Introduction: Questions of the Gift," in *The Question of the Gift: Essays across Disciplines*. ed. Mark Osteen (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 1-41, 27-31.

practices. But this is an illusion ultimately difficult to sustain, and it leads her later works to explore the dimensions of shame and humiliation no longer redeemable by the conventions of honour, as we shall see in my second chapter. Even though the honour code is gradually reduced to the level of a mere rhetoric, in my succeeding chapters we shall also see that the ideas of reciprocity and obligations still define the languages of Wyndham Lewis and Virginia Woolf, especially when they speculate on the relations between their works, the literary marketplace, and its impersonal reading public. While it is a perceived imbalance in exchange that drives Lewis to engage in satirical attacks against his contemporary public, it is an ideal of reciprocal exchange that enables Woolf to envision a better relation with her “common readers” as a defence against the ills of the marketplace. An act of modernism is like an offering of a gift or an issuing of a challenge in the contest of honour. It is structurally ambivalent, both a search for individual distinction and symbolic capital, and a proposal for a certain form of moral contract. But it is also crucially trapped in the market society where the honour code is frequently distorted and exploited. It is from this complexity, or this aporia, that modernism generates its distinctive poetics of shame and humiliation.

3. The Naked and the Nude

So far, I have sketched out the social aspect of shame and humiliation in relation to modernism in order to emphasize their public nature. Yet it would

be a very partial account of the nature of this emotion if we were to stop here: for, after all, isn't there a peculiarly intimate, almost visceral, quality in the intense feelings of shame and humiliation? Yet again, it would be also inaccurate if we tried to understand the private aspect of shame as something completely detached from its social aspect. As Julien Pitt-Rivers argues, honour claimed can equally be honour felt, and "it is allied to the conception of the self in the most intimate ways" since it is "linked to the physical person in terms of the symbolic functions attached to the body."⁴³ Traditionally, it is encoded especially in the conventional division of sexes between male and female. As Robert Nye claims: "In honor and shame societies men are regarded as the 'active' and women the 'passive' principle." Whereas a woman can only lose her honour as the essence of female honour consists in her sexual purity, a man can try to increase his honour by seeking distinction in the public arena since male honour has more to do with his public function.⁴⁴ As is now well known, Western societies have witnessed a radical disturbance of such gender norms in the late-nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries. Such phenomena as the rise of professional women, the suffrage movement, and the unprecedented failure of masculinity in the battlefields of the Great War, naturally brought a drastic change in everyday sexual conduct, a change which disrupted the bodily symbolism of the

⁴³ Julien Pitt-Rivers, "Honor," 505.

⁴⁴ Robert A. Nye, *op. cit.* 9-10. Pierre Bourdieu also argues: "the specifically male relation to sexuality is that of *sublimation*, the symbolism of honour tending at once to refuse any direct expression of sexuality and to encourage its transfigured manifestation in the form of manly prowess." *op. cit.* 92.

traditional honour code. If modernism still kept a somewhat ambiguous connection with the conventions of honour, such a disruption couldn't help also influencing the shame and humiliation of modernist literature.

If the age of modernism is characterized by such a momentous change of bodily *hexis* (in Pierre Bourdieu's term), it was a German sociologist Norbert Elias who took it to be a moment of crisis which posed an urgent need for a sobering historical reflection. What is innovative in his *Civilizing Process* (1939) is that he completely rejects the Enlightenment account of civilization as an orderly progress of rationalization. Rather, Elias explains the "civilizing process" in the West primarily as a spread of the notion of "civility" from the Renaissance period by means of manner books, and a gradual advance of "the frontiers of shame and the threshold of repugnance" is an integral part of the process. It is strictly correlated with the development of social interdependence and the subsequent monopoly of physical violence by the centralized authority of the state. In post-medieval societies, "the question of uniform good behaviour becomes increasingly acute" because interdependence creates "the social imperative not to offend others." This pressure demands new forms of "affect-moulding" and "drive-control" in the self which prohibit direct and immediate gratification of physical pleasure. Table manners are increasingly regulated by the use of forks, knives and napkins. Such actions as blowing one's nose and spitting are concealed by the use of handkerchiefs. Natural bodily functions such as urinating, defecating, and having sex are becoming a taboo subject in polite conversations, while they are strictly segregated from public sphere into the

private sphere. As these taboos have been “socially nurtured under quite specific conditions [and] constantly reproduced, not solely but mainly because they have become institutionally embedded in a particular ritual, in particular forms of conduct,” they create “the imprint of society on the inner self, the superego” in children through the process of inculcation. This eventually establishes “the invisible wall of affects which seems now to rise between one human body and another,” namely, the frontiers of shame and the threshold of repugnance.⁴⁵

Yet Elias’s account is far from a triumphant elucidation of human gentrification, for the civilizing process is fraught with a number of problems and contradictions. The patterns of conduct and sentiments thus established are, after all, “remnants of the power and status aspirations of established groups, and have no other function than that of reinforcing their power chances and their status superiority.” In other words, they are strategies for distinction.⁴⁶ Moreover, these modes of conduct merely displace the points of tension from the outside to the inside, i.e. from outer conflict with one another to inner conflict in each individual self between the socially imprinted super ego and instinctual impulses. As a result, this displaced conflict

⁴⁵ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Volume 1 The History of Manners*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 80, 127-8, 69. For Elias’s sense of crisis and his rejection of the Enlightenment account of civilization, see, *The Civilizing Process: Volume 2 State Formation and Civilization*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), 324-5, 229-31.

⁴⁶ Elias, *Vol.2*, 332. Elias also points out the deep complicity of this “civilizing process” with the Western colonization of other regions after the Renaissance period. See, 252-6.

sometimes produces certain cases of “maladjustment” which suffer social exclusion as “sick,” “pathological,” or “perverse.”⁴⁷ Furthermore, as society prohibits the immediate gratification of physical impulses, “a substitute is created in dreams, in books and pictures. So, on their way to becoming courtiers, the nobility read novels of chivalry; the bourgeois contemplate violence and erotic passion in films.” Similarly, as the exposure of the naked body becomes rarer in everyday context in accordance with the advance of the shame threshold, “the depiction of the naked body in art takes on a new significance. More than hitherto it becomes a dream image, an emblem of wish-fulfillment.”⁴⁸

This is not to dismiss art and literature as mere outlets for socially illegitimized desires and passions. The transformation of the naked body into the “dream image” indeed constitutes a central problem for the tradition of Western painting. At the beginning of his standard book on the subject, *The Nude* (1953), Kenneth Clark reinstates a distinction between the naked and the nude which he claims to have existed since the eighteenth century. According to him: “To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes and the word implies some of the embarrassment which most of us feel in that condition. The word nude, on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone.” In fact, “the nude is not the subject of art, but a form of art.” In terms of this formalist account, the making of a nude is a

⁴⁷ Elias, *Vol.1*, 142-150. Also see *Vol.2*, 244-245. As is also obvious from this, Elias’s thesis is strongly influenced by Sigmund Freud’s doctrines of psychoanalysis, while Elias also criticises the a-historicism of certain psychoanalytic writings.

⁴⁸ Elias, *Vol.2*, 242. *Vol.1*, 165.

process whereby the imperfection of a factual naked body is “re-formed” into “a balanced, prosperous, and confident body.”⁴⁹ Yet this simple distinction is in reality not as innocent as it first appears, given the predominance of the female nude in the history of Western painting. Thus, John Berger polemically rewrites the distinction in order to reveal a hidden sexism. “To be naked is to be oneself,” whereas “To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself” by an implicit masculine gaze of the spectator. Nudity is a body objectified by being “placed on display.” “To be on display is to have the surface of one’s own skin, the hairs of one’s own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded. The nude is condemned to never being naked.”⁵⁰ The disagreement between the two illuminates a resistance against nakedness working at the heart of the traditional Western aesthetics, even while it tries to justify the depiction of an unclothed human body as the academic nude.⁵¹

If the controversy over the distinction between the naked and the nude illustrates moral and aesthetic aspects of the resistance to nakedness, Claude Rawson provides a sort of political subtext for this problem in the literature of the eighteenth century. Under the ancien régime, there was “a tradition in which language was commonly referred to as the dress of thought,” a tradition

⁴⁹ Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study of Ideal Art* (London: John Murray, 1956), 1-3.

⁵⁰ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972), 53-4.

⁵¹ Whereas the nude was a relatively unproblematic subject for academic art in France and other Catholic countries, in nineteenth century England the nude continued to be a controversial subject even for academic paintings. See, Alison Smith, *The Victorian Nude: Sexuality, Morality and Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996).

which was deeply connected to “the whole issue of the social and political import of *la belle nature*.” Although this tradition had a number of eminent subscribers such as David Hume, John Dryden, and Jonathan Swift, it was increasingly under attack already from the seventeenth century. For instance, Puritan preachers called for a plainer style in sermons; the developing language of science and philosophy also recommended “a close, naked, natural way of speaking” as suitable for the nature of their inquiry. Yet it was from around the late-eighteenth century that “primitivist assertions of the innocence and dignity of naked unaccommodated man” started to pose the most serious threat, which culminated in the period of the French revolution.⁵² Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Confessions* (1782-89) proclaims: “I dared to strip bare the nature of men.” William Wordsworth in his Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) also celebrates “the native and naked dignity of man.” It is against such a cry of emergent romanticism that Edmund Burke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790) issues a note of moral outrage, saying that: “All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off.” For Burke, “All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination” is indispensable to “cover the defects of our naked shivering nature.”⁵³ Rawson also points out that Joshua Reynolds, the founder of the Royal Academy of Art, promoted the “drapery” of his neo-classical “grand style” in his *Discourses on Art* (1797) chiefly from his deep affinity with his friend,

⁵² Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment 1660-1830: Stress Points in the English Augustan Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 141, 157, 148, 153.

⁵³ Quoted in Rawson, *ibid*, 181, 189, 160.

Edmund Burke's reaction to the rising ideology of the naked human nature.⁵⁴

In terms of Norbert Elias's theory of the civilizing process, this historical controversy over the question of nakedness is a part of longstanding negotiations over the thresholds of shame and repugnance. Carl Schneider argues that the nineteenth century saw a re-evaluation of the experience of shame as "a possible clue to what is distinctively human" after its undervaluation by rationalism of the Enlightenment logical thinking. His prime example is Thomas Burgess, a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. In *The Physiology or Mechanism of Blushing* (1839), Burgess argues that, whereas all other expressions such as laughing and crying can be provoked by physical means, blushing alone cannot be stimulated in this way and only produced by consciousness. Therefore, blushing is an exceptional, spiritual expression which reflects the providential design.⁵⁵ Yet the subsequent development of natural sciences seems rather to have undermined such a quasi-religious account of shame. It is true that Charles Darwin, in *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), argues that "blushing seems to be the most strictly human" of all expressions, although his methodological premise is to place emotional expressions in the evolutionary chain from animals to human beings. But at the same time, Darwin directly refutes Burgess by saying that the "belief that blushing was specifically designed by the Creator is opposed to the general theory of evolution," and

⁵⁴ Rawson, *ibid*, 163-7.

⁵⁵ Carl D. Schneider, *Shame, Exposure, and Privacy* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1977), 1-2.

instead trying to find the physiological basis of blushing in the long-established human habit of self-attention.⁵⁶ In turn, the centrality of shame to the definition of humanity is demolished by Havelock Ellis in “Evolution of Modesty” (1899), published in the first volume of his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Using “modesty” as an umbrella word for emotions such as “shame, shyness, bashfulness, timidity, etc.,” Ellis drastically reduces it to a primitive feminine fear of sexuality which he claims to have also observed in the courtship behaviours of animals (by contrast, Darwin didn’t consider the sexual aspect of blushing). Thus attributing shame to the “fundamental animal factor,” Ellis claims that the advance of civilized scientific spirit can ultimately conquer and subjugate the primitive emotion of modesty.⁵⁷ No doubt it was a fitting piece as an introduction to and promotion of his ‘science’ of sexology.

It is exactly at this historical juncture, fraught with aesthetic, political, and even scientific controversies, that I want to examine literary modernism’s

⁵⁶ Charles Darwin, *The Expression of Emotions in Man and Animals* (London: Fontana, 1999), 358, 335-42.

⁵⁷ Havelock Ellis, “The Evolution of Modesty,” in *Studies in the Psychology of Sex: Volume 1* (Philadelphia, F. A. Davis, 3rd edition, 1918), 1-84, 7, 36-7, 80-2. The inherently controversial nature of this debate about shame is also seen in Max Scheler’s essay written in 1913 but published posthumously in 1933. He directly criticizes Ellis’s observation on the animal factor of shame and almost goes back to the position of Thomas Burgess in claiming that shame arises from the conflict between animality and divinity in the human nature. From this position, he also argues: “The *decline of the feeling of shame* in modern times is undoubtedly a sign of *racial degeneration*.” Although he was a follower of Husserl’s phenomenology, Scheler in this essay exhibits unpleasant racism and anti-Semitism. Max Scheler, “Shame and Feelings of Modesty,” in *Person and Self-Value: Three Essays* (Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff, 1987), 3-85, 3, 69. Emphasis in original.

representations of bodies that challenge the thresholds of shame and repugnance. Once again, the magnitude of the problem in this period can be seen in examples from visual arts, Gustav Klimt's troubles with the general public in Vienna around 1900, which was also the epicentre of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. In 1894, Klimt gained a prestigious commission to provide three decorative paintings for the Assembly Hall of Vienna University. They were expected to be standard academic allegories for the three faculties of philosophy, medicine, and law. Deliberately belying this expectation, however, Klimt eschewed "both the distance maintained by history painting and the utopia of allegory" and instead, boldly presented images of sexuality in his sensual and grotesque naked bodies. It provoked a scandal and a heated public debate which was even called, in the words of a contemporary art critic, an "aesthetic civil war."⁵⁸ Around the same time, but in a quite different level, Adolf Loos, the modernist architect, stirred another big scandal by his innovative building for the tailors Goldman & Salatsch in 1911. Following the principle formulated in his notorious lecture "Ornament and Crime" (1908), Loos designed a clear and simple façade divested of standard historicist ornaments. It was publicly condemned as "indecent nakedness" and even caused a trouble with the municipal authorities.⁵⁹ In this Austrian capital city around the turn of the century, the urge towards artistic modernism

⁵⁸ Tobias G. Natter, "On the Limits of the Exhibitable," in *The Naked Truth: Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka and Other Scandals*, eds. Tobias G. Natter and Max Hollein (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 17-42, 18-9. Also see 99-107 for the paintings in question. I am grateful to Lawrence Rainey for drawing my attention to this important exhibition catalogue.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 138-139. Loos's design is reproduced in 140-146.

emerged first and foremost as an urge towards problematic nakedness.

Around the same time, London also saw a number of scandalous new arts. Cases such as Aubrey Beardsley's erotic illustrations in the fin-de-siècle, and Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist exhibition (1910-1911), which introduced Gauguin's naked Tahitian women, are famous and already well-documented. Less well-known, but equally significant, is the case of Walter Sickert in his essay, "The Naked and the Nude" (1910). Turning the table to the academic sanction of the nude, Sickert denounces it as "the obscene monster" produced by an "inconsistent and prurient puritanism" of British society. Sickert justifies his critique first from his claim that the conventional art education has turned the nude into "an examination subject" which blights the true development of serious draughtsmanship. But he also argues that the old formulas of the nude have given licence to unearthly and unrealistic fantasies: "Compositions consisting solely of nudes are generally... not only repellent, but slightly absurd. Even the picture or two (I think there are two) of the Master Ingres, which is a conglomeration of nudes, has something absurd and repellent, a suggestion of a dish of macaroni, something wriggling and distasteful." Instead, Sickert suggests that, if a nude figure should appear at all, it should be placed back in everyday contexts.⁶⁰ Arguing in this way, he was actually defending his own practice, shocking pictures of the *Camden Town Murder* series (1907-1910). Sickert was originally inspired by a 1907

⁶⁰ Walter Sickert, "The Naked and the Nude," in *Walter Sickert: the Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 260-63. Ellipsis mine.

murder case of a prostitute in his neighbourhood. In each painting, he presents an unusual combination of a clothed man and a naked woman in a small dirty room. The man always looks brooding, and the woman listlessly lying on a shabby bed: the atmosphere is obscurely threatening and murderous. Sickert's exposure of the naked body is a reference to the dismal, low reality of contemporary North London suburbs.⁶¹

Literary modernism's legendary struggles with the public standard of morality, and especially its troubles with the state censorship, have been already well explored.⁶² Recent critics begin to be more interested in the question of supposedly 'high' modernism's traffics with "all that is low: obscene bodies, animals and objects; masturbation, shit and piss" by provocatively naming it "low modernism."⁶³ But my interests in shame and nakedness are slightly different, as I rather want to inquire what sort of discursive strategies enable modernism to perform a pose of 'truth-telling' which challenges the shame threshold, and how such strategies are in turn accompanied by negotiations over borders between the public sphere and the private institutions. For instance, Tobias Natter points out that the stance of Klimt is announced in his 1899 painting, *Nuda Veritas*. In the picture, the figure of a naked woman is framed with a quotation from Freidrich Schiller,

⁶¹ On Walter Sickert's *Camden Town Murder* series, see, Lisa Tickner, *Modern Life & Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 11-47.

⁶² Adam Parks, *Modernism and the Theater of Censorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

⁶³ Rachel Potter and David Trotter, "Low Modernism: Introduction," *Critical Quarterly* 46:4 (Winter 2004), iii

which says, in translation: “If you cannot please everyone through your deed and your work, aim to please only a few. One should not aim to please the masses.”⁶⁴ These words prefigured his subsequent turn away from the wider public, evident in his abandonment of the government commission for the Vienna University Hall. Klimt instead chose to express his passion for nakedness through smaller paintings which were exhibited in private salons of a few sympathetic patrons, or drawings which were by nature more private form of art. It is easy to redeem the modernists’ discords with the public by celebrating them as outlaws, outsiders, or even martyrs for the cause of their art. More important is to question how a certain form of shamelessness is enabled, rather paradoxically, by a certain concession to the thresholds of shame and repugnance.

Another important reminder to my discussion is that, in these examples, all the writers and artists who took up the question of shame and nakedness were male without exception. After all, perhaps it was much easier for male artists to challenge the academically sanctioned nude and expose the supposed nakedness beneath it as a potent sign of their masculinity. But isn’t this merely to place the naked body “on display” and thus to transform it once again into the nude? What sort of enabling or disabling effects this dilemma has on female artists, such as May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf, if they have to challenge the shame threshold? Therefore, I consider that, if the exposure of nakedness can be really possible, it cannot perfectly conform to the normative gender distinction between male and female. Nor can it be completely

⁶⁴ Natter, *op. cit.* 20, 108.

shameless. As Emmanuel Lévinas argues in his early piece, “De l’évasion” (1935):

Shame arises each time we are unable to make others forget [*faire oublier*] our basic nudity. It is related to everything we would like to hide and that we cannot bury or cover up. The timid man who is all arms and legs is ultimately incapable of covering the nakedness of his physical presence with his moral person. Poverty is not a vice, but it is shameful because, like the beggar’s rags, it shows up the nakedness of an existence incapable of hiding itself. This preoccupation with dressing to hide ourselves concerns every manifestation of our lives, our acts, and our thoughts. We accede to the world through words, and we want them to be noble. It is the great merit of Céline’s *Journey to the End of the Night*, thanks to a marvellous flair for language, to have undressed the universe in a sad and desperate cynicism.⁶⁵

In the final analysis, the moment of shame and nakedness should be understood as that of this specific inability. It is therefore such modernist instances of a “marvellous flair for language,” which resist our inherent tendency for glorification, and which perhaps even resist their authors, that I shall try to discover in the following chapters.

⁶⁵ Emmanuel Lévinas, *On Evasion*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 64.

CHAPTER 1

Worse Than Death: Culture, Commercialization, and Shame in the Novels of George Gissing and May Sinclair

1.

Despite her reputation as one of the major novelists of her day, May Sinclair (1863-1946) swiftly sank into obscurity after the late 1920s. By the time of her death, her novels were only remembered, if remembered at all, as one of what George Orwell called “good bad books,” i.e. novels that shine in “native grace” because of their lack of “literary pretensions.”¹ Yet since the 1970s there have been attempts at a reappraisal via two seminal monographs that called for a better recognition of Sinclair.² While these were informed by feminist revision of literary history, her connections with writers such as Ezra Pound, H. D., and Dorothy Richardson also turn out to be important when we reconsider the process of canon formation in academic modernist criticism. During the 1910s, Sinclair lent powerful support to these writers by writing several appreciative essays on their literary experiments, making a good use of her reputation as an established writer.³ Sinclair also tried to catch up with these trends by changing the conventions of her novels towards the modernist narrative of consciousness, best seen in *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), and *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922). But as Suzanne Raitt

¹ George Orwell, “Good Bad Books” (1945), in *Essays* (London: Penguin, 2000), 318-20.

² These are Theophilis E. M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair, Novelist* (Rutherford, NJ.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973), and Hrisay Dimitrakis Zegger, *May Sinclair* (Boston, MA: Twayne’s English Authors, 1976).

³ Most of these essays are collected in Bonnie Kime Scott, ed. *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 436-67.

cautions, we might miss the unique position of Sinclair if we are too rash in trying to associate her with the younger generation of modernists.⁴ It is important first to remember that her third novel, *The Divine Fire* (1904) was a best-seller, one that sold around 200,000 copies in the U. S. alone. Yet unlike other best-sellers such as Marie Corelli or Hall Caine, Sinclair maintained friendships with serious writers such as Violent Hunt, Ford Madox Hueffer, and Thomas Hardy. Sinclair's true uniqueness thus lies in her skillful balance between popularity and claims for artistic value, in spite of the fact that the two were often considered to be incompatible in the period. Before considering her later 'modernist' phase, as I do in the next chapter, in this chapter I shall investigate what enabled Sinclair, at one point in her early career, to combine a vision of wide public appeal with her desire for serious artistic innovations.

According to Peter Keating, the increasing professionalization and widening marketplace of literature in the late-nineteenth century had given rise to a number of books which, in some ways or others, were all concerned with the problems of authorship: such as Henry James's short stories on eminent authors, George Gissing's novels about impoverished writers, or Arnold Bennett's more practical literary manuals.⁵ We can regard two of May Sinclair's early novels, *The Divine Fire*, and *The Creators: A Comedy*

⁴ Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 2-3. Raitt's caution is most effectively expressed in the oxymoronic subtitle, a "modern Victorian."

⁵ Peter J. Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989), 73.

(1910) as late examples of these period interests in authorship. Sinclair shared with her contemporaries a keen perception of commercialization in the field of cultural production. Yet while Sinclair agreed with them in seeing some degrading effects in the spread of contemporary commercialism, she was quite unique in that she didn't consider these factors as insurmountable obstacles for writers to achieve authentic literary success. In what follows, I shall emphasize the point by plotting a series of contrasts between Sinclair's novels and those of George Gissing. Among other possible choices, I select Gissing not only because he was one of Sinclair's favourite novelists who could have strongly influenced Sinclair, especially in her early career.⁶ It is also because his novels most clearly exemplify a type of romantic pessimism against which Sinclair had to defend her persistent desire to pursue literary innovations as a venture worthy of public recognition.

I shall first draw an extensive contrast between Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891) and Sinclair's *The Divine Fire*. Although both regard the process of ruthless commercialization in the late-nineteenth century as a trend which trammels and frustrates the serious literary ambitions of young aspiring writers, their conclusions are remarkably different. In Gissing, the figure of the serious novelist, Edwin Reardon, is eventually put to a solitary death, shorn of public recognition perhaps proper to his authentic devotion to art. It

⁶ It is known that Sinclair sent her first novel, *Audrey Craven* (1897) to Gissing and was given a very favourable comment. After the death of Gissing, Sinclair exchanged some letters with Morley Roberts, an intimate friend of Gissing, and expressed a deep liking and almost identificatory compassion with Gissing's novels, especially *New Grub Street* (1891) and *Born in Exile* (1892). For Sinclair's letter to Robert, see, Boll, op. cit. 56. Also see, Raitt, op. cit. 67-71.

is only his romantic death, and ironically, a subsequent tribute from Jasper Milvain, a successful journalist, that seem to grant Reardon a measure of posthumous reputation. Meanwhile in Sinclair's novel, *Savage Keith* Rickman, the hero of the work, finally attains public acclaim as an innovative poet, although he has once sunk into a murderous drudgery of hack journalism. I shall argue that it is exactly the discourse of honour that enables Sinclair to celebrate Keith without any imputation of degradation which is usually attached to a commercial success. Sinclair achieves this by letting Keith once fall into the shame of commercialism, but in the end allowing him to repair his dishonour by means of sincere gift exchange with his lover. Yet I shall also suggest that, as a result of this, *The Divine Fire* becomes a curiously paradoxical product, a conventional romantic comedy which advocates the value of modern literary innovations.

This paradox inevitably unravelled when Sinclair shifted her attention from the male creativity to female creativity, as we shall see in a later short story, "The Gift" (1908). In this story, Sinclair starts to examine a certain gender imbalance in the traditional discourse of honour and gift. This imbalance makes it more difficult for women to combine their artistic pursuits with a proper exchange of gift, and this recognition leads Sinclair to address an aspect of shame which can no longer be properly accommodated by the discourse of honour. Sinclair's further exploration into the problem can be found in a still later novel, *The Creators* (1910). At first glance, the novel appears to revert to the kind of cultural pessimism that we found in Gissing as it describes a group of men and women writers who are firmly entrenched

against the invasive curiosity of the general reading public. But once we set it against Gissing's own late novel, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), a work often read as his thinly disguised autobiography, we can better grasp Sinclair's deeply ambivalent attitude to the value which Gissing's novel assigned to withdrawal and private retreat from the public world. For Sinclair, such a choice of private retreat was far more difficult: as a female novelist and intellectual, one who was also unmarried, she could not so easily or unilaterally idealize the fate of shameful isolation that contemporaries attached to the figure of the spinster, even if spinsterhood was reconfigured as a price to be paid for the pursuit of female creativity. This very impasse, in turn, would drive her towards the path of modernist experimentation.

2.

Written with hindsight of a decade, Gissing's *New Grub Street* chronicles the trend of literary commercialization in London during the 1880s, which was still very much in progress when the book was first published in 1891. The novel reveals its observations on commercialization and its all-pervasive effects by focusing on a handful of writers in the publishing world, a group sharply divided by a dichotomy between art and trade, old and new, and failure and success. The former is represented by Edwin Reardon, an author who supplies his three-decker novels to the decaying institution of circulating libraries, finding it difficult to accommodate himself to the new age of

cheaper and shorter fictions. The destiny of his decline is paralleled by that of Alfred Yule, an old-fashioned, embittered ‘man of letters’ assisted by his daughter Marian, a fine specimen of “the modern literary girl.”⁷ The latter group of successful trade is typified by Jasper Milvain, a commercial journalist who gains a prestigious editorship at the end of the novel by means of skilful socializing. His gradual ascent is constantly juxtaposed with an improving career of Welpadale, a failed novelist who becomes a “literary adviser” (*NGS*, 165) and the writer of an “author’s Guide” (*NGS*, 216). Its coverage of key features of the historical change is so thorough that one critic has called the novel “a sociological document of genius written in the form of a novel.”⁸ Yet the very sharpness of the contrast it draws may sacrifice closer attention to the actual complexity of the historical change at issue. For instance, near the end of the novel when Welpadale reveals his plan for a new journal called *Chit-Chat* (modelled on George Newnes’ *Tits-Bits*), he explains that it is targeted to “the quarter-educated; that is to say, the great new generation that is being turned out by the Board schools, the young men and women who can just read, but are incapable of sustained attention” (*NGS*, 460). Characterizing the newly emerging readership of the period in this monolithic manner, Gissing betrays his cultural pessimism, an outlook that may not necessarily be an adequate diagnosis of the situation. As John Goode argues, in this novel, “there is very little sense of the reading public,”

⁷ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. John Goode (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 16. Hereafter abbreviated to *NGS*.

⁸ P. J. Keating, *George Gissing: New Grub Street* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), 9.

partly because Gissing's focus on the side of writers is too narrow to produce a comprehensive picture of his contemporary public.⁹

Fredric Jameson argues that Gissing's fiction should be regarded essentially as a product of "high naturalist specialization that seeks to pass itself off as a map of the social totality," a form which emerged after the crisis of classic realism.¹⁰ This claim is persuasive if we consider the early changes in his literary objectives. In his first, self-published novel, *Workers in the Dawn* (1880), Gissing tried to seek a means of political engagement by portraying the deprivation of the urban poor, which led to his temporary association with a circle of radical intellectuals around the *Pall Mall Gazette*. Yet he was also quick to abandon his early hope for social reform towards a position of Schopenhauerian pessimism.¹¹ As Raymond Williams points out, this turn is already evident in Gissing's second novel.¹² In *The Unclassed* (1884), a novelist Osmond Waymark at first declares that "Art, nowadays,

⁹ John Goode, *George Gissing: Ideology and Fiction* (London: Vision, 1978), 118. On the actual diversity of new readership in the period, see David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895-1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), 62-4. On the complex situation of the changing publishing world, see, Peter D. McDonald, "Modernist Publishing: 'Nomads and Mapmakers,'" in *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 221-42.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 190.

¹¹ On these biographical details, see, John Halperin, *George Gissing: A Life in Books* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 21-48. For Gissing's essay on pessimism, written around 1882 but never published in his lifetime, see "The Hope of Pessimism," in Pierre Coustillas, ed, *George Gissing: Essays & Fiction* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970), 75-98.

¹² Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1958), 175-6.

must be the mouthpiece of misery, for misery is the keynote of modern life.” Yet by the time he finishes the manuscript of his novel, he comes to dismiss his early political motives. As Waymark confesses to his friend: “Is it artistically strong? Is it good as a picture? There was a time when I might have written in this way with a declared social object. That is all gone by. I have no longer a spark of social enthusiasm. Art is all I now care for, and as art I wish my work to be judged.”¹³ Combined with this exclusive devotion to art is a lofty disdain towards a public reception. In *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (1898), Gissing asserts that Dickens’s high-Victorian attitude as a public moralist is merely old-fashioned, an attitude “especially hard to maintain in face of a literary movement which devoted itself to laying bare the worst of popular life. The brothers Goncourt, Flaubert, and M. Zola were not companions likely to fortify a naïve ideal.” According to Gissing, a naturalist writer “takes for granted that the truth can be got at, and that it is his plain duty to set it down without compromise.” From this standard of naturalist intransigence, Gissing judges that Dickens was a non-realist who often compromised artistic truth to accord with popular tastes, citing as an example the major change in the plot of *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1843-4) in response to the declining number of subscriptions. While admiring Dickens’s novels as a whole, Gissing also argues that it was only “his genius” which “saved him from the worst results of the commercial spirit.”¹⁴

¹³ George Gissing, *The Unclassed* (London: Ernest Benn, 1930), 157, 201.

¹⁴ George Gissing, *Charles Dickens: A Critical Study* (London: Blackie & Son,

From this perspective, the figure of Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street* can be regarded exactly as that of “the commercial spirit” who is not equipped with the saving grace of a genius. At the outset of the novel, he openly declares: “Literature nowadays is a trade. Putting aside men of genius, who may succeed by mere cosmic force, your successful man of letters is your skilful tradesman. He thinks first and foremost of the market; when one kind of goods begins to go off slackly, he is ready with something new and appetising” (*NGS*, 8-9). Milvain’s infinite adaptability to the market conditions is informed by his social Darwinian vision applied to the overproduction of books. According to him: “The struggle for existence among books is nowadays as severe as among men” (*NGS*, 456). It is because the “quantity turned out is so great that there’s no hope for the special attention of the public unless one can afford to advertise hugely” (*NGS*, 29). He thereby starts to cultivate a good connection and to promote himself in the publishing world by means of skilful socializing, and recommends Reardon to follow his lead (*NGS*, 164). Yet when his social status begins to rise, Milvain feels no scruple to let his friendship with “old Bohemian associates” drop off, except for the moderately successful Welpadale (*NGS*, 389). Earlier in his career, he says: “Never in my life shall I do anything of solid literary value; I shall always despise the people I write for” (*NGS*, 74). This is a candid admission that his success is only produced by self-promotion and advertising. Yet by the end of the novel, when he is about to be appointed an editor, he grows so proud with himself that he dismisses the success of

Welpadale's *Chit-Chat* as merely monetary (*NGS*, 481), and asserts: "what I look to is intellectual distinction" (*NGS*, 509). His commercial spirit is so ascendant that Milvain even arrogates the kind of success which he didn't aim at.

Meanwhile, Edwin Reardon embodies an opposite pole of value in the novel. Although he is not a figure of genius, his passion for the disinterested culture of Greek classics is genuine and beyond doubt. Earlier in his career, a moderate success of his novel has enabled Reardon to travel on the continent (*NGS*, 63), but he soon commits a social error by marrying Amy Yule, an estranged cousin of Marian, while his career prospects are still uncertain (*NGS*, 66). Reardon is thereafter trapped in a downward spiral, partly because of financial worries caused by Amy's liking for a respectable and expensive lifestyle. Yet it is also because his Italian and Greek travels have adversely effected his novel-writing. As he explains it to Milvain: "I read little but Greek and Latin. That brought me out of the track I had laboriously made for myself; I often thought with disgust of the kind of work I had been doing; my novels seemed vapid stuff, so wretchedly and shallowly modern" (*NGS*, 77). Written in such a spirit, his novels are not marketable even after he turns from the three-decker towards one-volume fiction, "a glaringly artificial story with a sensational title" (*NGS*, 160). Grinding poverty is inimical to his workmanship, and alienates Amy when he most needs feminine sympathy. Left by Amy, Reardon entrenches himself with a cult of classical cultures, claiming: "The best moment of life are those when we contemplate beauty in the purely artistic spirit—objectively. I have had such moments in

Greece and Italy; times when I was a free spirit, utterly remote from the temptations and harrassings of sexual emotion" (NGS, 369). A man with an ideal of culture which is completely private, he is unable to strike a compromise with the popular taste. Sunk into a solitary poverty in his final days, he says: "To have had even a small reputation, and to have outlived it, is a sort of anticipation of death," and, "My strongest desire now is for peaceful obscurity" (NGS, 437-8). Reardon is not saved even when Amy inherits a large fortune; eventually, he dies.

The contrast between Milvain and Reardon is so sharp that Rachel Bowlby argues that the novel envisions "no way out of the impasse which offers an impossible choice between 'practical' adaptation to profit-seeking vulgarity, and the noble resistance of starving, embittered authenticity."¹⁵ Yet there is a disagreement among critics about whether or not this cultural pessimism anticipates the succeeding generation of modernism. On the one hand, John Goode claims that the novel does anticipate Joyce and Woolf, since "it starkly confronts the domain of literary production with the modern world and, finding no space for negotiation, clarifies the need in the relations of production for modernist opposition."¹⁶ On the other hand, Patrick Brantlinger dismisses Gissing's novel merely as "dead-end...realism," unable "to see his way out of the impasse into the coming era of literary modernism."¹⁷ A case in point is not so much the fate of Reardon, as that of

¹⁵ Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (New York and London: Methuen, 1985), 117.

¹⁶ John Goode, "Introduction," in *NGS*, vii-xxi, xix.

¹⁷ Patrick Brantlinger, *Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in*

his friend Harold Biffen, another novelist figure. Unlike Reardon, he doesn't have any family that he must support, and thus devotes his impoverished life entirely to an experimental writing, which is "an absolute realism in the sphere of the ignobly decent" (*NGS*, 144). As he explains it, Biffen tries to dispense with any idealization in depicting the lower-middle class life: "The result will be something unutterably tedious. Precisely. That is the stamp of the ignobly decent life. If it were anything *but* tedious it would be untrue. I speak, of course, of its effect upon the ordinary reader" (*NGS*, 145; emphasis in original). Near the end of the novel, Biffen manages to publish his manuscript, now titled *Mr. Bailey, Grocer*. Yet reviews caustically dismiss it as "the spirit of grovelling realism" (*NGS*, 485). Left alone after Reardon's death and despaired of his futile passion for the widowed Amy, Biffen eventually commits suicide. In his final moment: "Only thoughts of beautiful things came into his mind; he had reverted to an earlier period of life, when as yet no mission of literary realism had been imposed upon him, and when his passions were still soothed by natural hope" (*NGS*, 493). It appears that his naturalist imperative for absolute truth is merely "imposed" on his original, romanticist yearning for an ethereal beauty; as such, it is not sustainable, and perhaps even suicidal.

Therefore, if it really anticipates modernism, *New Grub Street* does it only in a negative manner, insofar as it exhibits the limit-point of realist

conventions.¹⁸ Simon James argues that, whereas the high-Victorian novels often produce “a moral economy” in which the deserving is endowed with material rewards, Gissing’s fiction decisively “dissociate[s] the concepts of reward and justice,” which culminates in the success of Milvain.¹⁹ We can see this dissociation most clearly in Gissing’s decomposition of the discourse of honour. About the early career of Adrian Yule, the narrator observes: “Had Yule been content to manufacture a novel or a play with due disregard for literary honour, he might perchance have made a mercantile success; but the poor fellow had not pliancy enough for this” (*NGS*, 96). Instead, Yule’s high ambition has only led to a series of bitter controversies which gradually relegates him to the margin of literary journalism. By the end of the novel he suffers blindness, while Clement Fadge, his erstwhile enemy, ascends to “the place of honour” in a prestigious literary journal (*NGS*, 506). Yet according to Yule, Fadge is the “most malicious man in the literary world” (*NGS*, 26); even Milvain dismisses him as “that ruffian” (*NGS*, 513). Similarly, when Reardon produces “a wretched pot-boiler,” he says “I shall be ashamed to see it in print,” from the viewpoint of his workmanship. Yet his wife Amy feels ashamed rather because of “people’s talk and opinions” (*NGS*, 129). As the narrator revealingly tells: “Now she was well aware that no degree of distinction in her husband would be of much value to her unless she had the

¹⁸ On this point, see, Martin Ryle, “‘To Show a Man of Letters’: Gissing, Cultural Authority and Literary Modernism,” in *George Gissing: Voices of the Unclassed*, ed. Martin Ryle and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 119-132, 131.

¹⁹ Simon J. James, *Unsettled Accounts: Money and Narrative in the Novels of George Gissing* (London: Anthem Press, 2003), 19, 104-6.

pleasure of witnessing its effect upon others; she must shine with reflected light before an admiring assembly” (*NGS*, 133). While the honour and shame of literary work is primarily the question of its autonomous quality for artists such as Reardon and Yule, for a reader like Amy its “distinction” is completely heteronomous, since it is essentially subject to the viewpoint of others. Appropriately, when Reardon attempts to reconcile with his wife after their estrangement, his efforts fail because of his poor outward appearance: “Reardon had no such remarkable physique; and it was not wonderful that his wife felt ashamed of him. Strictly ashamed; he seemed to her a social inferior” (*NGS*, 346).

Seen from this angle, the doomed love affair between Jasper Milvain and Marian Yule is interesting insofar as it explores a possibility of creating a new value out of a disregard for the sense of shame or concern with mere outward appearances. If not in his literary style, then certainly in his private conduct, Milvain follows a policy of open speech and plain truth. Earlier in the novel, he confesses to her: “I shall do many a base thing in life, just to get money and reputation; I tell you this that you mayn’t be surprised if anything of that kind comes to your ears.” To this, she replies: “People who are going to live unworthily don’t declare it in this way” (*NGS*, 119). His open declaration impresses Marian favourably, because it suggests a certain frankness and honesty in Milvain’s character.²⁰ When he proposes an engagement to

²⁰ On this point and its wider implication for the novel itself, see, Christina Lupton and Tilman Reitz, “*New Grub Street’s* Self-Consciousness,” in Ryle and Taylor, *op. cit.* 133-44.

Marian, he doesn't hide the fact that his proposal is occasioned by her inheritance of a small but still significant fortune, even though he has been attracted to her from the beginning. He rather prefers to expose "the plain, coarse truth" as a proof against his "possible insincerity" (*NGS*, 328). But when Marian's inheritance turns out to be much smaller and even this becomes unavailable to his career move because of her parents' financial insecurity, Milvain flinches from directly suggesting a break in their engagement. In their final meeting, he merely enumerates the difficulties which will await their marriage. Yet against his rather rhetorical excuse, this time Marian astonishingly takes over his role as a truth-teller, and speaks out: "What can be simpler than the truth? You loved me, or you thought you did, and now you love me no longer. It is a thing that happens every day, either in man or woman, and all that honour demands is the courage to confess the truth." Marian quickly walks away, leaving Milvain behind with "the face of a man who is suffering a severe humiliation" (*NGS*, 503-4).

At this critical moment, Gissing is briefly exploring a radical possibility of a 'new woman' who start to address herself to the principles of plain truth and unconventional honesty.²¹ In the final part of the novel, the narrator informs us that Marian finally gets a position as assistant in a provincial public library in order to support her parents; this might sound rather obscure,

²¹ It is possible to regard this as a period interest widely shared by the 'New Woman' novelists. For instance, see M^énie Muriel Dowie's *Gallia*, ed. Helen Small (1895; London: J. M. Dent, 1995). "Gallia, who had no religious ideas, and had never at any moment in her life felt the want of any, was only anxious to do what was honest and honourable" (198).

but as David Kramer points out, it was a rare intellectual achievement for a woman of the period.²² But Gissing does not follow her professional career further in this novel, and instead, he allows the commercial spirit of Jasper Milvain to have a final word. After the death of Edwin Reardon, Milvain publishes a tribute to his works in order to restore them to a status of rightful recognition. “One who knew Jasper might reasonably have doubted, before reading this,” the narrator ironically comments, “whether he was capable of so worthily appreciating the nobler man” (*NGS*, 463). Yet the true irony is in the fact that Milvain’s apparently altruistic action is actually, consummately self-serving, since this enables him to resume his friendship with the now widowed Amy, who has inherited a larger fortune than her cousin Marian. It results in a marriage between the two, which eventually leads Milvain to his worldly success and much-desired material comfort. By allowing him to obliterate his “severe humiliation” so easily, Gissing concludes his naturalist novel with an ironic blow to the Victorian moral economy, but without wholly breaking away from its literary conventions.

²² David Kramer, “George Gissing and Women’s Work: Contextualizing the Female Professional,” *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 43:4 (2000), 316-30, 319. The first female librarian in Britain started her term in 1879, less than a decade before Marian. Gissing’s further exploration into the question of new professional women, in his later novels such as *The Odd Women* (1893), *In the Year of Jubilee* (1894), and *The Whirlpool* (1897), attracts a number of attentions in recent scholarship on Gissing.

3.

Just as Gissing has done, when writing *The Divine Fire* (1904) May Sinclair took a retrospective viewpoint in chronicling the new literary commercialization of London in the 1890s, the period when Milvain-like commercial journalism was supposedly ascendant. At the beginning, the novel introduces “the Junior Journalists’ club,” which is peopled by writers affiliated with two different types of journals.²³ One is represented by Horace Jewdwine, “an Oxford don, developing into a London Journalist” (*DF*, 34), and at this point a staff member of *The Museion*, an established literary journal. The other is “the three wild young spirits of *The Planet*” (*DF*, 27), a newly launched ambitious weekly. Around the middle of the novel, Jewdwine acquires the editorship of *The Museion* and aspires to revitalize its “protest against the spirit of anarchy in the world of letters” (*DF*, 308) by means of a critical spirit charged with his aesthetic of “the Absolute.” Yet his proclaimed aim, “to set its face sternly against Democracy, Commercialism and Decadence” (*DF*, 311), turns out to be feeble once its proprietors change its policy to aim at a more popular success. It is henceforth renamed as *The Metropolis*, and Jewdwine lets himself be deceived by the money and position gained in compensation for becoming “the slave of whatever opinion was dominant in his world” (*DF*, 643). Meanwhile, *The Planet* also comes to enjoy a degree of prosperity, but it is not because its

²³ May Sinclair, *The Divine Fire* (1904; rep. Toronto: McLeod & Allen, 1906), 27. Hereafter abbreviated to *DF*.

serious effort has found a responsive reading public. Rather, it is largely owing to the commercial success of Herbert Rankin, one of “the three young spirits” who has turned to the career of a popular novelist. The key to his success is said to be his intuitive knowledge about “which *genre* should be chosen at any given moment” (*DF*, 587), that is, his infinite adaptability to the growing generic diversity which was the salient feature in the new age of cheaper and shorter fictions. Thus, when Rankin is faced with a moral dilemma posed by the Boer War, he views it “more as a personal grievance than as a national calamity,” because other Boer War fictions are soon proliferating, competing with his own, and so harming his “royalties” (*DF*, 589).²⁴ The implication is obviously that commercial success cannot be attained without costing one’s own conscience, both as ‘men of letters’ and citizens of a nation.

But if Gissing and Sinclair equally launch a bitter satire on the moral and artistic costs of commercial success, their novels differ in one crucial point. While Jasper Milvain in *New Grub Street* habitually refers to “men of genius” as an exceptional category of writers, his doing so only serves as an alibi to justify the ‘sober’ pragmatism of his mercenary socializing. There is no place for “genius” in the commercialized world of Gissing’s naturalism. By contrast, Sinclair in *The Divine Fire* does try to describe a successful

²⁴ On the importance of new generic diversity in the Edwardian literary world, see, “Introduction” to Sandra Kemp, Charlotte Mitchell, and David Trotter, *Edwardian Fiction: An Oxford Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), x. This companion contains fifteen entries on genre fictions which were popular during the period. “Boer War fiction” is in 37-8.

emergence of such a genius from the commercialized world in the career of its hero, Savage Keith Rickman. At the beginning of the novel, he is only a shop-assistant in the second-hand section of his father's newly built bookshop in the Strand, and his poetic ambition is mocked by his friends as "the soul of a young Sophocles, battling with that of a—of a junior journalist in the body of a dissipated little Cockney" (*DF*, 30). Yet the commission of cataloguing the Harden library, an illustrious private library owned by an aristocratic family in Devonshire, makes his path cross with that of Lucia Harden, a cousin of Jewdwine. This encounter places the subsequent process of Keith's poetic development within a dynamic interaction between the two very different spaces. The one is the London bookshop of Isaac Rickman, Keith's father, a modern commercial institution which caters for "the great book-buying, book-loving Public" of the 1890s (*DF*, 72), but is held in contempt by Keith as a "Gin-Palace-of-Art" (*DF*, 37). The other is the Harden library in a Tudor country house, "the work of ten generations of scholars beginning with Sir Thomas, a Jacobean maker of madrigals, and ending with Sir Joseph, the Victorian Master of Lazarus" (*DF*, 84).

Yet the stark contrast between the two is introduced only to undergo a fatal collapse in the subsequent movement of the plot. While working together on the catalogue of the Harden library, Keith comes to conceive a refined love for Lucia, which serves as a better inspiration for his poetic genius, in spite of the "social gulf" that separates them (*DF*, 104). Yet meanwhile, the sudden insolvency and death of Lucia's father ends in the Rickman's bookshop buying the Harden library for a fraction of its actual

worth, a transaction secretly machinated by Richard Pilkington, an ex-journalist turned financier (*DF*, 232). Feeling ashamed of what he regards as cheating, Keith resigns from the bookshop and starts his independent career as a journalist, while dreaming of one day meeting Lucia again and restoring the library back to her. The bankruptcy of the Strand bookshop and subsequent death of Keith's father give him an unexpected chance to realize his plan, if only Keith can pay the balance of debt which Pilkington had loaned to his father as a mortgage on the library. At one point Keith sinks to the lowest bottom of hack journalism, yet he eventually achieves a long-awaited public recognition as a genius-poet, and acquires the means to repay the loan. In his reunion with Lucia, Keith tries to 'give' her back the library, together with a sonnet devoted to her. At first tentative, Lucia finally decides to accept his gifts, and in return offers her love for him. "Very slowly he realized that the thing he had dreamed and despaired of, that he dared not to ask for, was being divinely offered to him as a free gift" (*DF*, 621). In commenting on the passage, Suzanne Raitt argues that, although at first "Lucia represents the possibility of non-commercial economies: economies of learning and love," the final exchange of the library and herself makes even the romance between Keith and Lucia subject to the "logic of the market place."²⁵

It is certainly true that the novel carefully explores the ambiguous terrain in which art, love, and mercenary motives are sometimes indistinguishable.²⁶

²⁵ Suzanne Raitt, *op. cit.* 88-9, 92.

²⁶ This is most conspicuous in the episode of Keith's temporary engagement to

As a whole, however, the structural logic of *The Divine Fire* appears to resist a perfect conflation of the two types of economy: the market exchange of commodities, and the reciprocal exchange of “free gift” between Keith and Lucia, which significantly accompanies Keith’s maturity as a poetic genius. While often subscribing to the Gissing-like vision of decadent commercialization, Sinclair ultimately offers us a vision which is remarkably different from the cultural dystopia of market determinism. This is partly because Sinclair in this novel is informed not by a pessimistic vision which starkly divides private art and the public world, but by the idealist philosophy of T. H. Green which offers a more harmonious vision of relationship between individuality and society.²⁷ In the last two decades of the nineteenth century, T. H. Green and his tenets of the British Idealism were hugely influential as a moral and political philosophy which could provide a metaphysical justification for the ideal of self-sacrifice and social service, justification that was especially appealing at a time when Evangelical devotion was rapidly losing its hold as a religious faith by the advance of scientific naturalism.²⁸

Flossie Walker, a bank-clerk whom Keith nicknames as “a Beaver.” As Sinclair describes: “Flossie was determined that whatever else she failed in she would not fail in her woman’s trade. She would have considered herself disgraced by such bankruptcy” (*DF*, 354).

²⁷ On this point, see, Hrisey Zegger, *op. cit.* 17-23, 29-35.

²⁸ Melvin Richter argues that Green’s idealist philosophy “can be best understood as a surrogate faith appealing to a transitional generation.” Melvin Richter, *The Politics of Conscience: T. H. Green and His Age* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1964), 19. Suzanne Raitt also understands Sinclair’s interest in Green’s philosophy within the late-Victorian context of secularization, since Sinclair first came to know his idealism through Dorothea Beale’s recommendation of it as an antidote to her spiritual crisis. Raitt, *op. cit.* 48-50.

The point of his quasi-theological philosophy is to regard society as a moral organism to which each individual contributes through “the self-realisation of the divine principle” within him- or herself. In *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883), Green claims: “human society presupposes persons in capacity—subjects capable each of conceiving himself and the bettering of his life as an end to himself—but it is only in the intercourse of men, each recognised by each as an end, not merely a means, and thus as having reciprocal claims, that the capacity is actualised and that we really live as persons.”²⁹ According to his view, individuals and society are in the relation of mutual enrichment, and members of a given community are morally united by a shared recognition of “reciprocal claims.”

Within more concrete politics, Green’s idealist philosophy had inspired the New Liberal policies of social reform and various philanthropic activities, especially in the East End of London. As Stefan Collini comments, it was evidently coloured with “a streak of the puritanism of the active radical who combines an austere asceticism with an exclusively political moral philosophy.”³⁰ It seems that May Sinclair was less attracted to this ascetic side of Green’s teaching. According to Theophilus Boll, around 1893,

²⁹ T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. A. C. Bradley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), 191-2.

³⁰ Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 127. On this point, see section 270 of Green’s *Prolegomena to Ethics*. Wyndham Lewis violently opposed this puritan aspect of Green’s philosophy in *Paleface: The Philosophy of the Melting-Pot* (1929; rpt, New York: Gordon Press, 1972), 7-17 and more on this point, see my chapter 3.

Sinclair wrote a manuscript of a verse drama (which remains unpublished), titled *A Debt of Honour: A Tragedy in Three Acts*, in which its hero, Walter Brandon, abandons his promising career as a poet for a life devoted to philanthropy, yet he ends up killing Honoria, his wife, who has objected to such a choice.³¹ Yet in the same year, Sinclair also published her first paid essay “The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism,” in which she gives a very favourable account of Green’s philosophy. According to her interpretation, Green’s idealism does not demand a complete surrender of individuality for the sake of the larger whole, yet it can still “reconcile the conflicting claims of so-called egoism and altruism.” In this view, an individual is “under a positive obligation to develop to his utmost all the powers and latent capabilities of his nature,” since “through the highest self-culture and self-fulfilment he becomes a more valuable member of society.” Sinclair therefore claims: “No development and no culture of the individual is complete that does not take into consideration his relations to his brother-men.”³² We might understand that, by regarding culture as an act of self-realization in Green’s vision of society as a moral organism, Sinclair is trying to place her literary practice within an ideal community in which its members are morally united together through the social network of “reciprocal claims.”

This amounts to an implicit rejection of Gissing’s naturalist pessimism

³¹ Boll, op. cit. 47-8.

³² May Sinclair, “The Ethical and Religious Import of Idealism,” *New World* 2 (Dec. 1893), 694-708, 701-2.

and his stark dichotomy between art and the commercialized world. Sinclair argues: “The true idealist is neither optimist nor pessimist. He does not sit still in sleek content, believing that this is ‘the best of all possible worlds,’ nor, oppressed with Schopenhauerian hypochondria, does he bewail that not only it is no better than it should be, but that it is as bad as it can be. Between these two extremes the idealist preserves the *juste milieu*.” In her view, therefore, the struggle with commercialization is a necessary encounter with the evil, yet it is merely a stage in the teleological process towards a higher attainment: “evil is not an eternal reality but a phenomenal phase. It is... for man the necessary means to the realization of a higher good in the perfecting of holiness through temptation and struggle.”³³ In *The Divine Fire*, Sinclair dramatizes such a process of struggle by resuscitating the discourse of honour and dishonour. This is most explicitly seen in Keith’s moment of violently emotional reaction against his father’s scheme of buying the Harden library in a bargain price:

He had felt himself obscurely tainted and involved. Now he realized, as he had never realized before, that the foundation of Rickman’s [bookstore] were laid in bottomless corruption. It was a House built not only on every vile and vulgar art known to trade, but on many instances of such a day’s work as this. And it was into this

³³ Sinclair, *ibid*, 703. Ellipsis mine. As Gissing’s essay, “The Hope of Pessimism” was not published around this period, Sinclair’s refutation of his Schopenhauerian pessimism is only contextual.

pit of infamy that his father was blandly inviting him to descend. He had such an abominably clear vision of it that he writhed and shuddered with shame and disgust; he could hardly have suffered more if he had gone down into it bodily himself. He endured in imagination the emotions that his father should have felt and apparently did not feel.

He came out of his shudderings and writhings unspeakably consoled and clean; knowing that it is with such nausea and pang that the soul of honour is born. (*DF*, 259)

Born out of such a magnified sense of “shame and disgust” against what might after all be a usual commercial dealing, it is as though “the soul of honour” promised Keith to let him transcend the market economy. Keith subsequently regards his project of giving the library back to Lucia as an act of reparation of his own “dishonour” (*DF*, 204), or the “debt of honour” (*DF*, 504) that he owes to Lucia. He even regards the dedication of his sonnet to her as “a partial payment of a debt” (*DF*, 346), which means something more than the commercial value of its original manuscript. Differently from the sense of shame suffered by Edwin Reardon in Gissing’s novel, Keith’s sense of dishonour is described as potentially reparable, provided that he manages to restore a proper balance in his exchange with Lucia.

As we have already seen in Marcel Mauss’s *The Gift* (1925), the exchange of gift-giving is integrated in the social norm of reciprocity and obligations. Yet as Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes, this form of gift exchange is always

inevitably accompanied by the contest of honours among potential contenders. One consequence of this ambivalence is that an act of reciprocal exchange requires a rough equality of honour from its participants as a starting point.³⁴ When they are still working together on the catalogue of the library, Lucia comes to notice a poetic side of Keith's personality and decides to offer him, as a form of patronage, the position of acting as her private secretary during a journey to Italy (*DF*, 177). For Lucia, this act of generosity occurs naturally as a traditional attitude of her family toward a talented poet of plebeian origin. But for Keith, having already started to apply himself to the code of honour, this 'gift' only enhances the "dishonour" he thinks he suffers in hiding from her his secret knowledge of her father's approaching insolvency (which he has learned from Pilkington, the financier). After the death of Lucia's father, the question is whether Lucia will receive the library and the sonnet as gifts from Keith, which amounts to recognising him as a possible social equal, and becoming obliged to give something in return. This dilemma, posed by her persistent awareness of the "social gulf" between them, is finally cleared away by the European-wide fame Keith achieves at the end of the novel: now Lucia can (and must) accept Keith's gifts, and is sanctioned (and obliged) to offer

³⁴ On this point, see Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), 100. "The converse of this principle of reciprocity is that only a challenge issued by a man equal in honour deserves to be taken up. The act of honour is completely constituted as such only by the riposte, which implies recognition of the challenge as an act of honour and of its author as a man of honour. The fundamental principle and its converse imply in turn that a man who enters into an exchange of honour (by issuing or taking up a challenge) with someone who is not his equal in honour dishonours himself."

herself in return as a “free gift” (*DF*, 621). The novel ends in a happy moment when they are planning to leave for Italy together, a realization of Lucia’s initial plan to act as Keith’s patron, but one transformed into something which doesn’t offend his “soul of honour.”

Although Arlene Young argues that the novel’s innovation lies exactly in its dramatization of the union between a patrician lady and a poet of the lower-middle class origin which “breaks a novelistic taboo in transgressing a virtually sacrosanct class boundary,”³⁵ we might also sense a tinge of class snobbery in the idealized portrait of Lucia Harden. Still, this is different from a simple fetishization of aristocratic tradition and lineage on Sinclair’s part. That merely belonging to an aristocratic family doesn’t guarantee immunity from commercialization is visibly demonstrated in the case of Horace Jewdwine, Lucia’s cousin whose ‘degeneration’ stands in a sharp contrast to Keith’s ‘regeneration.’ In this regard, it is revealing to consider the discussion over aesthetics between Keith and Jewdwine which occupies the middle of the novel. Before he succumbs to the market principle, Jewdwine upholds the doctrine of metaphysical criticism, the bywords of which are “unity,” “Idea” and “the Absolute” (*DF*, 309). From this standpoint, he attacks “Individualism in Modern Art” merely as a decadent pose:

“[The individual] belongs to the ages of inspired innocence and

³⁵ Arlene Young, *Culture, Class and Gender in the Victorian Novel: Gentlemen, Gents and Working Women* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 188.

inspired energy. We are not inspired; we are not energetic; we are not innocent. We're deliberate and languid and corrupt. And we can't reproduce by our vile mechanical process what only exists by the grace of nature and of God. Look at the modern individual—for all their cant and rant, is there a more contemptible object on the face of this earth? Don't talk to me of individuality." (*DF*, 313-4)

In such a cultural condition, according to Jewdwine, serious art can be made only through the rigorous discipline tethered to the absolute principles. But the frequent references to *his* languidness seems to hint at the possibility that such a social diagnosis may only mirror Jewdwine's own lack of vigour, that is, his limitation as an individual. Appropriately enough, he first appears in the novel lackadaisically lying upon a hammock (*DF*, 14).

By contrast, Keith clings to the value of modern individuality. He says, "in the modern art, I take it, the universal absolute beauty is subdued to the individual. That seems only fair. What you've got to reckon with is the man himself" (*DF*, 314). As this phrase anticipates the title of the novel's final section, "The Man Himself," it is important to recognise it as something more than a mere romantic doctrine of self-expression. Asked how he considers the question of literary style, Keith answers: "if you want me to say it's the clothing of your thoughts, I won't. The less clothing they have the better.... Style isn't the clothing, it's the body of your thoughts...; and in a slap-up, A 1 style, the style of the masters, *my* style, you can't tell the body from the soul" (*DF*, 373; emphasis in original, ellipsis mine). In this passage,

Sinclair is making Keith condemn an older view that saw style as the dress or ornament of thought. Instead, Keith reformulates a view that can be traced back to the famous maxim of Buffon, “*Le style est l’homme même*” as expressed in his *Discours sur le style* (1753). Among Sinclair’s contemporaries, Walter Pater in “Style” (1888) takes up this maxim, arguing: “according to the well-known saying, ‘The style is the man,’ complex or simple, in his individuality, his plenary sense of what he really has to say, his sense of the world; all cautions regarding style arising out of so many natural scruples as to the medium through which alone he can expose that inward sense of things.” Pater therefore asserts: “in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage,” in other words, “all other accidental or removable ornaments of writing whatever.”³⁶ Sinclair appears to follow the advice of Walter Pater quite closely in her description of Keith’s poetic development. At one point in the novel, the narrator observes: “[Keith’s] muse, Modernity, had begun to turn her back resolutely on the masters and the models, to fling off the golden fetters of rhyme, gird up her draperies to her naked thighs, and step out with her great swinging stride on perilous paths of her own” (*DF*, 329). And if the point of Keith’s modern stylistic innovation really rests on the direct exposure of his “naked” body and soul, it is all the more reasonable that, in this novel, his personal integrity matters so much.

³⁶ Walter Pater, “Style,” in *Appreciations with an Essay on Style* (1889; rpt, London: Macmillan, 1944), 1-36, 33, 16. Buffon’s maxim also influenced some high-modernist writers such as Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, and T. E. Hulme, via Remy de Gourmont’s *Le Problème du style* (1902). See, Richard Sieburth, *Instigations: Ezra Pound and Remy de Gourmont* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 59.

When Keith is rescued by his friends at a moment when he is suffering from a deadly cold, the narrator declares: “It was not in him to truckle to the tradition that ordains that unfortunate young poets shall starve in garrets and die in hospitals. He had always been an upsetter of conventions, and a law unto himself” (*DF*, 606). It is ultimately in the ‘honourable’ exchange of gifts between Keith and Lucia that both his individual genius and her traditional high-culture find a needful space of survival within an otherwise commercialized society. And this space is meant to be as inclusive as it can be. Earlier in the novel, Keith reflects on the contradiction between his obscure social origin and the process of refinement he has undergone during his contact with Lucia: “He was, through that abominable nervousness of his, an impossible person, hopelessly, irredeemably involved in social solecisms” (*DF*, 138). But what is loved by Lucia are, as she herself later recognises, exactly these “social solecisms” of Keith, compared with the degenerate flabbiness of Jewdwine: “Who was more finished than Horace? And yet her heart had grown more tender over Keith Rickman and his solecisms. And now it beat faster at the very thought of him, after Horace Jewdwine” (*DF*, 632). It seems that the novel’s own vision of community is also based on these “social solecisms” among different ranks of people. For instance, when Lucia visits and stays with Miss Roots, her former governess, in a boarding house where Keith also lives, Lucia comes to associate with other sorts of plebeians who crucially lack the genius of Keith. But she finds herself not disgusted, and even admits that she prefers the lives of those uncultivated obscures: “after the wear of incessant subtleties and uncertainties

[in Jewdwine's house] there was something positively soothing in straightforward uninspired vulgarity" (*DF*, 464). The marriage between the plebeian genius and the patrician lady is the culminating point of such inclusive "social solecisms."

And yet, for the novel, if not for Lucia, there are also some limits to this bracing intercourse between civility and vulgarity. We can see this in Sinclair's treatment of some marginal characters. For instance, consider Richard Pilkington, who mediated the sale of the Harden library. He is a key figure in the novel insofar as his change of career from journalist to financier illustrates a strange parallel between these two professions in the 1890s (*DF*, 238-9). Yet conventionally enough, the novel blurts out his Jewish origin in the description of his nose: "Mr. Pilkington's nose had started with a distinctively Semitic intention, frustrated by the Anglo-Saxon in him, its downward course being docked to the proportion of a snub. Nobody knew better than Ms. Pilkington that it was that snub that saved him" (*DF*, 233). Its effect is only to over-emphasize the novel's critique of commercialism, and mar its edge by linking it to a portrait of facile anti-Semitism.

Another, and perhaps more serious example is the figure of a prostitute who happens to be Keith's neighbour when he falls into the bottom of society immediately before his final success. She helps Keith when he has caught a deadly cold, without any of his friends knowing about it. When she offers him a cup of tea, "[Keith] had some difficulty in swallowing; and from time to time she wiped his mouth with her villainous apron; and he was grateful still, having passed beyond disgust" (*DF*, 600). This might be the utmost point of

the vision of social solecisms, but when his friends, Maddox and Rankin, turn up to take command from the prostitute, she soon retreats from the scene, exchanging her service with a sovereign “flicked” by Maddox (*DF*, 603). It is as though the boundaries of disgust, momentarily “passed beyond,” have been quickly restored in preparation for the final public recognition of Keith’s genius. These cases suggest the possibility that the economy of honour and gift is actually sustained by the politics of disgust, a politics which demarcates its border by excluding the others. If not because of its conventional marriage ending, then certainly because of these strategies of exclusion, Sinclair’s vision of an alternative ground of creativity in this novel proves to be an unacceptable solution to the problem of commercialization.

4.

In *The Divine Fire*, Sinclair has tried to envision Keith’s poetic innovation as an act of self-realization within the moral organism of society, and thus to reinstate the connection between art and the reading public once severed by the naturalist intransigence of Gissing. Yet as we have seen above, her vision of “social solecisms” is in reality less inclusive than it might first appear. While there is little sense of the actual reading public in Gissing, perhaps a similar charge is also applicable to Sinclair, as Keith confesses to Lucia in the final scene of the novel: “[the British Public] doesn’t really love me, Lucy, nor I it” (*DF*, 661). If the mutual exchange of sincere love is to be

found only in the transaction between Keith and Lucia, it is satisfactory only when we take it as a mere romantic fantasy. The fact that a novel which celebrates the modern innovative poet ends in a happy marriage, the most conventional of all possible endings and one which by that time had been rendered increasingly obsolete by women's growing participation in the public sphere, is an ominous paradox which may reveal a number of unresolved dilemmas. Yet this is not to say that Sinclair in 1904 still held a naïvely optimistic view about the redemptive possibility of marriage for women. Already in her first novel, *Audrey Craven* (1897), the ending with the marriage of its heroine is nothing but bitterly ironic. Her other early works, such as *Mr and Mrs Nevill Tyson* (1898) and *The Helpmate* (1907), belong to the genre of 'marriage problem' novels.³⁷ And most notably in *Kitty Tailleur* (1908), Sinclair places the figure of a former prostitute at the centre of its tragic narrative; she chooses to commit suicide rather than marrying her lover, driven by an oppressive sense of her past shames.³⁸ If Keith's innovative exposure of modern individuality requires the reciprocal exchange of honours as its preconditions, is it possible for a woman to play a role in such an exchange which is more than merely passive and receptive? Is it possible for her to participate in the public exchange as a fully qualified

³⁷ On the development of 'marriage problem' novels in this period, see, Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel* (London: Virago, 1994), 39-84.

³⁸ May Sinclair, *Kitty Tailleur* (London: Constable, 1908). Especially, see the following passage: "The faces of [her lover] and his children hung somewhere on the outskirts of her vision, but she could not fix them or hold them; they were tramped out, obliterated by that phantasmal procession of her shames" (251).

creative subject, rather than being merely exchanged as a commodified sexuality just like a ‘public woman’?³⁹

Such questions are central to the subsequent development of Sinclair’s artistic career after *The Divine Fire*, as evidenced in her short story, “The Gift” (1908). It is about the tragic failure of a friendship between a man and a woman, Wilton Caldecott and Freda Farrar. At the beginning of the story, Wilton and Freda have already passed three years of mutual intimacy. They have continued meeting each other because both have recognised Freda’s “charming, inimitable gift” as an aspiring poet.⁴⁰ But the story also implies that Freda’s “gift” (in the sense of her genius) seems to have also served, for Wilton, as a pretext to continue their friendship without any troublesome romantic overtones; insofar as he believes that what concerns him is only Freda’s literary “gift,” their relationship can be safely contained in the well-defined one of that between mentor and disciple. It is at this point, however, that Julia Nethersole, another female friend of Wilton, intervenes, eventually destabilizing the gentle balance between Wilton and Freda. In the midst of a casual conversation, Julia intimates an oblique warning to Freda not to show too much affection to Wilton; otherwise he might break away. His difficulty in sustaining a friendship with women can be traced back to the disastrous failure of his previous marriage. “[Wilton] has suffered... all his

³⁹ Differently from the respectable connotation of ‘public men,’ ‘public women’ traditionally mean prostitutes. See, Celia Marshik, “Publication and ‘Public Women’: Prostitution and Censorship in Three Novels by Virginia Woolf,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 45:3 (Winter 1999), 853-86.

⁴⁰ May Sinclair, *The Judgement of Eve and Other Stories* (London: Hutchinson, 1914), 99. Hereafter abbreviated to *JE*.

life, from an over-developed sense of honour. He could see honour in situations where you wouldn't have said the ghost of an obligation. His marriage was not an affair of the heart. It was an affair of honour. The woman—she's dead now—was in love with him" (*JE*, 110; ellipsis mine). According to Julia, his "sense of honour" obliges him to offer marriage in return for the affections which some women friends have shown him, but the trauma of the first marriage makes it impossible. Consequently, Wilton has chosen to discontinue the troublesome friendship with those female friends rather than staying beside them unmarried.

To keep the friendship with Wilton, in other words, women should be careful not to awaken his "over-developed sense of honour" with too many signs of humanly affection. But ironically, this advice of Julia's turns out to be fatal. Believing her relation with Wilton to be "the unique and immaterial tie" (*JE*, 109), Freda takes a step to make him, and herself, convinced of the purely spiritual quality of their friendship, which has so well nurtured her "gift" of poetry-writing. As Freda considers:

It was only a gift, a thing that [Wilton] had given her, that if he chose he could at any moment take away. What had come from her came only through him. She owned with a sort of exultation that there was nothing in the least creative in her. She had not one virile quality; only this receptivity of hers, infinitely plastic, infinitely tender. What lay in the lamplight of her caressing hand [the manuscript of her poetry] had been born of their friendship. It was

their spiritual child. (*JE*, 117)

By re-reading her “gift” (in the sense of her *own* genius, almost like a property) as a gift which has been sent to her by someone else (a work of “collaborat[ion]” [*JE*, 125]), Freda tries to assure Wilton that their friendship is more than the worldly affairs of mere material men and women. The bitter misfortune is that Wilton cannot see the logic of gift exchange in Freda’s exalted discourse; indeed, “He had seen nothing but one thing, the thing he was accustomed to see, the material woman’s passion to pursue, to make captive, to possess” (*JE*, 128). Following the dictate of his sense of honour, Wilton goes away, while Freda, suddenly losing the inspiration for poetry, eventually fades away into a solitary death at the end of the story.

Partly endorsing Julia’s conjecture, the story implies that Freda has been lacking in self-knowledge. She fails to see through her exalted façade of spirituality, and recognise that she might after all be in ‘love’ with Wilton. Nevertheless, the story is also hard on Wilton’s “masculine honour” (*JE*, 128), which fails to recognise that Freda’s spiritual necessity inherent in her “gift” is ultimately different from “the material woman’s passion...to possess.” By introducing this gap between the ideal of gift exchange and the desire for property and possession, Sinclair emphasizes the spiritual and cultural dimension of the “gift” and makes culpable the more conventional aspect of honour in the “masculine” conduct of Wilton. Honour and gift, which had previously combined seamlessly in *The Divine Fire*, suffer a fatal split in this story, one that is in parallel with the polarized categories of masculine and

feminine. In fact, in her 1907 novel *The Helpmate*, Sinclair has already made her heroine complain: “A man’s honour and a woman’s honour are two very different things.”⁴¹ In the traditional conventions of honour and shame, as Robert Nye argues, “men are regarded as the ‘active’ and women the ‘passive’ principles.”⁴² Such a gender imbalance inherent in the discourse of honour can be a serious impediment for women especially when they desire to pursue some sorts of professional career and thus to participate in the wider world of public exchange.

Sinclair must have felt the problem keenly as she turned her focus from the male creativity of Keith to the female creativity of Freda. Traditionally, the conventional association of womanliness with feeling has had a disabling effect on women who aspire to intellectual forms of labour. By the late-nineteenth century the difficulty for intellectual women had been compounded further, for, in the new age of consumerism and commercial fiction, women were often associated with passive indulgence in sentimental frivolity and sensational desire. Therefore, as Rachel Bowlby claims: “In general... intellectual achievement on the part of women was accompanied by a conscious refusal of the trappings of femininity.”⁴³ Such a refusal of ‘passive’ femininity and implicit approach to ‘active’ masculinity might in turn make intellectual women even more liable to isolation than men, insofar as for women intimate exchange with others is sanctioned chiefly by way of

⁴¹ May Sinclair, *The Helpmate* (London: Constable, 1907), 389.

⁴² Robert A. Nye, *Masculinity and Male Code of Honour in Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 9-10.

⁴³ Rachel Bowlby, *op. cit.* 152. Ellipsis mine.

their naturalized gender-identity. In her first novel *Audrey Craven* (1897), Sinclair has already given a case of such a dilemma in the figure of Katharine Haviland, a female painter. Early in the novel, Katharine is said to bear a tinge of masculinity, because, as the narrator observes, “Among all artists there is a strain of manhood in every woman, and of womanhood in every man.” Towards the end of the novel, she swiftly matures as a portrait painter, a result of extended observations she had acquired while nursing Vincent Hardy, a character who soon dies. Her growing success depends on her isolation in the wake of Vincent’s death: “And the voice of her womanhood cried out in anguish—‘All the success in the world won’t make up to you for the happiness you have missed.’”⁴⁴ Her secret love for Vincent has never been reciprocated because of his fatal, indeed deathly devotion to the more conventional feminine beauty of Audrey Craven, a character who is also the central target of the novel’s satirical observations.

As a woman novelist aspiring to intellectual status, May Sinclair has been forced to confront such a dilemma between creativity and femininity, one shared by other contemporary women novelists. Seen from this angle, Freda Farrar’s re-reading of her “gift” might be understood as a tentative solution to the dilemma. By understanding her own literary creativity as a “gift” from the “virile” Wilton to her feminine “receptivity,” Freda tries to substitute a creative community for the fate of isolation that would result from her career as a serious female poet in the world of commercialized culture. But this solution is ultimately aborted because of Wilton’s “honourable” masculinity.

⁴⁴ May Sinclair, *Audrey Craven* (London: Blackwood, 1897), 92, 312.

Whereas Keith in *The Divine Fire* carves out the possibility that his claim to artistic individuality can be reconciled with the social organism by repairing his “dishonour,” Freda in “The Gift,” just as Katharine in *Audrey Craven*, cannot reconcile her claim to individual creativity and an unproblematic assumption of normalized femininity: for both, individuality leads to isolation. Left by Wilton, Freda silently accuses him of incomprehension: “Is it honourable to take [the gift] away? Don’t you see how you’re breaking faith with me? Don’t you see that you’ve made me ashamed, and that nothing can be worse to bear than that?” (*JE*, 129) Unlike honour and dishonour, which are depicted as having redemptive potential in *The Divine Fire*, this sense of shame suffered by an isolated woman is strictly irreparable, and possibly, even worse than death.

5.

In *The Creators: A Comedy* (1910), Sinclair takes up the problem of authorship once again by placing it back into the contemporary situation of literary commercialization. Written after the lapse of her faith in the redemptive potential of reciprocal exchange, the novel reveals a vision of the literary world which is much bleaker than previously offered by Sinclair. Like *New Grub Street* and *The Divine Fire*, it presents a group portrait of men and women writers under the pressure of the literary marketplace. Yet in *The Creators*, they are no longer internally divided according to the absolute

dichotomy between art and trade that determined the fates of their predecessors. Instead, Sinclair in this novel alternately presents episodes of different characters that undergo a similar course of struggle within the commercialized literary world and consequent isolation, followed by compensatory desire for domestic peace and its bitter frustrations. Among them, the parallel episodes of Jane Holland and George Tanqueray, both novelists, are central: although they are bound by mutual recognition of each other's genius, their relationship is complicated by their other intimate ties; George is married to Rose Eldred, a working-class girl, and Jane to Hugh Brodrick, a successful editor of a newspaper and a literary magazine. Another marriage is that between Laura Gunning, a short-story writer, and Owen Prothero, an unrecognised poetic genius. But each of these marriage ends in some sorts of unhappiness, and the only alternative to the failure of ideal domesticity is represented in the life of determined celibacy chosen by Nina Lempriece, a rival novelist of Jane. While these cases are designed to invite comparisons among various strategies of facing the contradictions between creativity and domesticity, the resulting contrasts are never drawn with sufficient clarity. As if Sinclair had been unable to identify one of them as a definite or at least more viable solution, the novel's weakness is most conspicuous in its inconsequential ending. Yet as Jane Eldridge Miller argues, we might also take this inconsequence as a result of Sinclair's shift of attention from the closure of the Victorian moral economy to the psychological depth of her characters which has no easy satisfaction.⁴⁵ This

⁴⁵ Miller, *op. cit.* 189.

allows us to read the novel as that of transition, a work which anticipates Sinclair's later modernist phase.

The basic undertone of the novel is determined by its persistent attention to the characters' "genius" or "divinity"—whether recognised or unrecognised—and unreserved sympathy with their bitterness against the corrupt literary marketplace and its incompetent reading public. At the beginning of the novel, Jane is hosting a party for several "preposterous celebrities," having herself attained a worldly success with her novels.⁴⁶ But the party is described merely as a tiresome social obligation, and Jane, as well as George among them, is unmistakably weary:

They both avoided the circles where [what they called the "literary taint"] spread deepest, in their nervous terror of the social process, of "getting to know the right people." They confessed that, in the beginning, they had fought shy even of each other, lest one of them should develop a hideous susceptibility and impart the taint. There were points at which they both might have touched the aristocracy of journalism; but they had had no dealings with its proletariat or its demi-monde. Below these infernal circles they had discerned the fringe of the bottomless pit, popularity, which he, the Master, told her was "*the unclean thing.*" (C, 6; emphasis in original)

⁴⁶ May Sinclair, *The Creators: A Comedy* (New York: Century, 1910), 3. Hereafter abbreviated to C.

According to this passage, the social hierarchy of “aristocracy,” “proletariat” and “demi-monde” has reproduced itself through the development of new journalism within the literary world. George and Jane share an observation that the new age of artificial publicity has also created a new kind of popular appeal, one that has no significance whatsoever in terms of authentic literary merits. Being still obscure as a writer, therefore, George is said to have “stood almost undiscovered on his tremendous height” (C, 6). Having attained a public acclaim, by contrast, Jane worries that “there must be something wrong with her since she was celebrated,” and consoles herself by thinking that “her celebrity was, after all, only a disgusting accident” (C, 116).

Sinclair makes these authors consistently assume an adversarial stance against their reading public, an attitude which reminds us of the naturalist intransigence of George Gissing. Jane’s creativity is said to be “shaping unashamed the bodies and the souls of men. There was nothing in contemporary literature to compare with the serene, inspired audacity of Jane Holland” (C, 11). Similarly, George is said to be “a great realist” who has “an eye that unstripped, a hand that plunged under all coverings to the essential nakedness” (C, 15). Yet in spite of the “unashamed” audacities of their works, they also desire to keep shy of the moment of publication. When Jane is writing a novel titled *Humbleby*, she wants to preserve it forever as a manuscript: “When published he would be made to stand in shop windows coarsely labelled, offering himself for sale at four-and-six; he would go into the houses of people who couldn’t possible appreciate him, and would suffer

unspeakable things at their hands. As the supreme indignity, he would be reviewed. And she, his creator, would be living on him, profiting by his degradation at percentage which made her blush” (C, 140-1). George recommends that she should instead write a book “that nobody but [he] can read” (C, 123). As a reaction to the literary marketplace, the authors jealously seclude themselves from the wider world of public exchange and try to replace it with the private audience of their coterie. Such exclusive attitudes cannot help inviting hostile comments. Hrisay Zegger complains that “the ‘creators’ always talk about their own and each other’s works with portentous seriousness,” which shows that the novel fails to fulfil the promise of its subtitle, i.e. a “comedy.”⁴⁷ Yet we might read this novel as a site where Sinclair explores the possibility that the group of fellow professionals have become the only reliable criterion of cultural values, in a world supposedly forsaken by a more comprehensive reading public. In Pierre Bourdieu’s words, they are an early version of the “field of restricted production.”

Such a small-scale, professional audience might be beneficial insofar as the mutual recognition of each other’s works encourages aspiring but still obscure writers to continue their efforts until they attain a certain degree of public recognition. Yet the validity of their judgement will be put into question once the standard of their values irreconcilably clashes with that of

⁴⁷ Zegger, op. cit. 50. Most of the contemporary reviews of the novel also criticized the over-inflated rhetoric that May Sinclair used in her descriptions of her characters’ “genius” and “immortalities.” See, Michele K. Troy, “May Sinclair’s *The Creators*: High-Cultural Celebrity and a Failed Comedy,” in *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 47:1 (2004), 50-74, 62-4.

the literary marketplace. A case in point is that of Owen Prothero, a former physician who has served in India and the Boer War, but who has turned into an unconventional mystical poet. While others in their group, such as George and Nina, eventually attain fame of some sorts, Owen's reputation never extends beyond that of their coterie audience. From his first introduction to Owen, however, George instantly perceives his genius: "[George] was on his knees in a moment before the incorruptible divinities. He had the immortal's scent for immortality" (*C*, 177). Owen soon becomes the favourite in their group, and Jane makes use of her established reputation to force her publisher to print a volume of his poetry (*C*, 192). After his return from Manchuria as a war correspondent, Jane even implores Hugh Brodrick, by that time her husband, to give Owen a job in his paper so that Owen can marry Laura Gunning (*C*, 315). The domestic life of Owen and Laura intimates a possibility of reconciliation between his unpopular artistic innovation and her commercial success as a short-story writer, a rare moment in this novel otherwise so hostile to monetary gains.⁴⁸ Yet his poetry never ceases to stir bitter controversies: "He fell conspicuously, illustriously, between the reviewers who reviled him, and the public who would have none of him. If they had only let him alone. But they didn't. There was no poet more pursued and persecuted than Owen Prothero" (*C*, 320). Towards

⁴⁸ See the following passage: "It was the miracle that [Laura's] marriage perpetually renewed for her, this process of divine transmutation, by which her work passed into Owen's and became perfect. It passed, if you like, through a sordid medium, through pounds and shillings and pence, but there again, the medium itself was transmuted, sanctified by its use, by the thing accomplished. She touched a consummation beyond consummation of their marriage" (*C*, 430).

the end of the novel, George tries to publish a “vindication” of Owen’s poetry against hostile reviews (*C*, 430), but it comes out a bit too late to save the poet himself from death by obscurity, destroyed by a combination of overwork and, as befits a romantic poet, tuberculosis. Differently from the redemptive marriage of Keith and Lucia in *The Divine Fire*, the private space of Owen and Laura can no longer work as much needed mediation between the literary marketplace and the authentic poetry which appears to be too lofty to be properly appreciated by the ordinary reading public.

In *The Creators*, art and culture are no longer seen as an act of individual self-realization which is vitally integrated in the moral organism of society. Instead, by subjecting Owen Prothero to the conventional destiny of death, which Keith Rickman barely avoided, Sinclair seems to revert to George Gissing’s naturalist pessimism which posits an irreparable gulf between art and the commercialized world. Similarly, Laura’s subsequent devotion to the cause of Owen’s posthumous recognition—editing his literary remains and memoirs for publication (*C*, 517)—conforms with a pattern which we can often find in Gissing’s novels, namely, a combination of death of an unrecognised genius and a subsequent act of tribute by a fellow professional, the latter an attempt to promote a cultural value which the reading public seems singularly unable to discern. Although Gissing once ironically exploited this conventional pattern in Jasper Milvain’s self-serving tribute to the works of Edwin Reardon in *New Grub Street*, in his later work, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft* (1903), he utilizes the same pattern in a more earnest manner as a structural principle of the text itself. *The Private*

Papers has a fictional framework which makes it a posthumous publication of Henry Ryecroft, a now deceased former hack writer, edited by “G. G,” his friend. As the fictional editor writes in his preface to the volume: “To me, [the private papers’] personal appeal was very strong; might it not be possible to cull from it the substance of a small volume which, at least for its sincerity’s sake, would not be without value for those who read, not with the eye alone, but with the mind?”⁴⁹ Despite the surface modesty displayed in his use of a rhetorical question, the book is delivered to the reading public already apprised, as it were, through the mediating hand of the editor who lovingly dedicates the volume to the memory of his deceased friend.

It is as though, in the cultural dystopia created by a corrupt literary marketplace and an incompetent reading public, an author were allowed a moment of sincere expression only after he had entered into the ultimate privacy of a secluded graveyard.⁵⁰ In the case of Henry Ryecroft, the matter is more than the mere subjunctive. As the editor of *The Private Papers* explains, the book consists of the private jottings of a man who had been a struggling hack writer, but who was released from toil when he received an unexpected small legacy. Released from the burden of family (his wife is already dead, and a daughter has been married off), and retiring from the routine of writing, Ryecroft retreats from London to an isolated country

⁴⁹ George Gissing, *The Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, ed. John Collis (Brighton: Harvester, 1983), x iii.

⁵⁰ In his earlier essay on pessimism, Gissing has written: “The grave will become a symbol of joy; those who have departed will be spoken of as the happy ones, and the tears of the mourner will be checked by his bitter reason.” In “The Hope of Pessimism,” 97.

cottage in Exeter, Devonshire. He lives his recluse-like life with only a minimum of human contact from a self-effacing housekeeper, and enjoys himself by cultivating Greek classics and harmless plants. While the major interests of Gissing's earlier novels lie in tense conflicts between his ideal of private culture and the material realities of his contemporary world, Ryecroft's personal peace represents a moment when such conflicts are completely removed. Adrian Poole argues that his utopian life is "not so much a 'public' vision of a shared future, as a private, very private, vision of personal release." As such, the figure of Henry Ryecroft "embodies Gissing's image of satisfied desire."⁵¹ Just as in Sigmund Freud's "pleasure principle," Henry Ryecroft's "satisfied desire" intimates a state of death as an ultimate resolve of unpleasant excitations.⁵² At one point in his private papers, Ryecroft records a moment of sudden revelation: "this warm, still day on the far verge of autumn—there suddenly came to me a thought which checked my step, and for the moment half bewildered me. I said to myself: My life is over."⁵³ He regards his retirement as a social death even before his actual, physical dissolution which is announced by the editor in his preface. Ryecroft's private peace is so complete that its exemption from any real-life difficulties can be likened to the endless quiescence of suspended animation. Only behind the veil of a perfect privacy, Gissing seems to be arguing, does

⁵¹ Adrian Poole, *Gissing in Context* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 204-5.

⁵² See, Sigmund Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Volume X VIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), 62.

⁵³ Gissing, *The Private Papers*, 217.

the author allow himself an authentic expression, now freed from any unworthy care about the reading public.⁵⁴

As *The Creators* reiterates this pattern of death and subsequent tribute in the episode of Owen and Laura, it might follow that Sinclair is attracted to the grave-like quietude of withdrawal and private retreat espoused by Gissing as a defence tactic against the commercialized literary world.⁵⁵ Yet it is also important to recognise that death and posthumous recognition is only one possible alternative among several options carefully examined by Sinclair in the parallel episodes of different authors. While Sinclair describes Owen's destiny in a rather idealized manner, she also explores the material realities of tactical retreat in the domestic arrangement of George Tanqueray. Earlier in the novel, at a moment when he is most hungry for female contact, George impulsively marries Rose, a servant-girl in his lodging. As it happened after his brief flirtations with Jane and Nina, his sudden, surreptitious marriage enrages both of them. While her anger drives Nina to formulate a categorical incompatibility between the demands of creativity and those of ordinary domesticity for women (*C*, 106), George on his side considers that his marriage doesn't prevent him from keeping his female friends as "an

⁵⁴ Although some readers have understood this work as a thinly disguised autobiography of its author, such a reading can be justifiable only when it is also recognised as a day-dream which is designed to fulfil some wishes dearest to Gissing trapped deep in his real-life difficulties. About his domestic troubles, see John Halperin, *op. cit.* 250-283.

⁵⁵ But this is different from arguing that Sinclair fully accepted this pattern without irony. In a later short story, "The Wrackham Memoirs" (1913), she creates a light-hearted comedy out of pretentious authors concerned with the literary politics of posthumous reputations (*JE*, 371-323).

intellectual seraglio" (C, 59). And indeed, once he satisfies his physical desire in the marriage, Georges ceases to care for his unlearned wife and resumes his friendship with the female authors, making Rose suffer from "melancholy" caused by his neglect (C, 131). After his novels start to procure a certain degree of public recognition, George considers Rose merely a "nuisance," largely because her "embarrassments and solecisms" cannot keep up with his desire for social respectability (C, 364). Eventually George decides to stay away from Rose in a country cottage in Devonshire for a long time, using his need to concentrate on his new novel as a convenient excuse.⁵⁶ Although George Tanqueray is not described as a type of self-conscious hypocrite, the narrative appealingly elaborates on the emotional strains imposed on his wife as the cost of his self-centred quest for an untroubled privacy. The dream of private retreat, Sinclair seems to imply, is only available for men, not for women.

This episode is significant insofar as it illustrates the problem of gender imbalance at work even in the supposedly disinterested exchange within the field of restricted production. Just as in the relationship between Wilton and

⁵⁶ According to Suzanne Raitt, the character of George Tanqueray provoked several attempts at model-spotting. A contemporary review suggested George Meredith as the model, whereas Ezra Pound and Ford Madox Ford also recognised certain degrees of their likeness in the domestic conducts of George Tanqueray. See, Raitt, *op. cit.* 122. I suggest that it might also be possible to consider George Gissing as a model for George Tanqueray. Gissing's real life had become an object of curiosity after his death in 1904, but it was not until Morley Roberts' fictionalized biography, *The Private Life of Henry Maitland: A Record/ dictated by J. H.* (London: Eveleigh Nash, 1912), that Gissing's troublesome domestic conduct came to be known widely. May Sinclair personally knew Morley Roberts as one of her correspondents.

Freda in “The Gift,” the friendship of male and female authors in *The Creators* is unsatisfactory since it cannot help becoming more, or less, than purely spiritual. Just as Wilton Caldecott has done, George Tanqueray turns away from Jane Holland because of their ambiguous intellectual intimacy that threatens to lapse into a romance. Left by George, Jane starts to follow Nina’s injunction of “virginity” as “the indispensable condition” for her female creativity. As she considers:

[Jane] was beginning to understand the way of genius, of the will to create. She had discovered the secret and the rhythm of its life. It was subject to the law of the supersensible. To love anything more than this thing was to lose it. You had to come to it clean from all desire, naked of possession. Placable to the small, perishing affections, it abhorred the shining, dangerous powers, the rival immortalities. It could not be expected to endure such love as she had for Tanqueray. It rejoiced in taking Tanqueray away from her. For the divine thing fed on suffering, on poverty, solitude, frustration.

(C, 116-7)

Her pursuit of “the divine thing” at this point seems to approach the glorification of disinterested “gift” that we have already found in the early writings of Sinclair, as Jane must be entirely devoted to her creativity, “naked of possession.” Yet this condition, founded on her renunciation of all possessive desire, is severe since there is no longer any compensatory

possibility of reciprocal exchange for Jane. The pains of “poverty, solitude, [and] frustration” consequently drive her to seek a refuge in marriage with Hugh Brodrick, a successful editor who has helped her friends to publish their works in several occasions. But the result is that Jane is treated by Brodrick merely as “his possession” (C, 265). For a while, Jane is quite contented; but little by little, as she takes on the burdens of a wife and then a mother, the demands of domesticity start to impede her novel-writing (C, 287-8). The contradiction of her desires between creativity and domesticity is perpetual.

Seen from this angle, as Theophilus Boll argues, the character of Nina Lempiece can be understood as “an optional other-self of Jane Holland” who consistently resists the temptation of succumbing to ordinary domesticity.⁵⁷ But even this is not described as an easy resistance. Like Katharine Haviland in *Audrey Craven*, Nina suffers from the serious confusion of her gender-identity because of her ‘masculine’ desire for creativity. As she explains to Jane: “When we want a thing we can’t sit still like a woman and wait till it comes to us, or doesn’t come. We go after it like a man: and if we can’t get it peaceably we fight for it, as a man fights when he isn’t a coward or a fool” (C, 105). This active craving for the object of her desire gives Nina a certain “haggard” look, an appearance which impresses George rather unfavourably: “To his mind there had always been something a little murky about Nina” (C, 59). Later, when Nina is obsessed with an unreciprocated passion for Owen, she at first tries to keep him to herself by staying away from her friends. But when she returns to the group in order to introduce

⁵⁷ Boll, op. cit. 202.

Owen, George suspects her of some dubious motives: “There was (he came back to it again) something very murky about Nina. And Nina, with her murkiness, was manifestly in love with this spiritual, this mystical young man” (C, 180). The frequent reference to her “murkiness” suggests that, behind her assumption of aloof detachment, Nina suffers from a persistent hunger for human contacts. Indeed, when she faces dismay at the marriage of Owen and Laura, Nina breaks away from her friends once again. Yet this bitter frustration is also said to be good for her creativity: “[Nina] was narrowed down to that, her bare genius. Since there was nothing else; since, as she had said long ago, she had been made to pay for it with all she had and all she might have had, she cherished it fiercely now” (C, 378). However enabling it might be for Nina as a condition of her work, her “bare genius” remains to be a predicament of shameful isolation and social exposure, one that is caused by the difficulty of female creativity to participate in the wider world of public exchange, an exchange underlain by a conventional gender distinction.

The weakness of *The Creators* as a novel appears to be a result of Sinclair’s inability to choose either Jane or Nina as a more successful instance of female creativity. On the one hand, the novel provides a rather easy solution for the shameful isolation of Nina’s “bare genius” by making her humbly accept the “communion” and “fellowship” offered by the group of fellow professionals (C, 380). Her “murkiness” suddenly disappears, and she reaches a certain stage of peaceful self-contentment. As Jane observes near the end of the novel:

The beauty and the wonder of it—in Nina—was its purity. Nina showed to what a pitch it had brought her, the high, undivided passion of her genius. Under it every trace of Nina's murkiness had vanished. She had lost that look of restless, haggard adolescence, that horrible intentness, as if her hand was always on the throat of her wild beast.... It was the flame, unmistakably the pure flame. If solitude, if virginity, if frustration could do that—[Jane] knew what it had cost Nina, but it was worth it, seeing what she had gained. (*C*, 451-2; ellipsis mine)

Yet on the other hand, such a vision of her “high, undivided passion” is after all contained in the centre of viewpoint placed on the side of Jane, who is suffering from too many human contacts, surrounded by her husband's pestering families. In this novel, Sinclair can represent Nina's solitary trials and her subsequent sublimation only as an idealized object of Jane's envy, and as such, the description of her “pure flame” often sounds perfunctory, or at best half-hearted. Therefore, whether or not the communion of authors in the field of restricted production truly has such a redemptive capacity remains an open question.

The uncertainty of this closure means that, at this point, May Sinclair has already exhausted literary conventions available to her as a more strictly Edwardian novelist. Repulsed by the trend of commercialization in the contemporary literary world, Sinclair has set out to seek a space of survival

for high cultural values in her novels. Unable to find consolation either in the romance of ideal reciprocity or Gissing's tactical retreat to the private sphere, however, Sinclair has delineated a pattern of deadlock in Jane Holland, suspended in the contradictions between devoted creativity and troublesome domesticity. And if this was the dead-end of her early poetics, Sinclair would execute her later modernist experiment by placing her focus more properly on the life of female intellectuals like Nina Lempriece, namely, women whose individualism has historically taken the form of deliberate spinsterhood.

CHAPTER 2

On Idealism: Modernism and Spinsters in May Sinclair's *Mary*

***Olivier: A Life* and *The Life and Death of Harriet Frea*n**

1.

In the previous chapter, we have first observed how May Sinclair had invoked the code of honour in opposition to the commercialization of the literary marketplace, a strategy motivated by her desire to celebrate serious literary innovations against the backdrop of her contemporary publishing world that was seen as essentially corrupt and decadent. But as her attention gradually shifted towards the problematic creativity of women rather than men, it became increasingly difficult for her to ignore the dilemma of the shame that attached to intellectual women, a result of the gender imbalance inherent in the traditional discourses of honour and gift. By the time she wrote *The Creators*, Sinclair had developed this dilemma into a double critique of both middle-class domesticity and commercialized publication, a critique articulated through her exploration of single or celibate life.

Susanne Raitt suggests that it was exactly this orientation towards a single life that informed Sinclair's sympathetic interest in the lives of the Brontë sisters during the early 1910s. An outcome of this interest was, in Raitt's words, "the poetics of celibacy," a poetics which deeply explored the close connection between a life of social isolation and that of devoted creativity for women like the Brontës and Sinclair herself.¹ An apparent

¹ Susanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 108. As Raitt points out, around this time May Sinclair established herself as one of the leading experts on the literature of the Brontë sisters. After she wrote a series of introductions to the new Everyman edition of their novels, Sinclair published a critical biography of sisters as *The Three Brontës* (London: Hutchinson, 1912). She also wrote a fictionalised account of their lives, as *The Three Sisters*

paradox is that her deep, almost identificatory interest in the past literature of the Brontës did not prevent Sinclair from discerning value in the early works of Anglo-American modernism. Not only did Sinclair champion it, she actively befriended a generation of younger writers such as Ezra Pound, H. D., Richard Aldington, and Dorothy Richardson. In the period before the Great War, Sinclair's "poetics of celibacy" and the general "individualizing tendencies" of early modernism could find an unexpected point of confluence.² Yet Sinclair's special interest in the problem of single women coloured her individualism, giving it a tinge that diverged from the canonical line of Anglo-American modernism and ultimately led to the unfortunate neglect of her literary experiments in the subsequent history of modernist criticism. In trying to re-evaluate the modernist works of Sinclair, therefore, I shall estimate her "poetics of celibacy" within the historical context of the problems faced by single women in this period, then called "spinsters." It is exactly at this crossroad between literary innovation and spinstershood that May Sinclair launched her particular brand of modernism.

Paradoxically, around this period the social predicament of spinstershood contributed to the formation of the modern feminist movement. Although Victorian spinsters were often branded as social failures, their essential placelessness within middle-class domesticity eventually prompted them to seek out more active participation in the wider public sphere. By the turn of

(London: Hutchinson, 1914).

² The "individualizing tendencies" of the early modernism is fully explored by Michael Levenson in *A Genealogy of Modernism: A Study of English Literary Doctrine 1908-1922* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 15.

the century, “celibacy” could even be revalued as a critical strategy that could work against patriarchal social institutions. Yet the same period also saw a rise of scientific discourse which constructed an image of female sexuality as an essential impediment to women’s participation within the public sphere. The thorny issues of sexuality also provoked a heated debate and bitter conflict among the different branches of early twentieth century feminism. By placing Sinclair’s ambiguous support for the suffrage cause within the context of this debate, I shall suggest that the spiritualized rhetoric of Sinclair’s later years remained trapped in discourse about the female body that was furnished by contemporary scientific authorities. The resulting ambiguity not only prevented her from a full commitment to the public activities of the suffrage movement; it also haunted the philosophical idealism that increasingly informed Sinclair’s literary innovations. In spite of her extensive reading in philosophy, psychology, and even psychoanalysis, Sinclair’s defence of autonomous selfhood ultimately led her towards a certain type of mysticism and spiritualism. This turn increasingly courted the danger of losing her public vision, a danger that found its counterpart in her increasing disdain for the vulnerable human body.

This crucial ambivalence with the question of the body informs my reading of May Sinclair’s modernist experiments in *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) and *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922). To a certain extent, this is to interpret these novels against the grain of Sinclair’s manifest intentions. Sinclair designed the life of Mary Olivier to advance a claim to honour for the intellectual achievement of a single woman such as herself, and

for this reason, it follows the pattern of a modernist *Künstlerroman* which narrates the triumphant emergence of an artistic consciousness. Yet insofar as the vision of “ultimate reality” Mary embraces at the end of the novel is founded on her renunciation of all human ties, it both justifies and accepts the fate of isolation meted out to spinsters by contemporary society. Mary’s mystical quest for the knowledge of “naked” reality (in Sinclair’s words),³ however, can also be viewed very differently, seen as a displaced desire for the “naked” body and sexuality, a desire displaced, as if by shame, to evade eyes from the deprived material conditions of the single women’s lives.

Although the novel’s reliance on mystical vision can frustrate readers, its exclusive focus on Mary’s consciousness enables Sinclair to explore a series of tensions much deeper than she perhaps intended. By contrast, the life of Harriet Fream is a bitter portrayal of a marginalized spinster. Yet in its thorough exploration into the shame of spinsterhood, Sinclair succeeds in transforming the story of Harriet’s life into a significant social critique of Victorian family values. A number of ironic turns ruthlessly expose the idea of moral beauty, which her parents taught to Harriet early in her life, to be nothing more than an agent of repression, a constraint which alienates her from engaging in human communication. Yet the return of repressed shame at the end of the story gives Harriet the first and last chance to recover a moment of community long lost to her. It is at this confessional (if unconscious) moment of Harriet’s shame that May Sinclair finally puts a period to her modernism of spinsterhood.

³ See, pp. 126-7 of the present chapter.

2.

Despite the fact that single women were a sizable minority in relation to married women, their social presence remained largely invisible throughout the early modern period. As Bridget Hill points out, originally the word ‘spinster’ simply meant a woman (or rarely a man) who did spinning as a regular occupation. By the seventeenth century, however, it had become a category for unmarried women, which was already attended with a strong connotation of social stigma.⁴ According to Nancy Armstrong, eighteenth and nineteenth century England saw a dramatic expansion of “domestic ideology” through conduct books, educational treatises, and novels which emphasized moral superiority of middle-class domesticity. While the division between the public and the private was strengthened, women were invested with a certain force of moral persuasiveness, provided that it was strictly limited to the female space of domesticity.⁵ This state of affairs was especially disadvantageous for spinsters, since their position was peculiarly ill-defined: they were neither in the public sphere of male employment, nor in the private sphere of female marital duties. Correspondingly, spinsters fared badly in literary representations. As Pat Jalland claims: “Victorian literary fiction is a rich source for stereotypes and assumptions about unmarried

⁴ Bridget Hill, *Women Alone: Spinsters in England 1660-1850* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 4-5. According to her estimation, “the number of spinsters in Britain reached a high point of about 16-18% in the 1680s, fell to as low as 4-7% in the 1750s and 60s, and average 7-10% thereafter” (11).

⁵ Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

women. The dominant literary image of the spinster was victim and social failure.”⁶ Spinsters and old maids became marginal figures in the traditional narrative whose interests centred on romance, love, and marriage.

But signs of gradual change were also appearing as early as the mid-nineteenth century. In the 1840s, the insufficient supply of jobs available for unmarried women of middle-class origin was often mentioned in social literature which lamented how few employment options were genuinely available (only the schoolteacher, the governess, and the lady’s companion were considered sufficiently genteel.) According to Janet Howarth, it was in the 1851 national census that marital status was recorded for the first time. The census revealed that “Over 16% of the female population in England and Wales aged 35-44 were single and a further 8% were widows”.⁷ In the period when the sexual division of labour made men the only breadwinners for a household, the existence of a large number of single women who potentially had to earn a living by themselves was nothing but a scandal. It provoked a wide debate over the problem of ‘surplus women’ and consequently put the ‘women question’ on the agenda of liberal social reform. Some proponents of domestic ideology, such as W. R. Gregg in his oft-quoted article “Why are Women Redundant?” (1862), were positively terrified by the issue, and suggested that women should emigrate to colonies, where they were scarcer

⁶ Pat Jalland, *Women, Marriage and Politics: 1860-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 258.

⁷ Janet Howarth, “Gender, Domesticity, and Sexual Politics,” in *The Nineteenth Century The British Isles: 1815-1901*, ed. Colin Matthew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 163-93, 179.

and no longer ‘redundant,’ and so could expect to find respectable marriage more easily.⁸ Yet in the long run, the problem posed by single women gave a strong incentive for reforms of conditions in women’s education and employment that gradually enhanced their participation into the public sphere. It is primarily from this work of transvaluation that Victorian women paved the way for the organized movement of modern feminism.

As Martha Vicinus argues: the “single woman necessarily took a leadership position in the effort to redefine woman’s role in society. Her very lack of an ascribed role in private—she was not a mother or a wife—and in public—she was not part of the male political and social spheres—was to prove both drastically limiting and immensely liberating.”⁹ In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the substantial increase in the number of middle-class working women had a big social impact and opened the way to representing the formation of female identity with a narrative pattern that differed from that of romance and marriage: the ‘New Woman’ fiction of the 1890s was being born.¹⁰ Spinsterhood could now be depicted as the result of deliberate choice, rather than passive suffering, the achievement of an active

⁸ W. H. Gregg, “Why are Women Redundant?” *National Review* 14 (April 1862), 434-60. Also see, Patricia Hollis, *Women in Public: The Women’s Movement 1850-1900* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1979), especially part 2 “Surplus Women and Emigration,” 33-44.

⁹ Martha Vicinus, *Independent Women: Work and Community for Single Women 1850-1920* (London: Virago, 1985), 12.

¹⁰ David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895-1920* (London: Routledge, 1993), 39-48. “In 1861 nearly 80,000 women were employed as teachers in England and Wales; by 1911 there were 183,000. Over the same period, the number of women employed as clerical workers rose from 279 to 124,000” (39).

professional life and an implicit critique of marital inequality, as seen in the character of Rhoda Nunn in George Gissing's *The Odd Women* (1893). Yet the same period also saw the rise of a new problem. By the time the suffragette writers, such as Christable Pankhurst and Cicely Hamilton, took up the discourse of 'celibacy' as a critical weapon against the institution of marriage and moral corruption of men, the new 'scientific' discourse of physiology and sexology started to attribute abnormality to women who did not participate in the norm of heterosexual intercourse. Sheila Jeffreys claims that the 'new morality' of 'sex freedom,' also appearing from this period, was largely complicit with the discourse of sexology, because such apparently liberal approaches to sexuality were in reality often taken, whether by men or by women, with a guiding assumption of heterosexuality.¹¹ The "sexualization of spinsterhood" (in Christine Bolt's words) in this period had a potentially disruptive effect on the solidarity of feminism founded on the strategic choice of celibacy and sexual abstinence.¹²

A case in point would be that of Dora Marsden and her journal, the *Freewoman* (eventually renamed the *New Freewoman* and the *Egoist*), later to become a major force in development of early Anglo-American modernism.¹³

¹¹ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (North Melbourne: Sphinifex, 1985), 86-127.

¹² Quoted in Anthea Trodd, *Women's Writings in English: Britain 1900-1945* (London and New York: Longman, 1998), 24.

¹³ On Dora Marsden's editorship of these journals, see Mark S. Morrisson, *The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences, and Reception 1905-1920* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), 84-132. Critics also suggest that Marsden's philosophy of individualism, influenced by Max Stirner's philosophical egoism in *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (1844), had a significant

Dora Marsden was an associate of Christabel Pankhurst from the time they were fellow students in Manchester's Victoria University in 1900, later becoming a prominent member in Pankhurst's Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU). But Marsden's individualist persuasions and radical activities led to her resignation in 1911, when she founded the *Freewoman: A Weekly Feminist Review* as a rival institution to the WSPU.¹⁴ In its first issue of 23 November 1911, it carried an essay titled "The Spinster. By One." Although the essay appeals for compassion for the plight of spinsters, it describes the life of spinsterhood as one of bitterness and frustration resulting from a thwarted expectation of marriage.¹⁵ A controversial reevaluation of 'celibacy,' it provoked a heated, long debate in the correspondence columns of subsequent issues. Some correspondents defended the value of spinsterhood and insisted on the beneficial effects of sexual abstinence, such as health and purity. Others, of which the most persistent was Stella Browne (later to become one of the leading figures in the birth-control movement), argued for the importance of sexual liberation and called for a better recognition of

impact on modernist writers like Ezra Pound and James Joyce. On Pound and Marsden, see, Vincent Sherry, *Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, and Radical Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 44-7. On Joyce and Marsden, see, Jean-Michel Rabaté, *James Joyce and the Politics of Egoism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 43-69.

¹⁴ For these biographical details, see, Les Garner, *A Brave and Beautiful Spirit: Dora Marsden 1882-1960* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990), 22-50. Bruce Clarke, *Dora Marsden and Early Modernism: Gender, Individualism, Science* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 47-55.

¹⁵ "The Spinster. By One," *Freewoman* (23 November 1911), 10-11.

women's capacity for sexual desire.¹⁶ Sheila Jeffreys identifies the journal's own position with the latter persuasion, which was, according to her, derived from "the sexological ideology of compulsive heterosexuality." Therefore she claims: "The *Freewoman* writers were united in alarm at the spinster, even when they were spinsters themselves."¹⁷ Setting aside the question of this statement's accuracy, the debate in the *Freewoman* amply illustrates the divide created within the pre-war feminism by the thorny issues of spinsterhood and sexual liberty.

As for Dora Marsden herself, it is certain that her intense rivalry with Pankhurst's WSPU consistently coloured her polemics. Yet her attitude to the question of spinsterhood was genuinely ambiguous. For instance, in her 1913 article "The Heart of the Question," Marsden fiercely opposes an anti-feminist argument which recommends that professional women go back

¹⁶ For the defendants of spinsterhood, see Margaret E. Hill, A Letter to the Editor, *Freewoman* (30 November 1911), 31; E. M. Watson, "Asceticism and Passion," *Freewoman* (15 February 1912), 231; Kathlyn Oliver, "Asceticism and Passion," *Freewoman* (22 February 1912), 252; Kathlyn Oliver, "Chastity and Normality," *Freewoman* (29 February 1912), 290. For Browne's essay for sexual liberation, see, 'A New Contributor [Stella Browne],' "The Chastity of Continence?" *Freewoman* (22 February 1912), 270; "Who are the 'Normal'?" *Freewoman* (7 March 1912), 312-13.

¹⁷ Jeffreys, *op. cit.* 95-6. Lesley A. Hall argues that "the common depiction of Stella Browne as an uncritical advocate of an untheorized liberated sexuality, the female mouthpiece of male sexologists with sinister agendas" is inaccurate, and instead defends Browne's essays as a part of efforts to provide better knowledge and new vocabularies for previously repressed female sexuality. Hall, "The Next Generation: Stella Browne, the New Woman as Freewoman," in *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminists*, eds. Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 224-38.

to the private sphere of marriage. According to her, G. K. Chesterton has called the feminist claim for “economic independence” nothing more than a “crazy cant,” because “the capitalists can treat each woman as that only too common thing, the conscientious spinster.” Marsden retorts that marriage is never a better alternative for women, arguing that it is ultimately comparable to prostitution as both make women dependent on men’s purses. Instead, she claims that the “economic independence” of “the conscientious spinster” is an essential condition for the individual empowerment of women.¹⁸ But later, when Christabel Pankhurst calls for a wider practice of celibacy in order to prevent the spread of venereal disease in *Plain Facts about a Great Evil, (The Great Scourge and How to End It)* (1913), Marsden dismisses this campaign as a mere cult of supposed female purity. According to her: “It is more important to heighten vitality than to combat disease: which as a matter of fact can only be overcome by increased vitality and there is more danger to ‘health’ to be awaited from the misery of renunciation and the dull heats of virginity than from the ills of syphilis and gonorrhœa [sic].”¹⁹ As Robert von Hallberg suggests, Marsden’s celebration of female sexual liberty is guided by her version of philosophical vitalism.²⁰ All the same, her warning against the “danger” of renunciation and virginity has an uncomfortable resonance with the contemporary medical discourse which ascribed celibacy

¹⁸ Dora Marsden, “The Heart of the Question,” *New Freewoman* 4:1 (August 1 1913), 61-4.

¹⁹ Dora Marsden, “The Chastity of Women,” *Egoist* 3:1 (February 2 1914), 44-6.

²⁰ Robert von Hallberg, “Libertarian Imagism,” *Modernism/Modernity* 2:2 (Summer 1995), 63-79, 69.

and sexual abstinence to abnormality.

Although May Sinclair was an occasional contributor to the *Egoist* (her essays on Imagism, H. D, and Dorothy Richardson first appeared in that journal), and the journal published an essay which admired her novels in 1918,²¹ it would be rash to associate Sinclair with Dora Marsden's brand of feminist individualism too straightforwardly. Yet it is still possible to situate Sinclair's stance towards contemporary feminism within this set of disputes provoked around the problem of celibacy and sexuality. Sinclair's pamphlet *Feminism* (1912) was originally issued from the Women Writers' Suffrage Union as a response to a letter published in the *London Times* on 23 March 1912, written by Sir Almroth Wright, then the Professor of Experimental Pathology in the University of London. Deploying his medical authority, Wright claims that the suffragette militancy is mostly fuelled by a thwarted desire for sexuality which has a dangerous tendency to induce mental derangement. According to Sinclair's summary, the main hypothesis of his argument is "that we may call journalistically the 'hysterical bacillus' is present as the pathogenic agent in every case of what the journalists are calling 'Suffragitis.'"²² In Wright's opinion, "no doctor can ever lose sight of the fact that the mind of woman is always threatened with the reverberations of her physiological emergencies," and, these "physiological emergencies" are solely responsible for "mental upsettings" which women can

²¹ Jean de Bosschère, "Charity and Grace in the Work of May Sinclair," *Egoist* 8:5 (September 1918), 109-11.

²² May Sinclair, *Feminism* (London: the Women Writers' Suffrage League, 1912), 4. Hereafter abbreviate to *F*.

never control by themselves (*F*, 8). He argues that “the recruiting field for the militant suffragists is the half-million of our excess population,” and that “the pangs and bitterness of ‘frustration’ and of ‘disappointed love’ are mainly at the bottom of it” (*F*, 15-6). Reducing the political claims of feminism to indices of mental and physical ‘frustration’ in this way, Wright clearly exhibits his anti-feminist prejudice.²³

Sinclair’s pamphlet, written a week after Wright’s letter, is a detailed refutation of his argument. Sinclair derides him for “his extraordinary descent from the serene heights of Science into this really horrid arena” of anti-suffrage journalism (*F*, 4). She also justly points out “certain hard *sociological and economic facts*” which necessitate single women to support themselves and to demand a wider access to the public arena of politics (*F*, 35; emphasis in original). But when she is most eloquent, Sinclair is guided by a certain vitalist or spiritualist philosophy. Yet this eloquence, designed to counter the reductive biology of medical authority, is uneasily underlain with a certain concession to the physiological discourse of anti-celibacy (as we have also seen in the case of Dora Marsden). True, as Sinclair concedes, the complex mechanisms of female body might make women more liable to the harm of frustrations; but “she is not all body any more than a man is; and though the primordial instincts may in her be rather more ‘reverberating’ than

²³ Bruce Clarke points out that Dora Marsden reprinted Wright’s letter in its entirety in the *Freewoman* of April 4, 1912 (392-3). Clarke considers that Marsden ironically hailed Wright’s “articulate misogyny” as it helps “her revolutionary desire to blast through polite reserve and reveal through bare utterance the full extent of the sexual antipathy at large in Western culture.” Clarke, *op. cit.* 87.

in him, because of her more complex mechanisms, still, even for her, *there are other things*” (*F*, 29; emphasis in original). She continues:

There is everything in that everlasting readiness to bring forth; everything in those profound and intarissable [sic] wells of instinct, in that stream of the Life-Force of which Woman is pre-eminently the reservoir. What I venture to dispute is the conclusion that for a woman there is only one kind of alternative between frustration and fulfilment of the Life-Force, and that is—hysteria, neurosis and the detestable manifestations of degeneracy. I dispute it without for one moment blinking the frightful possibilities of the celibate and solitary life.

For the Life-Force, like any other force when its channel is obstructed, will, of course, seek another; and it will tend to discharge itself along some line of least resistance. With your degenerate the line of least resistance may be the path of perdition. But with the normal, healthy human being, capable of control, may it not be transformed, transmuted, merged with certain increased energies of the body and the brain? In the artist, the enthusiast, the visionary (I will leave the saints out of this discussion), may it not be transformed and transmuted into still higher and subtler energies? (*F*, 30-1)

This assumption of spiritualization, which Sinclair inserts between the otherwise reductive dichotomy between “frustration and fulfilment,” enables

her to defend the suffrage movement as an example of such “transformed” energies. Sinclair thus loudly proclaims: “We are dealing less with a psychological [sic] portent than with a new sociological factor, the SOLIDARITY OF WOMAN. And there is only one other factor that can be compared with it for importance, and that is the SOLIDARITY OF THE WORKING-CLASS.” She dares to say, even, that “these two solidarities are one” (*F*, 33-4).

Yet this vitalist argument, based on the assumption of a transmutable “Life-Force,” might be a double-edged device to defend the feminist movement, insofar as the same energy is supposed to originate from “those profound and intarissable [sic] wells of instinct,” that is, the biological “instinct” of sexuality and procreation. It is for this reason that Sinclair assigns that “transformed” energy solely to “the normal, healthy human being,” while dismissing those women suffering from frustrations as cases of “hysteria, neurosis and the detestable manifestations of degeneracy.” For the same reason, she is also unable to blink “the frightful possibilities of the celibate and solitary life,” even while she ardently celebrates “the SOLIDARITY OF WOMAN” founded on the strategic choice of a single but united life. This ambivalence threatens to undermine her allegiance to the suffrage movement.

This problem is most explicit in the way Sinclair defends intellectual women against Wright’s charges that they are either sexually atrophied or embittered. She first argues that “‘Intellectual’ is a wide, loose term that may cover all sorts of cases without exactly fitting one. It may be made to

stretch from the heaven-born feminine genius to the last pitiful survivor of a competitive exam” (*F*, 21). From this observation, Sinclair goes on to offer her own distinction of the female intellectuals between “(1) the NATURAL and (2) the ARTIFICIAL” (*F*, 24). Whereas Sinclair enthusiastically hails the first category of women by granting them the utmost degree of “physiological perfection” (*F*, 21), she concedes to Wright that his charge of abnormality can be actually applicable to the latter group and even calls them “stunted, anæmic, and undeveloped” (*F*, 25). True, Sinclair places the blame rather on the educational system of cramming and competitive exams for the anaemia of these supposedly “artificial” intellectual women. But her language of indictment at times unhesitatingly approaches that of the contemporary eugenicist discourse: “Nature, mindful of the Race, tends to adjust this formidable disturbance of her balance, and the Artificial Intellectual is often sterile; and her numbers will tend to become more and more so, until, if she were left to Nature and not produced artificially, she would soon be weeded out” (*F*, 27). In short, despite her fierce critique of Wright’s brand of anti-suffragism, Sinclair’s spiritualized vitalism is still trapped in the contemporary scientific paradigm of discourse about the female body. This explains her ambivalent attitude towards the suffrage movement and its strategy of celibacy. It is therefore with this image of the body and its “frightful possibilities” as posed by the contemporary physiology that Sinclair struggles in trying to construct her philosophy and ultimately, her modernist poetics.

3.

In the period before the Great War, Sinclair's alliance with contemporary suffrage activists helped her to address the public sphere in a significant way. But the strategic choice of spinsterhood, an important link between Sinclair and the suffrage movement, was ultimately undermined in her case by the threat of the female body as defined by contemporary science and medicine. Sinclair took up the discourse of spiritualized vitalism as a defensive tactic, but it led her to introduce a crucial distinction within the solidarity of single women, namely, that between "the heaven-born feminine genius" and "the last pitiful survivor of a competitive exam." This self-serving distinction might be dismissed as little more than an attempt to justify her efforts as a serious novelist. But Sinclair had devoted a great deal of work to support her claim for the spiritually transformative powers of "the Life-Force." Indeed, for a virtually self-educated woman of the period like Sinclair, the width of her interests and the amount of her reading are truly impressive, which encompass the contemporary works of philosophy, psychology, and even psychoanalysis. Her effort resulted in her two philosophical works, *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) and *The New Idealism* (1922).

Without going into the details of Sinclair's complex argument, it is possible to describe the ultimate goal of her books, as it is a philosophy with a very marked preference for the individuality and autonomy of selfhood. As is also evident from their titles, Sinclair wrote these books as a 'defence' of an idealistic view which considers that selfhood is independent from its material

conditions and is endowed with an intuitive power to attain an ideal and absolute reality, such as “the eternal ideas of Truth, Goodness and Beauty.”²⁴

Writing in the period which saw the ascendancy of scientific naturalism with its central tenets of biology, physiology and evolutionary theory, however, Sinclair was also all too aware of the possibility that her attempt might be merely unseasonable. In her discussions, she seems deliberately to ignore the turn-of-the century British idealists such as T. H. Green and Bernard Bosanquet. As Sinclair writes in *The New Idealism*: “If I betray ignorance of many contemporary idealists, it is because for years I was satisfied with Kant and Hegel relieved by Schopenhauer and Mr. Bradley, and because, lately, my chief interest has been in seeing what can be said against idealism.”

Following this wave of the counter-argument, Sinclair criticizes that the traditional idealism has overemphasised the rational aspect of consciousness, “which reflects, judges, infers, and reasons.”²⁵ Although it might lend a strong support to the autonomy of selfhood, she regards the rationalism of ‘old’ idealism as misleadingly narrow-sighted and blind to other functions of mind such as emotion, perception, memory, and imagination. For her, the quest for abstract epistemology and *a priori* judgement is nothing more than “a dance of bloodless categories” which cannot do justice to the actual concreteness and empirical multiplicity of the world, one perceived “as full-blooded and gorgeously coloured, as variegated and multitudinous, as

²⁴ May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism: Some Questions and Conclusions* (London: Macmillan, 1917), x iii. Hereafter abbreviated to *DI*.

²⁵ May Sinclair, *The New Idealism* (London: Macmillan, 1922), x, v iii.

everlastingly exciting, mysterious, and surprising” (*DI*, 348).

It is largely because of this preference for concrete and perceived reality that Sinclair turns to the then up-to-date works of psychologists such as William James, Wilhelm Wundt, and William McDougall. Among these, the work of McDougall is central for Sinclair. For instance, when she discusses “the stream of consciousness”—a term she later famously applies to the novels of Dorothy Richardson—in *A Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair’s quotes are not from James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) but from McDougall in *Body and Mind* (1913).²⁶ According to McDougall, the stream of consciousness is “a multiplicity of distinguishable parts or features which, although they are perpetually changing, yet hang together as a continuous whole within which changes go on.” Assigning a multiplicity of changing perceptions to consciousness in this way, however, McDougall is in fact introducing a serious problem. For, in the same passage, he goes on to question the autonomy of consciousness thus understood as a stream: “my stream of consciousness is not self-supporting, is not self-sufficient, is not a closed, self-determining system; it is wholly admitted that each phase of the stream does not flow wholly out of the preceding phase, and that its course cannot be explained without the assumption of influences coming upon it from without” (quoted in *DI*, 90-1). The problem for McDougall is in fact to

²⁶ Suzanne Raitt suggests that, although Sinclair is often assumed to have been influenced from William James, there is no reason to suppose this direct influence because the term “stream of consciousness” was widely used in various scientific and psychological writings of the period. See, Raitt, *op. cit.* 218-9. Cf. Diane F. Gillespie, “May Sinclair and the Stream of Consciousness: Metaphor and Metaphysics,” in *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920* 21 (1978), 134-142.

investigate the nature of this “influences coming upon [the stream of consciousness] from without,” in other words, how the psychical process and the physiological process are correlated, and ultimately, whether one is reducible to the other.²⁷ The irony for Sinclair is that, on a quite different level, she is encountering a serious difficulty analogous to the one that she confronted in her defence of feminism: scientific naturalism is threatening to reduce her cherished spirituality to mere physicality (although, in the present case, the questions of gender and sexuality recede into the background). Attracted to the ceaseless flux of mental multiplicity, Sinclair risks losing the all-important autonomy of selfhood in the empirical actuality of the “stream of consciousness.”

Sinclair’s reaction is a partial concession, one that ultimately benefits her metaphysical preference. In a later stage of the argument, she admits that “our psychic life is not a water-tight compartment, but has porous walls, and is continually threatened with leakage and the flooding in of many streams” (*DI*, 375). Yet Sinclair claims that this recognition of external influences and even potential confluence of “many streams” does not disprove her doctrine of the autonomous selfhood. Far from it, she urges us to imagine how the state of affairs is like if we are lacking in the central self, by way of a veritable *reductio ad absurdum*:

²⁷ For a brief review and evaluation of the career and work of William McDougall, see, L. S. Hearnshaw, *A Short History of British Psychology 1840-1940* (London: Methuen, 1964), 185-196. Hearnshaw’s judgment of McDougall’s psychology is harsh: “It elevated the irrational, saved ‘the soul,’ and being non-experimental, was cheap enough to flourish when money for psychology was hard to come by” (195).

suppose that there are no psychic dispositions, no psychic interferences, no psychic preferences, and no selections and rejections of associations, then our consciousness would be like nothing on earth but an immense fantastic telephone exchange; an exchange where messages, indeed, received and answered themselves, but all at once, and in overwhelming multitudes; an exchange deafened and disorganized; bells ringing incessantly all through its working hours; messages rushing in from all parts of the city and suburbs at once, crossed and recrossed by trunk calls from all parts of the outlying country; casually crossing and recrossing, interrupting and utterly obliterating each other. (*DI*, 105)

Appearing in the years which followed the decline in Sinclair's early ideal of reciprocal exchange, the image of "immense fantastic telephone exchange" can be read as her nightmare vision of the bad collective, one that destroys the possibility of communication by virtue of its sheer disorderly excess. Using this as negative evidence, Sinclair instead tries to convince us of the logical indispensability of some "psychic dispositions" as "one central sorting and supervising system" (*DI*, 105). Although her procedure might not be satisfactory as a logical argument, she is in fact quite determined to elicit a spiritual unity out of the concrete multiplicity of immediate consciousness, even without the help of mediating rationality available from traditional idealism.

Sinclair's "New Idealism" amounts to nothing more than this conviction that the immediate perception of ultimate reality is not only possible, but has a crucial significance. This makes her approach the contemporary revival of spiritualism and mysticism then promoted by the activities and experiments of the Society for Psychical Research, which she joined in 1914. Founded in 1882, the Society held a membership of some eminent psychologists such as Fredric Myers, Henry Sidgwick, and William McDougall, and it pursued serious research on supernatural phenomena such as clairvoyance, clairaudience and psychokinesis. As Roger Luckhurst abundantly illustrates, the 'psychical research' satisfied a minimum level of scientific respectability at that time, and sometimes could even command interests of serious thinkers such as William James and C. S. Pierce.²⁸ Yet for Sinclair, it seems that the psychical research was important more as an imaginative need rather than as a strict science.²⁹ This can be seen from the fact that her favourite supernatural power is that of telepathy, which means, according to her, "that the ordinary methods of communication by speech and sign are 'transcended'" (*DI*, 299). We might consider that the necessity for this telepathic exchange

²⁸ Roger Luckhurst, *The Invention of Telepathy 1870-1901* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). On May Sinclair as "one of the best exemplars" of this trend, see 260-2.

²⁹ From around 1910, Sinclair wrote a number of short stories about supernatural phenomena, later collected in *Uncanny Stories* (London: Hutchinson, 1923). The revival of occult and mysticism is one of important undercurrents in modernism. On Sinclair's stories, see, David Graver, "'The Spectrality Effect' in Early Modernism," and David Seed, "'Psychical Cases: Transformations of the Supernatural in Virginia Woolf and May Sinclair,'" in *Gothic Modernisms*, eds. Andrew Smith and Jeff Wallace (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 29-42 and 44-61.

was especially urgent for her in order to ‘transcend’ the dilemma and disorder of “the immense fantastic telephone exchange.” As for the task of evidencing the phenomenon, Sinclair completely depends on the assumed scientific authority of the Society. As for explanation, she frankly admits that “it does not account for itself” (*DI*, 300).

Yet thus openly subscribing to the doctrine of mysticism, Sinclair was in effect veering towards the danger of an intellectual contradiction, for she was also an important early supporter of the emergent theory of psychoanalysis. From 1913 on, she was involved in the Medico-Psychoanalytic Clinic, which was, in Suzanne Raitt’s words, “the first British institution devoted to psychotherapy, and explicitly committed to psychoanalytic method.”³⁰ In 1916, Sinclair contributed to the *Medical Press* a review of C. G. Jung’s *Psychology of the Unconscious*, which challenged to subject “all the religions, all the mysticisms, all the innocencies of mythology and fairy-tale and childhood, with the sacred figures of poets and seers and saints” to a psychoanalytic diagnosis, namely, as an effect of the libido repressed into the unconscious.³¹ Against this onslaught, Sinclair’s defensive rhetoric is almost the same as that she had already used in *Feminism*. While she concedes that “mystical metaphysics are an abomination,” a mere “hysterical

³⁰ Suzanne Raitt, *op. cit.* 136, 135-140. Also for the connection between May Sinclair and psychoanalysis, see, Lyndsey Stonebridge, “Psychoanalysis and Literature,” in *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*, eds. Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 269-85, 274-5.

³¹ May Sinclair, “Clinical Lecture on Symbolism and Sublimation, I,” *Medical Press* (August 1 1916), 118-122, 118.

resurgence of natural longings most unspiritually suppressed,” Sinclair firmly distinguishes the spirituality of her “metaphysical mysticism” from this “abomination” and goes on to attack the latter fiercely in order to defend the former (*DI*, x viii). Therefore, on the one hand, she bitterly criticizes “Western Mysticism” of the Christian saints as “the deadliest perils of the monastic life” come true (*DI*, 289). For her, the language that the saints used when they described their moments of mystical vision is too “sensual,” “sensuous” and even “voluptuous”: it is merely a symptom of “the disease of asceticism” because their absolute division of body and soul simply repressed “the Life-Force” and failed to transform it (*DI*, 307, 311). On the other hand, Sinclair celebrates her brand of spirituality as “a robust and joyous Mysticism, reconciled to the world” (*DI*, 307), insofar as it is better informed with “Eastern Mysticism” which has successfully transformed “the Life-Force” into a spiritual power. Her example is the language of Rabindranath Tagore, an Indian Nobel-prize poet, whose “serenity” and “purity” Sinclair admires superlatively (*DI*, 311).

To consolidate this argument, Sinclair even resorts to the vocabularies of psychoanalysis. Yet here again, her appropriation of psychoanalytic theory is highly selective. She argues: “the psychoanalysts tell you that wherever there is repression without sublimation there is a neurosis or psychosis. It would be truer to say that wherever there is repression there is no sublimation, and wherever there is sublimation there is no repression” (*DI*, 9). This apparently innocent, yet in fact crucial, distinction enables Sinclair to celebrate the mystical transformation of “the Life-Force” as that of

sublimation, while avoiding any hateful association with the problem of repression. Yet as she also admits, the notion of sublimation remains to be at best an unformulated assumption for Sigmund Freud.³² What is more, Freud firmly denies that we can delimit the mechanism of repression solely in patients of neuroses. He insists: “*what is suppressed continues to exist in normal people as abnormal, and remains capable of psychical functioning.*”³³

While his meta-psychological theory is thus designed to level the distinction between the supposed ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal,’ Sinclair’s heretical formulation of mutual exclusivity of “sublimation” and “repression” in effect widens the gulf between the spiritual and the merely hysterical. Sinclair goes so far as to assume a distinction between two types of the unconscious. She complains that the unconscious according to psychoanalysis is “a pantechnicon murky to the last degree, and chockfull of hideous and repulsive things.” But she wonders: “I see no reason why [the unconscious] should overflow with things hideous and repulsive any more than with beautiful and attractive things” (*DI*, 6). Sinclair coldly diagnoses that this “murky” unconscious is just an unusual product of abnormal repression, possible only in patients. Meanwhile, she asserts that her version of the unconscious is a sublimated kind, resorting to Samuel Butler’s theory of “unconscious

³² Sinclair writes: “Freud’s Sublimation hangs in the air. He made no solid bridge between his psychoanalysis and his psycho-therapy.” In Sinclair, “Symbolism and Sublimation, II,” *Medical Press* (August 16 1916), 142-5, 145.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume V* (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 608. Emphasis in original.

memory” which argues that it is a reservoir of routinized actions mastered to the extent of dispensing with any conscious attention.³⁴ Therefore, for Sinclair, if any kind of “healing” is possible for the pitiful neurotics, “it is clear that we have to do not so much with the disclosure of a shameful secret as with the recovery of a lost Will,” the “Will-to-Live” miserably stamped down into the murky unconscious (*DI*, 11).

All this garbling of psychoanalysis and the belief in mysticism would have been less problematic as a private creed for Sinclair, had it not had some distorting effects on her attitude towards the public world. Writing in the midst of the Great War, Sinclair claims that the visionary moments of mystical certainty are also testified by the experience of the frontline soldiers: “Almost every other hero knows it: the exquisite and incredible assurance, the positively ecstatic vision of Reality that comes to him when he faces death for the first time... the world has been full of *these* mystics, *these* visionaries, since August 1914” (*DI*, 302, emphasis in original, ellipsis mine). In the same year, Sinclair published *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), a novel in which a soldier, Michael Harrison, experiences exactly this kind of mystical ecstasy. He also believes that the war is “the Great War of Redemption. And redemption meant simply thousands and millions of men in troop-ships and troops-trains coming from the end of the world to buy the freedom of the world with their bodies.”³⁵ As a statement written during the time the

³⁴ For a good explanation of Samuel Butler’s theory within a historical context of reactions to the Darwinian evolution theory, see, Peter J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983), 72-5.

³⁵ May Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), 377.

British Army saw an unprecedented number of shell-shock breakdowns, it regrettably has a pathetic note of complete unreality. It is fair to assume that all this was caused by Sinclair's exclusive concentration on the task of defending her mystical vision against the assault of scientific naturalism. From one aspect, *The Tree of Heaven* is the most inclusive of Sinclair's entire oeuvres, dealing with the "vortex" period of the suffrage and avant-garde movements that culminated into the death struggle of the Great War.³⁶ Yet from another angle, it might be seen as marking the point where Sinclair crucially lost her public vision, a vision which might have helped her to recognise the extent of horror and misery which was suffered by the fighting bodies in the battlefield.³⁷ In so far as it is founded on this crucial disavowal of the suffering bodies, we might conclude that Sinclair's mystical vision is enabled not so much by the sublimation of "the Life-Force," as by the repression of the vulnerability of the actual human body. And if this is indeed the case, what May Sinclair's modernism needs for its "healing" might

³⁶ On these aspects of *The Tree of Heaven*, see, Laura Stempel Momford, "May Sinclair's *The Tree of Heaven*: The Vortex of Feminism, the Community of War," in *Arms and Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, eds. Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich, and Susan Merrill Squier (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 168-183; Terry Phillips, "The Self in Conflict: May Sinclair and the Great War," in *The Literature of the Great War Reconsidered: Beyond Modern Memory*, eds. Patrick J. Quinn and Steven Trout (Basingstoke, Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2001), 55-66.

³⁷ As Suzanne Raitt points out: "The War in Sinclair's fiction is a perversely bodiless affair, as though Sinclair denied herself, or was denied, access to those male bodies which the war destroyed." In Raitt, "'Contagious Ecstasy': May Sinclair's War Journals," in *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, ed. Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 65-84, 67.

not be in “the recovery of a lost Will,” but, after all, in “the disclosure of a shameful secret.”

4.

Critics agree that *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) is the culminating point in May Sinclair’s progressive association with Anglo-American literary modernism. From 1915 on, Sinclair had been lending a powerful support to emerging modernism. She wrote several appreciative review-essays on Imagist poets such as H. D, Richard Aldington, and F. S. Flint. In 1918, she also published a review of Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage* and used the term “stream of consciousness” for the first time in a discussion of modernist literary technique. Adopting lessons from the younger generation of writers—in Hrisey Zegger’s words, it is “a stream of consciousness novel written in an imagist style”³⁸—enabled Sinclair to make *Mary Olivier* into a radical break with the conventions of her previous novels. Before its publication in book form, parts of the novel were serialised for a few months from January 1919 in the *Little Review*, side by side with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. *Mary Olivier* is also an autobiographical fiction which follows Sinclair’s personal history closely,³⁹ and by contributing the story of her self-creation to the period’s

³⁸ Hrisey Dimitrakis Zegger, *May Sinclair* (Boston: Twaine’s English Authors Series 192, 1976), 95.

³⁹ See, Suzanne Raitt, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian*, 213-7.

foremost avant-garde magazine, May Sinclair fully signalled her affiliations with the innovations of modernism.

The novel tells a life-story of Mary Olivier, an intellectual woman, in a strictly chronological order from a mid-Victorian period of 1865 to 1910. It consists of five sections, each titled, “Infancy,” “Childhood,” “Adolescence,” “Maturity,” and finally, “Middle-Age.” In one respect, the novel is a typical modernist *Künstlerroman* which narrates the triumphant emergence of an artistic consciousness. Mary Olivier, who later becomes a visionary poet, never ceases to read throughout her long life. As a woman virtually without any experience of schooling, Mary’s precocious self-education is as formidable as that of her real-life original. Before she turns 10 years old, Mary reads Shakespeare, Milton and Pope on her own, while she starts learning Greek with her favourite brother Mark.⁴⁰ When she is 11, Mary has “taken the doll’s clothes out of the old wooden box and filled it with books” (*MO*, 97), that include the Greek classics, Shakespeare, the diary of Samuel Pepys, and even John Locke. When she is 14, she starts to conceive a serious doubt about the Catholic doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, finding consolation instead in Spinoza’s pantheistic philosophy as explained in the pages of an encyclopaedia (*MO*, 115-8). Before she turns 20, Mary starts to attempt her own translation of ancient Greek poems, while reading Immanuel Kant in the original German (*MO*, 214, 241). In her late 20s, she begins her surveys of various non-Christian or heretical doctrines, reading widely in

⁴⁰ May Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (New York: New York Review Books, 2002), 90-91. All references are to this edition. Hereafter abbreviated to *MO*.

Buddhism, the Upanishads (*MO*, 317), Hegel (*MO*, 319), and Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (*MO*, 364). Thus well-read and learned in her middle age, Mary ultimately starts to articulate her own version of idealist philosophy, which is distinctly coloured with some quasi-mystical experiences she has intermittently had ever since she was still a small child.

Yet drawing a sharp contrast to this triumphant development of Mary's intelligence is a progressive shrinkage of her intimate world and a corresponding constriction of her social horizon. Although the Olivier family appears to be relatively wealthy at the beginning of the novel, around the end of Mary's adolescence they have to move out from the family house in Ilford, London, to a small mournful village in Yorkshire called Morfe ("a dead-and-life place" [*MO*, 172]), apparently because of the collapse of her father's business. From that time on, Mary's family disintegrates quickly: two elder brothers go away to find jobs; her father takes to heavy drinking and eventually dies of it, bringing a miserable shame to the bereaved (*MO*, 218). The monotonous life in Morfe makes Mary dream of going away, but the increasing frailness of her mother ties her to the place as an indispensable family support, while two of her brothers successively die of (apparently hereditary) heart failure. Although Mary does have some potential suitors who might help to improve her social prospects, all of them eventually fall away for some reason or other. In her middle-age, Mary attains a degree of public recognition as a poet with help from Richard Nicholson, a Greek scholar and ideal intellectual companion, but she declines his proposal for marriage on account of her now helplessly senile mother (*MO*, 401). By the

end of the novel, Mary is utterly stripped of any intimate connections after her mother's death, finding self-support only in her visionary experiences.

To a certain extent, this inverse proportion existing between Mary's waxing intellectual domain and her waning intimate sphere is inevitable, given Sinclair's long-standing critique of the institution of marriage and domesticity as a serious impediment to women's creativity. At one point, Mary imagines the orthodox Christian doctrine of her family as "a net of unclean wool" from which she "would have to cut and tug and kick and fight [her] way out" (*MO*, 132). Yet far more intense is Mary's struggle with her mother who constantly reproves Mary for being "selfish and self-willed" (*MO*, 18). Later in the novel, Mary confesses to her brother Mark: "Ever since I began to grow up I felt there was something about Mamma that would kill me if I let it" (*MO*, 287).⁴¹ Their lifelong conflicts often centre on the issue of Mary's heavy leaning towards reading and learning. In her adolescence when she professes her liking for Greek: "Her mother's face shivered with repugnance" (*MO*, 148). The main reason behind her mother's objection is that the reading takes Mary's attention away from more womanly works of household duties. Cheryl Wilson points out that, since Greek and Latin were learned by men as a tool of social advancement in the late-Victorian period,

⁴¹ Jean Ratford argues that Sinclair's exploration into the intensity of ambivalent emotions between a mother and a daughter is truly original at this point of literary history. See, Ratford, "Introduction," in *Mary Olivier: A Life* (London: Virago, 1980), unpaginated. Lyndsey Stonebridge also suggests that Sinclair's exploration into the maternal preceded similar attempts in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927) and prefigured the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein. Stonebridge, *op. cit.* 275-6.

this ‘masculine’ learning is problematic for Mary as it implies an act of “potential gender-crossing.” Wilson therefore asserts that Mary’s reading is “an overtly political act,” one that “allows for the creation of private and personal interior spaces that exist outside the control of patriarchal institutions.”⁴² But this “political act” might be in fact a bit more ambiguous, since this “creation of private and personal” refuge does not directly lead her to seek out public recognition: rather, it enables Mary to continue staying beside her mother by alleviating her frustrations over her confinement in the eventless domestic sphere. In her maturity, Mary contemplates: “To you nothing happened. Nothing ever would happen. At twenty-one and a half you were old too, and very wise.... You measure time by the poems you wrote and by the books you read” (*MO*, 293; ellipsis mine). In other words, the problem lies in the tendency that Mary’s over-investment in reading and learning sometimes threatens to take over and replace the entirety of her adult social life.

This problem of Mary’s over-investment in knowledge is enacted also at the level of the narrative technique. In her review of Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, Sinclair argues that the writer should renounce the position of omniscient narrator, saying that “She must not be the wise, all-knowing author.”⁴³ Yet this apparent renunciation of knowledge is actually

⁴² Cheryl A. Wilson, “The Victorian Woman Reader in May Sinclair’s *Mary Olivier*: Self-Stimulation, Intellectual Freedom, and Escape,” *English Literature in Transition (1880-1920)* 46:4 (2003), 365-381, 371-2, 365-6.

⁴³ May Sinclair, “The Novels of Dorothy Richardson,” *Egoist* 5 (April 1918), 57-9; reprinted in Bonnie Kime Scott, ed. *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 442-8, 443.

accompanied by a guiding assumption widely shared at this time, an assumption that all that is worth knowing happens not in the outer world, but in the mind of characters, in this case, in the consciousness of Miriam Henderson.⁴⁴ Sinclair proclaims: “The first-hand, intimate and intense reality of the happening is in Miriam’s mind, and by presenting it thus and not otherwise Miss Richardson seizes reality alive.”⁴⁵ It seems that what Sinclair attempts at in *Mary Olivier* is exactly this project of “seiz[ing] reality alive.” A good example can be seen in the following passage which describes Mary as an infant fascinated by a still unfamiliar winter:

White patterns on the window, sharp spikes, feathers, sprigs with furled edges, stuck flat on the glass; white webs, crinkled like the skin of boiled milk, stretched across the corner of the pane; crisp, sticky stuff that bit your finger.

Out of doors, black twig thickened with a white fur; white powder sprinkled over the garden walk. The white, ruffled grass stood out stiffly and gave under your feet with a pleasant crunching. The air smelt good; you opened your mouth and drank it in gulps. It went down like cold, tingling water.

Frost. (*MO*,12)

⁴⁴ On this point about the “Inward Turn” of modern novel, see, Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 3-17.

⁴⁵ Sinclair, *op. cit.* 466.

This paratactic, imagistic concatenation of concrete images is meant to represent Mary's consciousness as immersed in the sensuous multiplicity (visual, tactile, olfactory and even gustatory) of an unfamiliar "it," which is attached to the specific name of "Frost" only at the very end of the entire passage. This delay in specification, and this minute moment of suspension between the sensuous multiplicity and the substantive unity, cut out a space later to be filled by the passage of Mary's expectant, developing intelligence. This is in turn informed by Sinclair's doctrine of "New Idealism" or "New Mysticism," the project of eliciting a spiritual unity out of the concrete multiplicity of immediate consciousness.

At first sight, this desire to capture the "first-hand, intimate and intense reality" might seem to allow an entire range of experiences for Mary's consciousness. Yet this apparently neutral idea of "reality" is in fact strictly delimited by Sinclair's philosophical orientations. This might be observed in her vocabulary which she has employed in her public advocacy of experiments in poetry. Against the charge that the poetry of H. D. is merely obscure, Sinclair first retorts that: "We must distinguish here between obscurity of thought and obscurity of feeling. Whereas unclarified thought means shallow thinking, emotion at a certain depth *is* obscure." From this basic observation, Sinclair goes on to claim that the modernist, or in this case imagist, method can divest the obscure emotional depth of its inessential obscurity. Therefore she argues: "What the Imagists are 'out for' is direct, naked contact with reality. You must get closer and closer. Imagery must go. Symbolism must go. There must be nothing between you and your

object.”⁴⁶ Similarly, when Sinclair appraises T. S. Eliot’s *Prufrock and Other Observations* (1917), she declares: “Reality, stripped naked of all rhetoric, of all ornament, of all confusing and obscuring association, is what he is after.”⁴⁷ According to her argument, it is only when you remove all superfluous obstacles “between you and your object” that you can attain the desired effect of “direct, naked contact with reality.” Yet underlying this assumption might be a fiercely strict value judgement that anything other than a certain sensation of “reality” is inessential and therefore divestible. Indeed, it is exactly as this removal of everything except for the perceiving mind that Sinclair appreciates the conditions of Richardson’s Miriam Henderson: “Everything she ever wanted was either withheld or taken from her. She is reduced to the barest minimum on which it is possible to support the life of the senses and the emotions at all. And yet Miriam is happy.... What really matters is a state of mind, the interest or the ecstasy with which we close with life.”⁴⁸ In spite of Sinclair’s impassioned defence of spiritual quest for the “naked” reality, the truth might be that it is only a way to displace, and even take pleasure in, “the barest minimum” of Miriam’s life, or, for that matter, the severely deprived social horizon of spinsters such as Mary Olivier and May Sinclair herself.

From this perspective, I would argue that the major interest of *Mary*

⁴⁶ May Sinclair, “The Poems of ‘H. D.’” *Fortnightly Review* 121 (March 1927), 329-40; reprinted in Scott, op. cit. 453-67, 461, 454. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ May Sinclair, “‘Prufrock: And Other Observations’: A Criticism,” *Little Review* 4:8 (December 1917), 8-14; reprinted in Scott, op. cit. 448-53, 451.

⁴⁸ May Sinclair, “The Novels of Dorothy Richardson,” 446. Ellipsis mine.

Olivier as a novel never lies in its conclusive moment when Mary settles in the mystical peace of her solitary life, but rather in the process before that moment, during which Sinclair appealingly describes a series of Mary's bitter frustrations. Learning the name of "Frost" is still easy and not that troublesome. But when Mary's precocious intelligence starts to reach beyond the tangible world and encounter more difficult questions, the conventions of her family quickly arise to block her eager, almost ravenous desire to know. When the infant Mary is told her aunts are coming: "Mary jumped up and down with excitement. She knew how it would be. In another minute Aunt Charlotte would come in, dressed in her black lace shawl and crinoline, and Aunt Lavvy would bring her Opinions. And something, something that you didn't know, would happen" (*MO*, 40). The irony is that "something that [Mary] didn't know" about her aunts, both unmarried, touches on the family taboo. In the case of Aunt Lavvy, it is because her Unitarian belief is a prohibited topic in the family of strict conformist persuasions. The case of Aunt Charlotte is in a sense even more ominous, because she is constantly obsessed with a hysterical delusion, in which she is soon to marry a lover who exists only in her imagination. During her visit, Charlotte secretly gives Mary a small naked china doll, which she calls her "little baby," saying that she no longer needs it as she is soon to be married (*MO*, 45). But when the child Mary gets curious and asks Charlotte about birth and babies later, she prohibits Mary from thinking about the problems. Mary therefore muses: "It had something to do with the things you didn't talk about" (*MO*, 94). Subsequently, this characteristic usage of the indefinite pronoun "something"

is to proliferate throughout the entire novel. Mary's persistent desire for knowledge is repeatedly blocked and disappointed by her family and its numerous taboos. As a consequence, her subjectivity starts to be perpetually fixed on mysterious, unspecified "something" that can alternately be the problem of religion or that of sexuality, or even, the ultimate question of death.

Following a trajectory that differs from that of a typical *Bildungsroman*, the novel does not recount a steady increase in the intelligibility of the world which is achieved as Mary grows older. Instead, she is gradually, deeply entrapped in the unnerving monotony of everyday life with her mother. Yet even in her maturity, Mary never stops expecting "something" exactly in the same manner she did in her infancy: "Nothing could take from her her belief in happiness hiding behind certain unknown doors. It hid behind the white doors of the ivy house. When you went in something wonderful would happen" (*MO*, 193). Sinclair sometimes implies that Mary's frustrated desire is after all "something" to do with the problem of sexuality. This is adumbrated in Mary's uncanny dream about Charlotte placed at the end of her infancy:

That night [Mary] dreamed that she saw Aunt Charlotte standing at the foot of the kitchen stairs taking off her clothes and wrapping them in white paper; first, her black lace shawl; then her chemise. She stood up without anything on. Her body was polished and shining like an enormous white china doll. She lowered her head

and pointed at you with her eyes.

When you opened the stair cupboard door to catch the opossum, you found a white china doll lying in it, no bigger than your finger. That was Aunt Charlotte.

In the dream there was no break between the end and the beginning. But when she remembered it afterwards it split into two pieces with a dark gap between. She knew she had only dreamed about the cupboard; but Aunt Charlotte at the foot of the stairs was so clear and solid that she thought she had really seen her. (*MO*, 46)

This dream might indeed be a version of the “naked” reality Sinclair desires to expose by means of her modernist experiment, if only we can replace “reality” with “body.” In *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905, 1915), Sigmund Freud argues that a small child’s pleasure in narcissistic exhibitionism is converted into voyeuristic curiosity to see the hidden parts of someone else’s body as the originally shameless child comes to develop a sense of shame. According to him, it is this “energy of scopophilia” which powerfully fuels “the instinct for knowledge or research” which first emerges in children between the ages of three and five.⁴⁹ Peter Brooks therefore suggests that the desire to know and the desire to see are closely entwined: “The body held in the field of vision is par excellence the object of both knowing and desire, desire as knowing.”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality* (1905, 1915) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume X II (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 192, 194.

⁵⁰ Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge,

Brooks might well be describing the naked body of Charlotte held in the dream vision of Mary. The return gaze of Charlotte appears to request Mary to recognise this bodily origin of her desire to know.

Toril Moi argues: “Freudian theory posits the drive to knowledge (epistemophilia) as crucially bound to the body and sexuality.”⁵¹ Yet if this is indeed the case with the infant Mary, it seems equally the case that her “epistemophilia” develops further as it progressively forgets or represses its bondage to the body and sexuality. In other words, Mary’s desire is crucially troubled with a sort of an amnesia, or repression which prevents it from recognising its original object. In a moment of premonition, her childhood nurse says of the infant Mary: “She doesn’t know what she wants” (*MO*, 23). A recurrent motif of the novel is that it is of some ethical significance, although difficult, to know one’s own desire or to specify “something” that one wants. In an earlier moment of the novel, Mark, her favourite brother, says to Mary, “Nothing matters, Minky, as long as you get what you want” (*MO*, 70). Later, he even thinks the crazed Charlotte “the sanest” of the family, because “she knew what she wanted” (*MO*, 289). This statement might be less paradoxical than it first appears, given that, at the very least, Charlotte did know what she wanted, i.e. marriage, sexuality, and babies. This persistence marks a sharp contrast with the mournful note of religious renunciation voiced by the mother of Mary: “None of us ever get what we

Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 99.

⁵¹ Toril Moi, “Patriarchal Thought and the Drive for Knowledge,” in *New Directions in Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, ed. Teresa Brennan (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 189-205, 203. Quoted in Brooks, *op. cit.* 106.

want in this world” (*MO*, 351). During the most of her adolescent and mature life, Mary ceaselessly shuttles between these two poles taken by the previous generation of women, the relentless pursuit of desire like Aunt Charlotte, or its sober resignation like her mother.

It is during this period that Mary approaches, without finally reaching, the self-knowledge about the origin of her desire to know. The most evident sign of this is the change of the recurrent indefinite pronoun from “something” to “somebody.” When she is disappointed with her one-time fiancé Mourice Jourdain, Mary considers: “She didn’t want him. But she wanted Somebody. Somebody. Somebody. Somebody. He had left her with this ungovernable want.” Yet in Mary, this desire for some “body” is always mixed up with her desire for knowledge, as when she imagines her ideal lover: “He had the soul of Shelley and the mind of Spinoza and Immanuel Kant” (*MO*, 262). Although Mary often indulges in this sort of reverie, her mother repeatedly warns her by implying that Mary might become like Aunt Charlotte if she continues the pursuit of her desire (*MO*, 273, 330). The crucial obstacle to Mary’s self-knowledge is, after all, her internalized fear that this daydreaming might indeed some day drive herself crazy like Charlotte. This conflict between reverie and fear is the most compelling expression of her frustrations: “If only you didn’t keep on wanting somebody—somebody who wasn’t there. If, before it killed you, you could kill the desire to know another mind, a luminous, fiery crystal, to see it turn, shining and flashing. To talk to it, to listen to it, to love the human creature it belonged to” (*MO*, 361). For Mary, however, the solution to the problem is

to be found, once again, in reading and learning. She avidly reads the books by contemporary theorists of evolution and heredity such as Herbert Spencer and Théodule-Armand Ribot, and for a moment becomes convinced with the inevitable destiny of hereditary madness for herself (*MO*, 331-4). Yet her intellectual mentor Mr. Sutcliff opposes her conviction by asking: “Does Aunt Charlotte read Kant and Hegel and Schopenhauer, to find out whether the Thing-in-itself is mind or matter? Does she read Maudsley and Ribot to find out what’s the matter with her mind?” (*MO*, 337). The implication is not so much that the doctrine of heredity is simply wrong, as that Mary’s superior intelligence allows her to transcend the destiny of biological determinism.⁵² Sinclair might want us to believe that this is exactly Mary’s way of “sublimation,” but we might instead think that this is the decisive moment she represses her desire for “somebody,” and crucially, her own body.

From this angle, her long-awaited encounter with Richard Nicholson, a Greek scholar, is nothing but a foredoomed affair. Hiring Mary first as his part-time secretary, Nicholson soon discovers her erudition and starts to promote her as a new poetic talent. Their intellectual affinity soon draws them close together, and Mary does become his mistress for a short while. But she rejects his proposal for marriage because she cannot leave her now senile and helpless mother alone. From this point on, Mary becomes increasingly dependent on the mystical experience which she has continued to

⁵² For more on Sinclair’s concerns with these theories, see, Suzanne Stark, “Overcoming Butlerian Obstacle: May Sinclair and the Problem of Biological Determinism,” *Women’s Studies* 21 (1992), 265-283.

have throughout her life. In her childhood, it has been simply described as “the queer white light” which gives her a sense of absolute beauty and euphoria (*MO*, 57). But in her middle-age, the intelligence of her evolved selfhood (expressed in the first-person pronoun “I,” which starts to be used from the latter part of her maturity) begins to rationalize it as a spiritual experience of ultimate reality. Mary also believes that by virtue of willing it she has made Nicholson experience “something,” as though by means of a telepathic power. Mary explains it to him: “If it makes you happy without the thing you care most for in the whole world....There must be something there. It must be real. Real in a way that nothing else is” (*MO*, 422). She even considers that her experience is “the flash point of freedom” (*MO*, 434). If this is a freedom gained by her critique of marriage as an unequal and defective institution, this might well be reasonable. Yet instead, Mary appears to argue that it is only after she renounced all her desire for intimate human ties that she finally learned how to appreciate her vision of “reality” in a true sense: “She had gone through life wanting things, wanting people, clinging to the thought of them, not able to keep off them and let them go” (*MO*, 435). As a way of sublimation, Mary’s ethics of ‘letting go’ bears a strange resemblance to her mother’s injunction of religious renunciation. Moreover, her mystical vision of “reality” is a bit too discursive and abstract to be fully convincing.

Critical history shows that the ending of the novel has repeatedly failed to persuade its readers. Jean Ratford argues that, while the ethics of self-sacrifice might have been typical for Sinclair’s generation, “To a modern

feminist, the ending of *Mary Olivier* may well appear as an elaborate rationalisation of—yet again—self-denial.”⁵³ But the truth is that Mary’s ethics was unconvincing even for her contemporary women, especially for those in the avant-garde circle with whom Sinclair wanted to associate by means of this novel. In an article published in the *Little Review*, Edna Kenton dismisses the novel merely “as a symptom and not a case.” Jean Heap is more ferocious, arguing that “[Mary’s] ‘great spiritual triumph’ in the end is the completion of the frustration.”⁵⁴ Even more devastating was a review by Katharine Mansfield. Although she recognises Sinclair’s experiment as “the new way of writing,” Mansfield ultimately judges that it is valueless since its aim is “to represent things and persons as separate, as distinct, as apart as possible.” In other words, Sinclair’s exclusive focus on her heroine’s consciousness has simply destroyed her relation with the wider social framework, one that Mansfield compares to the relation between “the Ark” and “the Flood.”⁵⁵

By making Mary Olivier chase for the “naked” reality instead of fully exposing “the barest minimum” of her actual life, Sinclair failed to write a fully convincing story of an individual which has a measure of significance for the wider public world. Her mystical experience turns out to be incommunicable, if not by means of telepathy, then certainly by means of modernist experiments. In this sense, its later critical reception is already

⁵³ Ratford, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Edna Kenton and jh [Jean Heap], “May Sinclair’s ‘Mary Olivier,’” *Little Review* 6 (December 1919), 29-32.

⁵⁵ Katharine Mansfield, “The New Infancy,” reprinted in Scott, op. cit. 311-2.

prefigured in the novel in a moment when Mary feels ashamed because she cannot communicate her mystical vision to her mother:

When she thought of [the vision] she was hot and cold by turns and she had no words for it. She remembered the first time it had come to her, and how she had found her mother in the drawing-room and had knelt down at her knees and kissed her hands with the idea of drawing her into her happiness. And she remembered her mother's face. It made her ashamed, even now, as if she had been silly. She thought: I shall never be able to talk about it to Mamma. (*MO*, 168)

Even if Mary is sadly resigned to the inability of communicating her vision to her mother, the novel is there exactly because the desire to communicate, or the desire for “drawing [readers] into her happiness,” still persists beneath her resigned consciousness. Her shame announces the existence of this lingering desire for community, a persistence which powerfully contradicts May Sinclair's case for renunciation at the very end of the novel.

5.

The failure of *Mary Olivier* to convince its readers is highly regrettable, especially because May Sinclair desired the novel to lay claim to honour for

the intellectual achievements of single women such as herself. It is not until *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (1922) that Sinclair managed to create a fully satisfactory modernist story of a spinster, a story which is recognised not merely as a portrayal of a marginalized individual, but as a devastating social critique of Victorian family values.⁵⁶ Rather paradoxically, Sinclair achieved this desired effect by withholding any claim for public recognition from her heroine and instead ruthlessly exposing her impoverished mental life. This is nicely rendered with a tight economy of style which enables Sinclair to condense more than seventy-years of a life into a series of brief yet illuminating episodes.

Just like Sinclair's previous novel about a single woman, *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* focuses on its central character's consciousness from her infancy until her final years. Like Mary Olivier, Harriet lives in a world of intimacy that becomes ever more constricted as she grows older. Yet apart from this, the stories of their lives stand in sharp contrast. First, Sinclair situates the life of Harriet more properly within the Victorian period by setting the date of her birth in the 1840s, some twenty years earlier than Mary Olivier and Sinclair herself.⁵⁷ Moreover, Harriet is deprived of the intellectual strength which was so indispensable to Mary. In a sense,

⁵⁶ For examples of this recognition, see, Hrisey Dimitrakis Zegger, op. cit. 119, 123. Jean Ratford in her introduction to May Sinclair, *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean* (London: Virago, 1980), unpaginated. Hereafter abbreviated to *HF*.

⁵⁷ Both of Sinclair's biographers suspect that this chronological displacement might be motivated by her personal anxiety about being associated with the life of Harriet. See, Theophilus E. M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973), 274. Suzanne Raitt, op. cit. 243.

Harriet's parents are more gentle and enlightened than the Oliviers, since they never directly punish or disapprove of their only child and instead attempt to instil an ethics of self-control in Harriet by encouraging her to renounce "ugly" appetites from her early age. Yet their ideal of high morality, summarized in a set-phrase, "behaving beautifully" (*HF*, 23-4), ironically turns out to be an ethics of self-denial and self-sacrifice which does not allow Harriet to develop herself independently from her family. Harriet's chance of self-determination comes only once in her youth, when Robin, fiancé of her best friend Priscilla, declares his love to Harriet and proposes marriage. But Harriet rejects his proposal and renounces her love for him, apparently on account of Priscilla, but in fact because she blindly follows the ideal of "beautiful behaviour" (*HF*, 67). From this point on, Harriet's affection is firmly reattached to her parents and she never ceases to idolize them, even after the family suffers a disgraceful bankruptcy because of her father's financial speculations. Even after their death, Harriet does not learn how to define her own identity except with reference to her parents. At the end of her solitary old age, Harriet finds her only and perverse pleasure when she contracts the same disease as her mother, believing that she "was raised to her mother's eminence in pain. With every stab she would live again in her mother" (*HF*, 178). Throughout the novel, the narrative exacts a bitter irony from widening gaps between the narcissism of Harriet's mental habit and the actual miseries of her meagre life by skillful use of free indirect discourse.

Although Harriet never exhibits any manifest symptom of hysteria, it is doubtless that the story of her life is heavily informed by Sinclair's

psychoanalytic theory and contrasts sharply with that of Mary Olivier.

Sinclair may want us to understand that Harriet suffers from the hidden desire repressed in her unconscious, whereas Mary avoids the pitfalls of repression by successfully sublimating her desire into intellectual and spiritual power.

Yet once we start to compare Harriet's morality of "beautiful behaviour" with the philosophy of "letting go" that Mary embraces at the end of her life, the contrast might begin to collapse insofar as both are based on the self-denying renunciation of their desire. The sole difference is that Mary reaches this ethics only after considerable struggle, whereas Harriet is easily ensnared by her parents' ideal of moral beauty from very early in her life. This allows us to read the fate of Harriet as a critical rejoinder to the unsatisfactory conclusion of *Mary Olivier*, namely, the glorification of self-sacrifice which finally traps Mary into isolation.

Two brief episodes in Harriet's childhood reveal that her parents' moral education is inseparably connected to a Victorian morality which neglects to pay due attention to bodily desires. The first happens at a school treat to which Harriet is invited, to be served with a lot of tempting confectionaries. There are unfortunately not enough seats for everyone, so it is decided that girls will sit down first while boys will wait for their turn, standing behind. But when Harriet is about to eat, the party-mistress passes her somebody else's crumby plate, and her mother, finding Harriet with a plate already used, issues a well-meaning persuasion actually based on her misunderstanding:

"If you've finished, Hatty, you'd better get up and let that little

boy have something.”

They were all turning round and looking at her: And there was the crumby plate before her. They were thinking: “That greedy little girl has gone on and on eating.” She got up suddenly, not speaking, and left the table, the Madeira cake and the raspberries and cream. She could feel her skin hot and wet with shame.

And now she was sitting up in the drawing-room at home. Her mother had brought her a piece of seed-cake and a cup of milk with the cream on it. Mamma’s soft eyes kissed her as they watched her eating her cake with short crumby bites, like a little cat. Mamma’s eyes made her feel so good, so good. (*HF*, 13-4)

At first, Harriet suffers an intense feeling of shame as she renounces her appetite for the cakes and creams. Yet even after her mother notices the mistake she has made, she approves and encourages Harriet’s act of renunciation by saying: “Well, I’m glad my little girl didn’t snatch and push. It’s better to go without than to take from other people. That’s ugly” (*HF*, 14-5). This comment resonates with the second episode, when the child Harriet deliberately disobeys her parents by going to pick flowers of red campion in “Black’s Lane” where she is forbidden to go (*HF*, 16). In fact, her parents have prohibited her to go to the lane because a man who lives there preys on small children, but they never inform her of the fact of danger even after Harriet comes back safely with the flowers. Rather, as her father says to her, they want Harriet to “forget” what they consider to be the “ugly

things" (*HF*, 23). The red campion symbolizes the first, obscure approach of sexuality to Harriet insofar as it is associated with the sexual threat, which she is encouraged to "forget" or suppress without ever understanding. In short, the ideal moral beauty of Harriet's family is shown to be rather shallow, a mere surface cover to the secret of bodily desires which are repressed into the "ugly" unconscious.

Thus nurtured to embody her parents' idea of "beautiful behaviour," Harriet's grown-up morality is characterized by her essentially inflexible "determination to be good" (*HF*, 26). When she rejects Robin's proposal for marriage because it is (in her words) "too dishonourable" to break his engagement with Priscilla (*HF*, 60), at first glance it is unclear whether her rejection is a proper way to resolve the moral dilemma of a conflict between her friendship with Priscilla and her love for Robin. For several months thereafter, Harriet is depressed, but later she comes to find a strange satisfaction in the painful renunciation of her love for Robin: "When she thought of Robin and how she had given him up she felt a thrill of pleasure in her beautiful behaviour, and a thrill of pride in remembering that he had loved her more than Priscilla. Her mind refused to think of Robin married" (*HF*, 67). The surface altruism of her self-denial is thus revealed to be compensated for by this self-reflexive turn of her mind, a narcissistic "thrill of pleasure" she feels in her own "beautiful behaviour." Harriet is merely following her mother's earlier injunction, "It's better to go without than to take from other people." In other words, Harriet gives up Robin just in the same way she has given up the Madeira cake and raspberries, only to be

approved by her parents. Her concern with the honour and moral beauty turns out to be another form of complacency, a lack of willingness to own up to the shame and ugliness of her real passions. Sinclair is in a sense returning to her critique of the gendered conventions of exchange, the code of honour which assigns the essential passivity to the ideal of femininity. Trapped in this feminine ideal of passive renunciation, Harriet cannot find a way out from her family whose tenderness in fact debilitates her independent selfhood and prevents her from participating in the outer world of public exchange.

At first glance, the “motionless communion” of her family (*HF*, 40), to which Harriet settles back after her single love affair, is so beautifully drawn that it is only through a gradual series of ironic turns that its essentially delusive character is exposed. She finds “their happiness, their security” so satisfying that she starts to hate even a tiny change in her mother’s hairstyle (*HF*, 40-1). When Harriet participates in a dance-party held by their neighbour, she does not like it because she “was afraid of being lifted off her feet and swung on and on, away from her safe, happy life” (*HF*, 47). Her sense of security is first contradicted by her father’s taste for intellectual risk-taking. He likes reading “dangerous books” such as those of Darwin, Huxley and Herbert Spencer, saying, “The fascination of truth might be just that—the risk that after all it mayn’t be true” (*HF*, 41). But his intellectual taste is revealed to be dangerously connected to his liking for stock-broking—what he calls the “higher mathematics of the game” (*HF*, 38), eventually involving his friends in a shameful financial disaster. Yet the

scandal is concealed from Harriet to preserve paternal authority. Therefore, even after he lapses into a mortal illness and comes under Harriet's care, "when she had him under her hands to strip and wash him, she felt that she was doing something outrageous and impious; she set about it with a flaming face and fumbling hands" (*HF*, 88). After his death, Harriet admires the "pure, high serenity" with which her mother has accepted her widowhood and poverty (*HF*, 93). Yet ironically, it turns out that her mother's serenity is supported by her knowledge of a growing lethal cancer which she has concealed from Harriet in order to dispense with the expense of surgical operation. Her mother's death further impoverishes her mental life. "Through her absorption in her mother, some large, essential part of herself had gone" (*HF*, 108). A sense of emotional insecurity soon overwhelms Harriet, and makes her cling to her dead parents even more strongly, "like a child, for their shelter and support" (*HF*, 116).

At her worst moment, Harriet clings to the idea of her moral goodness exemplified in "the beauty of the act which had given Robin to Priscilla" (*HF*, 116). Yet even this is gradually encroached on by the sight of their unhappy married life. When Harriet visits their house to console Priscilla, who is suffering from a mysterious paralysis, she at first appears to sympathize with "Poor little Prissie." But the true nature of Harriet's emotion is revealed to be a pity which belies her superior attitude, a glorification of her passive renunciation as a spiritual act of self-sacrifice: "She thought of her deep, spiritual love for Robin; of Robin's deep spiritual love for her; of his strength in shouldering his burden. It was through her renunciation that he had grown

so strong, so pure, so good” (*HF*, 76-7). This is nothing more than parsimony of affective energy, an economy whereby the renunciation of the loved object is recycled to inflate her narcissistic self-love. The destructive effect of such an economy is seen in the change it causes to the personality of Robin. Before he is married to Priscilla, his youthful unreservedness is described as an active economy of generous exchange: “He would never give it or take it. You could see him tearing at things in his impatience, to know them, to make them give themselves up to him at once. He came rushing to give himself up, all in a minute, to make himself known” (*HF*, 55). Yet the long years of his loveless devotion to Priscilla gradually transform Robin into a “weak, peevish bully,” selfishly wrapt up in himself. Beatrice, his second wife after the death of Priscilla, excuses him to Harriet: “If he is [selfish], it’s because he’s used up all his unselfishness. He was living on his moral capital” (*HF*, 131-2). Harriet’s glorification of self-denial has driven Robin into exhaustion of his original generosity. His “expression of abject self-pity, of self-absorption,” is a mirror image of the arrogant reserve of Harriet, who deliberately narrows her social circle in order to secure the illusion of her superiority. Seeing the misery of Robin, however, Harriet starts to feel it difficult to continue deluding herself: “She had no clear illumination, only a mournful acquiescence in her own futility, an almost physical sense of shrinkage, the crumbling away, bit by bit, of her beautiful and honourable self, dying with the object of its three profound affections: her father, her mother, Robin” (*HF*, 149). After the ruin of honourable exchange, it is only a sense of shame which remains.

Suzanne Raitt points out that it is Harriet's identificatory desire for her mother that has crucially stunted the growth of her individual selfhood.⁵⁸ In her old age, Harriet starts to reinstate the household decorations of the time when her mother was still alive. When she restores an egg-shaped workbox (a gift to her mother on the occasion of her marriage) to its original place on the living-room table: "She sat gazing at it a long time in happy, child-like satisfaction. The blue egg gave reality to her return" (*HF*, 176). Harriet's child-like pleasure with the imitation egg (a symbol of sterility) ironically prefigures her "strange, solemn excitement and exaltation" which she feels when she comes to know about her cancer, the same disease as her mother's (*HF*, 178). It is as though, as in Freud's melancholic, her object-love had regressed to the stage of primary narcissism, whereby the ego desires to "incorporate" the loved object and to make up for its loss by means of a complete, bodily identification.⁵⁹ In fact, cancer is not directly named in this novel, only mentioned as "that horrible thing that even the doctors were afraid to name." When her mother contracts it and her friends come to console, "Harriet wouldn't tell them what it was; she pretended that she didn't know, that the doctors weren't sure; she covered it up from them as if it had been a secret shame" (*HF*, 100). According to Susan Sontag, this association has a long tradition. She claims that it is especially after the Romantics started to value the open expression of intense passion that disease comes to be seen as

⁵⁸ Suzanne Raitt, *op. cit.* 249-50.

⁵⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (London: Hogarth Press, 1957), 237-58, 268-9.

the bodily symptom of repressed emotions. As cancer is “a disease of growth... , of abnormal, ultimately lethal growth,” it is often imagined to be a result of physical and sexual repression. In this imagery, cancer is “a demonic pregnancy” which is shameful, sterile, and deadly.⁶⁰ Although this image doubtlessly seems inappropriate to suffering patients, Sinclair’s use of cancer is devastatingly effective as a symbolic return of the repressed body.

In the end, Sinclair does not even allow Harriet to entertain a glorifying illusion out of her disease, since Harriet has to undergo an operation which her mother avoided: “This different thing was what she dreaded, the thing her mother hadn’t had, and the going away into the hospital, to live exposed in the free ward among other people” (*HF*, 179). Yet ironically, this exposure gives her the first and last chance to open herself to “other people.” Apart from the fear of surgery itself, Harriet is worried about the effect of anaesthetic, because she is told that patients in stupor tend to speak out “indecent things” hidden beneath their everyday minds. Following the advice of the nurses, Harriet keeps her mouth tight shut the entire day so that she does not say anything. In the last minutes before the operation, she believes she “had behaved beautifully” (*HF*, 180-2). Yet all her effort turns out to be in vain, as she starts muttering unconsciously:

‘There’s a dead baby in the bed. Red hair. They ought to have taken it away,’ she said. ‘Maggie had a baby once. She took it up

⁶⁰ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and Its Metaphors* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 12-14. Ellipsis mine.

the lane to the place where the man is; and they put it behind the palings. Dirty blue palings.

...Pussycat. Pussycat, what did you there? Pussy. Pussie.

Prissiecat. Poor Prissie. She never goes to bed. She can't get up out of the chair.'

A figure in white, with a stiff white cap stood by the bed. She named it, fixed it in her mind. Nurse. Nurse. Nurse—that was what it was. She spoke to it. 'It's sad—sad to go through so much pain and then to have a dead baby.'

The white curtain walls of the cubicle contracted, closed in on her. She was lying at the bottom of her white-curtained nursery cot. She felt weak and diminished, small, like a very little child. (*HF*, 183-4)

By means of the Freudian dream logic, her lifelong obsessions and repressed memories are all compressed into this short passage. In a sense, we are attending to a moment of her confession, or “the disclosure of a shameful secret,” which Harriet has never confided to others throughout her long life. Only in the state of unconsciousness does she manage to escape the constraint of her “beautiful behaviour” which has trapped her into the fate of isolation. The effect is therefore both harrowing and strangely consoling.

While appreciating “the lucid despair” of this ending, T. S. Eliot criticised the novel for its reliance on psychoanalysis: “because the material is so clearly defined (the soul of man under psychoanalysis) there is no

possibility of tapping the atmosphere of unknown terror and mystery in which our life is passed and which psychoanalysis has not yet analysed.”⁶¹ Yet from our perspective, it is exactly because Sinclair at this point has renounced any attempt to address “unknown terror and mystery” (which she has done in her mystical quest) that there arises a chance of communication, a moment of community which discharges single women from the shame of isolation. It is this rare moment that has enabled May Sinclair to complete and thus annul her modernism of spinsterhood.

⁶¹ T. S. Eliot, “London Letter,” *Dial* (August 1922), 329-31, 330. It is possible to argue Eliot’s criticism is motivated by his own preference for mysticism which he has shared with Sinclair. Cf. Rebecca Kinnamon Neff, “‘New Mysticism’ in the writings of May Sinclair and T. S. Eliot,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 26 (1980), 82-108.

CHAPTER 3

**Naked Truth: Wyndham Lewis and the Shame of Being an
Enemy in *The Apes of God* and *Snooty Baronet***

1.

Although Wyndham Lewis is widely recognised as one of the key-players in the development of British literary modernism, his works have been often omitted from the canon subsequently shaped by academic criticism. This is partly because the essentially polemical nature of his writings has made them resistant to the formalist analysis of the new criticism, while Lewis's misdirected sympathy towards right-wing and even fascist politics during the inter-war years has also added certain notoriety to the original unpopularity of his works. The recent revival of interest in Lewis, a welcome reaction to earlier critical neglect, has evaluated his works most often in terms of their avant-garde intransigence, a quality considered to be exceptional in Anglo-American modernism. For instance, Richard Humphries has recently quoted Geoffrey Grigson's phrase for Lewis, "a man who was not for sale," to emphasize his uncompromising attitude to the commercial art market.¹

However inadvertently, such criticism replicates the self-image that Lewis fashioned for himself by means of his turbulent artistic practices. Yet this critical emphasis might be also a bit misleading insofar as it fosters an image of consistency, an image not actually suitable for the reality of a career that was frequently characterized by major and minor redirections. In exploring the complex negotiations which in fact existed between his artistic practice and his sense of the contemporary public, therefore, I propose to read Lewis

¹ Richard Humphries, *Wyndham Lewis* (London: Tate, 2004), 75. Also see, Peter Nicholls, *Modernism: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), 273.

and his works with a particular emphasis on a series of changes and contradictions which inevitably compromised his strategic self-fashioning as an intransigent, avant-garde “outlaw.”

It is in the second major phase of Lewis’s career in the inter-war years that these self-contradictions were most conspicuous. As Tyrus Miller has noticed, this period started for Lewis with an urgent need to redirect himself after the interruption of the Great War had fatally dissipated the momentum of his pre-war Vorticism. His leading position among avant-garde artists had vanished, while the post-war British public grew fascinated by the successive publications of canonical modernist texts, such as T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, both in 1922.² It was natural that Lewis at this point considered it necessary to take a break from his frivolous celebrity activities, and to prepare a fundamental reconstruction of his artistic career. In his own words, he “went underground.”³ When he re-emerged from the underground around 1926, the year of the General Strike, he invented the new persona of the “Enemy,” a fiercely adversarial polemicist, substantiated with a one-man journal the *Enemy* (three volumes from 1927 to 1929), and a number of important works of cultural and political criticism, such as *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), *Time and Western Man* (1927), *Paleface* (1929) and *The Doom of Youth* (1932). It was only from this period that Lewis started to ground his

² See, Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 67-9. Also see, Geoff Gilbert, “Words, Flies, Jews, Joyce, *Joint*: Wyndham Lewis and the Unpublishing of Obscenity,” *Critical Quarterly*, 46:4 (Winter 2004), 1-21, 2.

³ Wyndham Lewis, *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1936; London: John Calder, 1982), 222.

adversarial stance in a complete socio-political diagnosis: from the commercialization of the book-trade, through the emergence of the new communication media, to the lethal decadence of liberal democracy.

Therefore, I shall first examine how Lewis's diagnoses of his contemporary situations led him to assume the persona of the "Enemy," an aloof elitist who espoused a pessimistic vision of a puppet-like audience.

What is above all conspicuous in Wyndham Lewis's "Enemy" project is his fierce hatred of the commercialized world and open contempt for the puppet-like majority, passions that are usually considered to be evident not only in his critical works, but also in his creative activities. Critics often suggest that it was not until his much later works, such as *The Revenge for Love* (1937) and *The Vulgar Streak* (1941), that Lewis started to show an alternative aspect of his personality, a concern with more humanly emotions such as compassion and love.⁴ However, it is important to notice that Lewis tried to formulate his conception of love and beauty already at the beginning of his "Enemy" campaign in *The Art of Being Ruled*, although it was often in conflict with his more dominant mood of generalized hatred and humiliations. I shall claim that it was exactly this fundamental conflict that propelled a gradual shift in Lewis's attitude towards the contemporary literary market and

⁴ For instance, see, John Holloway, "Wyndham Lewis: The Massacre and the Innocents," *The Charted Mirror* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), 118-36. Paul Edwards, *Wyndham Lewis: Painter and Writer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 443. An important exception, which tries to unearth Lewis's concern with love in earlier work, is Stephen E. Lewis, "Love and Politics in Wyndham Lewis's *Snooty Baronet*," *Modern Language Quarterly* 61:1 (December 2000), 617-49.

its reading public. In order to trace this change, I shall particularly focus on Lewis's rhetoric of truth and nakedness, a topic that entails a number of important issues such as his aesthetic of abstraction, his pessimism about human nature, and his understanding of the cultural and economic crises of modernity itself. I shall ultimately argue that Lewis's creativity in this period stemmed not just from his fierce antipathy, but also from his profound shame in the face of the naked truth, an emotion which bespeaks a dire conflict between his extreme hatred and his compromised love.

From these perspectives, I shall then offer my interpretations of two of his important novels, *The Apes of God* (1930), and *Snooty Baronet* (1932). *The Apes of God* is doubtlessly the most programmatic production of his entire career, self-publicised through the *Enemy* journal and accompanied by a blatant apologia for its method, *Satire and Fiction* (1930). Although it is fundamentally a devastating satire on what Lewis regarded as pretentious 'high-brow' coteries of Chelsea, Mayfair, and Bloomsbury, it is also important to notice that his attack is totally lacking in any positive pole of values that can offer an alternative to his satirical targets. Rather, Lewis reveals that figures ostensibly in opposition to the dominant culture, such as Pierpoint, Zagreus, and Blackshirt, can be as fully compromised as any of the satirized Apes trapped in the world of inauthentic artistic creations. The only saving grace to be found in this world is located in Dan Boleyn's moments of blushing, which reveal his painful sense of shame in his encounters with the naked truth. These moments of shame directly contradict Lewis's satirical drive to expose the nature of humanity in its bare wretchedness. To a certain

extent, *Snooty Baronet* complements *The Apes of God*, for it offers a picture of the decadent cheap-fiction industry not directly treated in his previous novel. At the same time, *Snooty Baronet* is also its antithesis, insofar as the novel pursues the vision of puppet-like human nature to its logical extremes. Yet by making his protagonist assume such a shameless will to expose humanity in its all nakedness, Lewis also reveals a deeper madness and danger inherent in such a vision. *Snooty Baronet*, in short, is an ironic exposure which hints at the cul-de-sac that beset Lewis's own adversarial practice in the "Enemy" campaign. It is by revealing the limit of shamelessness that Lewis marked a gradual turn away from his obsession with the naked truth, towards his later, more recognisably human vision.

2.

From the late-nineteenth century, as we have already seen, the steady growth of the mass reading public and the commercialization of literary marketplace attracted numerous comments and observations, whether partisan or disinterested. Yet it was only after the 1910s, according to Joseph McAleer, that "the mass reading public was commercially managed and exploited in a recognizably modern way." The phase of growth had already passed; the maturity was the thing which the writers and publishers had to encounter during the period 1914-1950. The First World War and its paper rationing gave rise to a major restructuring of the publishing industry which resulted in

concentration of ownership, and the steady rise of production costs forced it to follow the movement towards cheaper-priced books in order to accommodate the tastes of the new reading public, which was recruited mostly from the lower-middle and working classes. Market-targeting and ‘commodity-style’ techniques (attractive packaging and showy advertising) were thus adopted to ensure revenues which matched the high production costs. The growth of public and private lending libraries (such as the ‘tuppenny’ libraries) also helped readers to access cheap, light fiction. Many publishers were unwilling to take risks with untested, first-time writers, and thus they became increasingly dependent on popular fiction authors, i.e. established bestsellers. One consequence was a redrawing of boundaries. While “fiction in Victorian and Edwardian Britain was distinctive for its sometimes rigid division along ‘popular’ and ‘mass lines,” McAleer suggests, the new popular light fiction blurred such a distinction. “Thus, the commercialization of fiction publishing in the twentieth century, and the evolution of the market into ‘low-brow’ and ‘high-brow’ camps—made possible by developments before 1914—makes it harder to draw the line between popular and mass fiction.”⁵

Such a process of shifting boundaries is best seen as a part of larger cultural change in this period; introduction of new communication media such as cinema and wireless, advancement of mass leisure activities, and even some adversities such as war and depression—all contributing to the emergence of

⁵ Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 7, 41.

“a popular mass ‘culture of the middle.’”⁶ Lawrence Rainey points out that the first appearance of the word “*middlebrow*” was in 1906, “a term that acknowledges not just increasing stratification but also increasing interchanges among different cultural sectors.”⁷ It was, as Peter D. McDonald suggests, “the moment when instability became the most conspicuous feature of all cultural hierarchies, and new cultural spaces began to open up. What was, for some, an apocalyptic crisis of value was, for others, a new opportunity for cultural mobility and innovation.”⁸

Apocalyptic narrative and yearning for renovation often go hand in hand. It was during the late 1920s that Q. D. Leavis engaged herself in a doctoral research and construction of the narrative of reading public’s lapse from utopia, which was later to be published, coupled with a proposal for cultural renovation by means of the journal *Scrutiny*. In *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932), what appals her is a dominance of the large reading public by some commercial “middlemen,” the Press, the Book Society, and the ‘tuppenny’ libraries. The public is indeed so large that “it needs as vast an organisation as the modern Press to serve as middleman between author and reader, with its book-reviews, -advertisements, and literary articles.” Leavis

⁶ Siân Nicholas, “Being British: Creed and Culture,” in *Short Oxford History of the British Isles: The British Isles 1901-1951*, ed. Keith Robbins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 103-135, 104.

⁷ Lawrence Rainey, *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), 3.

⁸ Peter D. McDonald, “Modernist Publishing: ‘Nomads and Mapmakers,’” *A Concise Companion to Modernism*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 221-242, 226.

is even more resentful of such commercial, ‘middlebrow’ standards because they cannot help “arrogating righteousness and betraying hostility to any more serious standards.”⁹ Mutual hostility is even more intense exactly because of the unstable yet complex stratifications.

Wyndham Lewis’s ‘Enemy’ project, together with the Leavisite *Scrutiny*, is the most conspicuous expression of, and glaring attack on, this cultural quicksand during the period between the two World Wars.¹⁰ In some editorials of the *Enemy*, Lewis clarifies his target. In his opinion, the publishing industry is organized following “a cast-iron standard of Best-seller vulgarity and dullness” to meet “the exact commercial requirements of the largest of Library Publics.”¹¹ Lewis declares that “‘fiction’ is Big Business, straight away” (*E3*, 96); thus, that such a high-literature (as his own) be classified as ‘fiction’—for the book-trade and for review purposes—is a deplorable category mistake. “It is no superstition to suppose that you require an idiot to review ‘fiction’: but it is a mistake to suppose that a square

⁹ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; rpt. London: Pimlico, 2000), 19, 24. Leavis here quotes as her example from an article in *the Book Guild Bulletin* (July 1930) which attacks the ‘highbrows’ as too difficult and too ‘precious’ to be readable.

¹⁰ On the parallel between the two, see David Ayers, *English Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), chapter 3, 99-123. Also see, D. H. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 101-137, 293-333 for the comprehensive spectrum of strategies taken by dissent literary figures during the period.

¹¹ Wyndham Lewis, ed. *The Enemy 3* (London: Arthur Press, 1929), 94. Hereafter abbreviated to *E3*.

peg does not sometimes by accident find its way into a round hole” (*E3*, 95).¹²

One distinctive note of his ‘Enemy’ stance is found in his assumption that even his modernist colleagues are compromised by the ascendancy of the similar commercial standard within the ‘highbrow’ society. According to Lewis, “we of the literary or art world, and our patrons, are in the nature of a large family.” Yet it is within such familial associations that most artists compete and do harm to each other to gain commercial success:

[An artist] knows that the decisions of the family-circle will alone secure him an income; that it is there, above all, that his rival can be circumvented and that without any impertinent questions (such as the mere merit of the respective work) coming into it. He knows that the decision will rest solely on the matter of who flatters Mamma most, or who it is gives himself the fewest airs in the opinion of the family, who is most obedient, most vulgarly accommodating, who laughs loudest at the family jokes.¹³

¹² Also in 1932, Lewis observes that “the big-business methods [were] introduced into the publishing world during the last two years. What will happen in the book business may be judged from the example of the films. The machinery of distribution—of puff, panegyric, ‘release,’ removal—will be more and more closely organized; and, in view of the cost of paper and printing involved (the same argument as is, of course, advanced for the poor-quality film), only that book will be published which is unobjectionable to everybody.” Wyndham Lewis, *Creatures of Habit and Creatures of Change*. ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 187. Hereafter abbreviated to *CHCC*.

¹³ Wyndham Lewis, ed. *The Enemy I* (London: Arthur Press, 1927), x ii. Hereafter abbreviated to *E1*.

Lewis also claims that, “Even artists of some calibre drop many valuable hours in this traffic. But many ‘artists’ do nothing at all to-day, quite literally; they find it more lucrative. Business first!” Lewis therefore stages his ‘Enemy’ stance as a moving outside, a gesture to dispense with “that distasteful burden of the dinner and tea-party” (*EI*, x iii) which, in some cases, virtually threatens to replace artistic creation itself.¹⁴

When Lewis proclaims, at the very outset of the *Enemy* journal, “there is no ‘movement’ gathered here (thank heaven!), merely a person; a solitary outlaw and not a gang” (*EI*, ix), it might be with some guilty-consciousness of a veteran publicist. After all, Lewis was once engaged in the publicity performance of the avant-garde movement before the Great War, learning much from the Italian Futurism’s innovative practice of exploiting the mix between the high and the low.¹⁵ In the post-war years, Lewis starts by

¹⁴ Lewis also suggests that the standardization in the world of ideas strictly corresponds the standardization of everyday goods in the market and industry: “Just as in our domestic life we are able to appreciate the great deterioration that comes over all the things that are sold us for consumption the moment any department of supply comes under the control of a Trust, so we should be able, by this time, if we are at all observant, to recognise the process of standardization that has occurred in the world of ideas. In the literary field, not that of purely popular fiction, but of more high-brow articles, this standardization is to-day almost universal.” Wyndham Lewis, ed. *The Enemy 2* (London: Arthur Press, 1928), x x x iv. On more about Wyndham Lewis’s ‘Enemy’ stance, see SueEllen Campbell, *The Enemy Opposite: The Outlaw Criticism of Wyndham Lewis* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1988).

¹⁵ On the relation between Italian Futurism and Lewis’s Vorticism, see, Lawrence Rainey, op. cit. 10-41. Also see, Andrzej Gasiorek, *Wyndham Lewis and Modernism* (Devon: Northcote House, 2004), 23.

defining the art movement as a mere swing of the pendulum of fashion, which might nevertheless help artists to create social circumstances favourable to the full development of their gifts. “So the ‘movement’ in art, like the attitude of the community to art, is not a thing to be superior about, though it is a thing you may be superior to.”¹⁶ Several years later in *Time and Western Man* (1927), however, Lewis outrightly denounces art movements essentially as attempts “to outwit and to capture a momentary attention, or to startle into credulity,” their effect being only to “advertise the inferior artist at the expense of the better.”¹⁷ Yet if he, as is fitting for an “outlaw,” feels able to bid farewell to both the publicity art movement and the ‘highbrow’ circles (“these various social-cum-trade organisations” [*EL*, x iii]), it is only after Lewis comes to find and enjoy a reasonably reliable patronage in the figures of Sir Nicholas and Lady Waterhouse, who also financially support the publication of the *Enemy* journal itself.¹⁸ For Lewis, just as for other modernists, an opposition to the modern commercial marketplace entails a tactical retreat into the pre-modern system of patronage.

The difficult relation between artistic creation and commercial concerns had troubled Lewis from the beginning of his career. When Lewis saw the

¹⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *The Caliph's Design: Architects! Where is Your Vortex?* ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1986), 93. Hereafter abbreviated to *CD*.

¹⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Time and Western Man*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1993), 23-5. Hereafter abbreviated to *TWM*.

¹⁸ About Lewis's biographical relation with the Waterhouses, see, Paul O'Keeffe, *Some Sort of Genius: A Life of Wyndham Lewis* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000), 266-7.

complete setback of his Vorticist project by the outbreak of the Great War, it made him recognise the heteronomous principles at work even in his art movement which was vigorously critical of British society. As he indicates in a post-war essay “The Children of the New Epoch” (1921), the artist might be merely a childlike creature, humiliatingly dependent on formerly indulgent but now disappearing social circumstances.¹⁹ In his polemics in the 1920s and 1930s, however, Lewis asserts his individual creativity by virtually reversing the direction of dependence. “It must be remembered,” he admonishes in *The Lion and the Fox* (1927), that “human beings are congeries of parasites subsisting on The Individual, subsisting on a very insufficient supply of Individuals, who are consequently overstaffed or overstocked to a dangerous degree.”²⁰ In “Diabolical Principles” (1929), Lewis argues that, whereas some small minority are naturally endowed with “invaluable and mysterious gifts,” the majority are “for the most part receptive only,” and “ask nothing better than to receive and receive and receive.”²¹ The problem is that society fails to recognise what it receives from the individuals as a gift also requires repayment. Thus, in *The Art of Being Ruled* (1926), Lewis declares: “The most spoilt of societies in the past have not repudiated their intellectual obligation—while making full use of it, as we do. Where we

¹⁹ Wyndham Lewis, *Wyndham Lewis on Art: Collected Writings 1913-1956*, eds. Walter Michel and C. J. Fox (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), 195-6. Hereafter abbreviated to *WLA*.

²⁰ Wyndham Lewis, *The Lion and the Fox: The Role of Hero in the Plays of Shakespeare* (London: Methuen, 1966), 136-7. Hereafter abbreviated to *LF*.

²¹ Wyndham Lewis, *The Diabolical Principles and the Dithyrambic Spectator* (New York: Haskell House, 1971), 128. Hereafter abbreviated to *DPDS*.

differ so much is in our repudiation of the debt.” In its supposedly organized hatred of the intellect, society manages to disregard its obligation because it refuses to grant intellectuals a degree of honour befitting the equal exchange of gifts (according to the logic expounded by Pierre Bourdieu). Therefore Lewis asserts: “Genius has become for us Caliban,” namely, a brutalized orphan cast away from respectable society into bitter humiliation.²²

To hammer home this vision of the intellectuals’ castaway-status, Lewis refashions himself as a modern Cynic philosopher. Describing himself in the front cover of the *Enemy 3*, Lewis writes: “HE IS THE DIOGENES OF THE DAY: HE SITS LAUGHING IN THE MOUTH OF HIS TUB AND POURS FORTH HIS INVECTIVE UPON ALL PASSERS-BY, IRRESPECTIVE OF RACE, CREED, RANK OR PROFESSION, AND SEX.”²³ In his confrontation with society at large, there is all the rage and violence of assumed humiliations (whether it is actually derived from one-sided credit or one-sided debt). One remedy he postulates is a rigid distinction between the gifted few and the docile many:

Goethe had a jargon of his own for referring to these two species whose existence he perfectly recognized. He divided people into

²² Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*, ed. Reed Way Dasenbrock (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1989), 222. Hereafter abbreviated to *ABR*.

²³ The same description of himself is in “The Diabolical Principles,” which is originally published in the *Enemy 3*. See, *DPDS*, 20. Also in *Time and Western Man*, Lewis approvingly quotes from Edward Caird’s description of the Cynic philosophers from his *Evolution of Theology* (1904), although not without some reservations. *TWM*, 130-1.

Puppets and Natures. He said the majority of people were machines, playing a part. When he wished to express admiration for a man, he would say about him, “He is a *nature*.” This division into *natural* men and *mechanical* men (which Goethe’s idiom amounts to) answers to the solution advocated in this essay. And today there is an absurd war between the “puppets” and the “natures,” the machines and the men. And owing to the development of machinery, the pressure on the “natures” increases. We are *all* slipping back into machinery, because we *all* have tried to be free. And what is absurd about this situation is that so few people even desire to be free in reality. (*ABR*, 125; emphasis in original)

Insisting on the puppet-like, mechanical nature of the majority, Lewis denies them any authentic desire for independent, responsible liberty. “Absence of responsibility, an automatic and stereotyped rhythm, is what men most desire for themselves.” What they need is a low kind of freedom that is compatible with “the joys of slavery and submission” (*ABR*, 130-2). Lewis’s view that humanity consists of docile, yet excitable animal-herds, he goes on to urge, should be accepted less scandalously (not as contempt or disgust) than other arguments which blame the aggressive nature of “Mankind” for the recent carnage in the Great War.²⁴

²⁴ See, *ABR*, 52-65, 79-88. Lewis defends his theory of essential inequality by comparing it with various pessimistic statements by the intellectuals after the Great War, such as Bertrand Russell, G. B. Shaw, and Charles R. Richet. The question of human aggressivity (as it was supposed to be illustrated in the Great War) haunts

To a certain extent, Lewis regards this human helplessness as a part of wholesale social transformations in progress: “The present is of course a particularly ‘transitional’ society: but the transit must take some time, as it must go all round the earth. Animal conditions, practically, must prevail while this progress is occurring. We begin already to regard ourselves as animals” (*ABR*, 25). Such a transformation is achieved, Lewis claims, by “the Circe of Capitalism” “for our shipwrecked world” (*ABR*, 370).²⁵ In his opinion, even the democratic policy of enfranchisement and education is only a pretence of progress that effectively fosters the magic of enslavement: “The contemporary European or American is a part of a broad-casting set, a necessary part of its machinery. Or he is gradually made into a newspaper-reader, it could be said, rather than a citizen” (*ABR*, 105). Herein lies the point where Lewis is most critical of the developing mass communication culture: the Press, the Cinema, and the Wireless. These are only a state apparatus of indirect rule by means of suggestion and falsification, while they claim to serve the heart’s desire of the public. Their ‘service’ is

some of Wyndham Lewis’s interwar writings, especially *The Art of Being Ruled*, as well as those by other major European intellectuals of the day, such as Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein.

²⁵ This Circean transformation is another of Lewis’s idea which has its origin in his experience of the Great War. In “Imaginary Letters” (published in the *Little Review*, March 1917), the protagonist William Bland Burn writes: “I feel that we are obviously in the position of Ulysses’ companions; and there is nothing I resent more than people settling down to become what is sensible for a swine. I will still stalk about with my stumpy legs, and hold my snout high, however absurd it may be. We must get through this enchantment without too many memories of abasement. We most need, in the inner fact, *changing back into men again!*” (21-22; emphasis in original)

merely a stratagem of flattering and ingratiating, which scarcely conceals the underlying contempt, ridicule, and mercenary deception. For Lewis, this hypocrisy is most fittingly encapsulated in a phrase “*What the Public Wants*,” often associated with the press innovator Alfred Harmsworth (Lord Northcliffe): “As a result of the dogma of *What the Public Wants*, and the technical experiences of the publicist, a very cynical and unflattering view of what the Public is is widely held today” (*ABR*, 74). And what is worse, for Lewis, such a cynical vision has a disastrous effect of realizing itself; the supply of cheap entertainments ends up degrading the mind of the public and even humanity itself.

For Lewis, the ideal intellectual stands in adamant opposition to this combination of laissez-faire capitalism and liberal democracy: “the intellectual is the only person in the world who is not a potential ‘capitalist,’ because his ‘capital’ is something that cannot be bartered” (*ABR*, 373). Similarly, when he defines the gift of intellect as work of the disinterested ‘not-self’ in “*Physics of the Not-Self*” (1925, 32), he calls it “inhuman” because all other forms of ‘human’ activities are strictly interested and egotistic. Even “altruism, or generosity, can be so rigidly related to [one’s] interests that never a drop is wasted: and that, in fact with usury, its store is seen constantly to augment.” “A gift that *expects no return* is,” therefore, “not a human gift.”²⁶ A paradox is that, in spite of this idealist

²⁶ Wyndham Lewis, “*Physics of the Not-Self*” in *Collected Poems and Plays*, ed. Alan Munton (Manchester: Carcanet, 1979), 193-204, 198, 199. Emphasis in original. Lewis is obviously writing in a different spirit from that in which he accuses society of the default of its obligation—its debt—to the intellectuals. In

intellectualism, Lewis has no alternative or more redeeming view of humanity which might replace the “very cynical and unflattering view” of “*What the Public Wants*.” But Lewis insists that the significant contribution of the intellectual is exactly his revelation of the pessimistic ‘truth’ of the human helplessness, even though the capitalists go on to steal and exploit the ‘truth’ as it is exposed by the intellectual. After all, as we have seen, it is Lewis himself who has espoused the puppet-like nature of the human average. In this way, the two, supposedly opposite camps appear to conform, only that (as Lewis excuses) “I set out to consider how *What the Puppets Want* might differ from *What the Public Wants*” (ABR, 129; emphasis in original). How different are they indeed?

If there really is a difference, this would exist between the artistic creation of Lewis himself and the standardized commodity of cheap fiction industry. Yet it appears that they are disquietingly similar in their shared underestimation of their readers’ intelligence. Still, Lewis claims that “the doctrine of *What the Public Wants* begins where philosophy leaves off. And in the case of this belief it is not so much the truth of what it states, as of the uses to which this discovery is put” (ABR, 86). What underlies this statement is Lewis’s unique argument that the validity of philosophical truth does not depend on its pragmatic utility; rather, he insists, philosophical truth and its vulgarized usage are diametrically opposed. As Lewis asserts in *The Lion and the Fox*: “Truth does not propagate itself, but is always prostituted” (LF, 80). For Lewis, the greatest difference between the intellectual and the

other words, he is frankly contradicting himself.

vulgarizer lies exactly in their contradictory attitudes towards the dark revelation: while the former suffers from the pessimistic truth of the human helplessness, the latter gladly moves to exploit the blind docility of the general public. “The latter would rub his hands with satisfaction, and approach the Public with an obsequious grin, and a *What can I do for you today, my little man?* [The intellectual], his face convulsed with angry discouragement, would rush out and apostrophise his *semblable*, his *frère*” (*ABR*, 87; emphasis in original). Yet if the truth is “always prostituted” by the vulgarizer and can never contribute to the betterment of human society, what is the true significance of such a revelation? And if all that Lewis can offer in his ‘Enemy’ project is only this performance of Baudelaire-like angry convulsion and bitter apostrophizing, then, what kind of audience is imaginable for his books?²⁷

3.

Building on an apparent contradiction, Wyndham Lewis casts himself as a gleeful pessimist with no fixed readership in *The Art of Being Ruled*.

²⁷ Lewis’s answer is, at least in *The Art of Being Ruled*, in his introduction: “A book of this description is not written for an audience already there, prepared to receive it, and whose minds it will fit like a glove. There must be a good deal of stretching of the receptacle, it is to be expected. It must of necessity make its own audience; for it aims at no audience already there with which I am acquainted. I do not invent (or if that was not an invention, then I am not happy enough to know) a class of *esprits libres*, or “good Europeans,” as Nietzsche did. I know none” (*ABR*, 13).

Although he accuses the commercial mass media of degrading the public and depriving him of his potential readers, at the same time Lewis seems to give it an *ex post facto* approval because it helps to actualize the Lewisian separation of human beings into the two distinct, mutually exclusive castes (‘Nature’ and ‘Puppets.’) “Those who like or can stomach what they are given in Western democracies today will change and separate themselves naturally from those who reject or vomit at that fare. A natural separation will then occur, and everybody will get what he wants” (*ABR*, 364). Such a statement might suggest a deep antipathy towards humanity at large. As D. H. LeMahieu has put it, we might conclude that “Wyndham Lewis placed hatred of the general public near the centre of his works.”²⁸ Tom Normand even asserts that an accusation, “only your hatred is creative” (as it is thrown to Bailiff in *The Childermass* [1928]), is also applicable to Lewis himself.²⁹ But if such claims only augment an already established notoriety of his works as a product of generalized misanthropy, it is important to recognise that, in Lewis’s art, there exists an impulse which runs counter to the passion of his intense hatred. After all, the year 1926—when *The Art of Being Ruled* was published—was a bit too early a date for Lewis to put forth a final diagnosis on the ongoing political and economic crisis of interwar Europe. As the European situation gets darker and the threat of the next war grows stronger,

²⁸ D. H. LeMahieu, *op. cit.* 108.

²⁹ See, Tom Normand, *Wyndham Lewis the Artist: Holding the Mirror up to Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 127. The sentence in full quotation is: “The trouble is that only your hatred is creative it is your only way of being creative.” Wyndham Lewis, *The Childermass* (1928; London: Calder, 2000), 394.

Lewis is constantly compelled to revise his judgement about the conditions of the public. As Lewis later recalled it in *The Rude Assignment* (1950): “for some time I was very sore and that soreness increased, if anything, during the immediately ensuing years. The sentimental side of me suffered (I think now) more deeply than it should.”³⁰ I shall suggest that Lewis’s creativity—as well as his misguided politics—is better understood with reference, not only to the intensity of his hatred and humiliations, but also to its conflict with its opposite number, his “sentimental side,” something not so far afield from love.

It is certain that Lewis has written his subsequent books upon the keystone of fundamental observations constructed in *The Art of Being Ruled*.³¹ However, some small yet significant modifications are also already observable from *Time and Western Man*, a book published only a year later. In the former, the general public is deceived into submission because the majority of humankind is anyway averse to independent, responsible liberty in their good conscience. But in the latter, Lewis claims, somewhat sardonically: “I now believe, for instance, that people should be compelled to be freer and more ‘individualistic’ than they naturally desire to be, rather than that their native unfreedom and instinct towards slavery should be encouraged and organized”

³⁰ Wyndham Lewis, *Rude Assignment: An Intellectual Autobiography*, ed. Toby Foshay (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), 184. Hereafter abbreviated to *RA*.

³¹ In a number of occasions, Lewis repeats substantial passages from *The Art of Being Ruled*. His excuse for this strange practice of self-quoting is that this book is difficult to obtain for the general readers, whom it is designed to benefit. For instance, see, *DPDS*, 82-93.

(*TWM*, 118). This change also influences Lewis's mode of address to the general public. As Lewis explains it to "the general reader" in his "Author's Preface," the chapters in his book are ordered in a manner which gradually instructs the public and directs its understanding from the concrete and familiar to the abstract and unfamiliar; from applied technology to pure science, or, from modernist literature to its philosophical or ideological backgrounds. Lewis thus proclaims his intention to drag some well-informed readers out of the "prescribed tracks" of "mechanical activity" (*TWM*, x i).

Similarly, Lewis in *The Art of Being Ruled* hails the disappearance of small business entrepreneurs by the consolidation of the Big Business as he thinks "small man" represents no less than the laissez-faire, egotistic competition which is simply inimical to the genuine liberty of creative individuality (*ABR*, 103-4). By the time he publishes *Hitler* (1931), however, Lewis has turned his preference to the marginal freedom of "small man," and set it against the international capital which now appears to Lewis to threaten a wholesale enslavement. "In the past I have written a good deal about 'the Little Man' and his ways, and it has been mainly against that undersized individual.... I did not discriminate clearly enough at that time, between the different manifestations of his opposite—the 'Great,' in short. All that is opposite to the Little Man is not so very good."³² If this be understood as suggesting his care for the marginalized majority, it is typically, yet bitterly ironic for Lewis to give it expression in a book like *Hitler*. Indeed, we can

³² Wyndham Lewis, *Hitler* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), 181. Ellipsis mine. Hereafter abbreviated to *H*.

find the sentences just in the middle of his favourable, if qualified, exposition of the ‘Hitlerist’ economy, which is nothing less than the conspiracy theory of the ‘international’ (i.e. Jewish) ‘Loan-Capital.’ Paradoxically enough, it is as though Lewis’s “sentimental side” were looping back into another, more openly destructive doctrine of intense antipathy.³³

It is not surprising, then, that the rise of German Nazism and the suffering of Lewis’s “sentimental side” share common roots in the Great Depression starting in Europe around the end of 1920s, exacerbated through the Wall Street Crash in 1929 and the German Banking Crisis in 1931. The period saw an unprecedented number of people who suffered from the effects of mass unemployment. In Britain alone, “From 1931 until 1935, the number of unemployed never fell below 2 million people and in the winter of 1932-3 reached its highest point at just under 3 million.”³⁴ As Lewis writes in

³³ This is not to suggest that Lewis fully subscribed to the Nazi theory of Jewish conspiracy or that of fascist economy, although in his worst moments he was often prone to insinuate the ‘alien’ influence behind the decadence of the West. For Lewis’s reservation about the Nazis’ anti-Semitism, see *H*, 34-43. For Lewis’s qualified support for the fascist economic theory (or the “Credit-Crank”), see *H*, 147-189. For more about Lewis’s anti-Semitism, see David Ayers, *Wyndham Lewis and the Western Man* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992); Geoff Gilbert, “Shellshock, Anti-Semitism, and the Agency of the Avant-Garde,” in *Wyndham Lewis and the Art of Modern War*, ed. David Peters Corbett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 78-98. Lewis discussed, and criticized the tendency of anti-Semitism extensively in *The Jews: Are They Human?* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1939). For more about the connection between Lewis’s fascist sympathy and his care for “small men,” see his “‘Left Wings’ and the C3 Mind,” *The British Union Quarterly*, I . no. 1 (January/April), 22-34.

³⁴ John Stevenson and Chris Cook, *Britain in the Depression: Society and Politics 1929-39* (London and New York: Longman, 1977, 94), 65. For the impact of

Paleface (1929), “employment is obtained and held under more exacting conditions than before, there is everywhere more anxiety and less freedom.”³⁵

Lewis also argues that “the great majority of Palefaces are now in the same boat as their Coloured friends—that obviously they are in the position of fellow-slaves, and not of a ‘White Conqueror’ at all” (*P*, 22).

Claiming that the “Palefaces” and “their Coloured friends” are “fellow slaves” in the system of economic exploitation, Lewis might be hinting at a sudden expansion of his sympathy. But this mounting awareness of generalized sufferings does not immediately compel Lewis to take up any commitment for programmes of economic redistribution. Rather, Lewis is bitterly critical of the moralist overtone of humanitarian socialism as it is articulated by T. H. Green in *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1883). Against Green’s universalist ethics (encapsulated in a phrase “there is something due from everyone to everyone” [*P*, 13]), Lewis at first judges that it is too expansive to be sensible. According to Lewis’s theory of inequality, after all, something is due from one person to another only when “we recognize an entity with superior claims to ours upon our order, kind or system” (*P*, 76). Yet contradicting himself, Lewis also charges Green of being not expansive enough. When Green glosses the Roman definition of justice (“*Justitia est constans et perpetua voluntas suum cuique tribuendi*”), he interprets this to mean: “Every man both by law and common sentiment is recognised as having

Depression in Europe, see Patricia Clavin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929-39* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000).

³⁵ Wyndham Lewis, *Paleface: A Philosophy of the Melting-Pot* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1929), 24. Hereafter abbreviated to *P*.

a ‘suum,’ whatever the ‘suum’ may be, and is thus effectively distinguished from the animals (at any rate according to our treatment of them) and from things. He is deemed capable of having something of his own, as animals and things are not.”³⁶ Therefore, it is not completely unjust of Lewis to argue that this kind of moral philosophy is in reality narrowly humanist and incapable of dealing with the neglected problems of animal exploitations, such as “the problems of the pork-chop and the mutton-cutlet, in fine, or of the draught-horse.” But he continues to claim: “of all neglected problems of that order, the *Paleface* problem is to my mind the first on the list—if only because, in that instance, we ourselves are the mutton-chop” (*P*, 92-3; emphasis in original). Reminding us of the Circean spell over the White Europeans, he concludes this tricky argument with a pleading for a special attention to those who suffer from animalization. Lewis’s gesture towards expansive sympathy is after all rhetorically reversed to assert the priority of the sufferings of the Palefaces as a social problem.

All the same, there is more in Lewis’s sense of animalization than a mere rhetorical sleight-of-hand. For it is by way of countering this degradation to animal status that Lewis introduces his formulation of ‘love’ and ‘beauty’ in *The Art of Being Ruled*. According to Samuel Butler (as Lewis quotes him from his *Note-books* [1912]), “there is no true love short of eating and consequent assimilation” (*ABR*, 226). As the passion of love entails a desire to eliminate difference and distance from the self, it could take the form of

³⁶ T. H. Green, *Prolegomena to Ethics*, ed. A. C. Bradley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1883), 223.

identification, assimilation and even, bodily incorporation.³⁷ Yet Lewis thinks of it only as a lower form of affection suitable only to lower animals, and the higher love is its exact opposite. “It is only when something is independent of us, a non-assimilable universe of its own, that we ‘love’ it, as we call it.” It is from this definition of love that Lewis also derives his idea of beauty:

The ‘superficial contact of exterior form’ which characterizes the ‘love’ of the more complex animals is essential to the existence of ‘love’ or ‘affection’; that is an emotion for something different to the self, that cannot be absorbed into the self, in the sense of be eaten. That *detachment, distance*, and, as it were, chastity, and intense *personal* sensation on our side, is at the bottom of all our spiritual values, as we name what about us is independent of feeding and renewing our machine.

³⁷ As Lewis himself noticed, Butler’s theory of love as ‘devouring’ identification has a marked similarity with Sigmund Freud’s analysis of identification as a primitive emotional bond of society. In his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud also notes the ambivalence of identificatory desire: “Identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone’s removal. It behaves like a derivative of the first, oral phase of the organization of libido, in which the object that we long for an prize is assimilated by eating and is in that way annihilated as such.” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Volume XVIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 106-7. For more about the relation between identification and violence, see Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (California: Stanford University Press, 1996).

Butler's sentiments for the oyster would literally have to become platonic (on the principle of Gilbert's 'affection à la Plato, for a bashful young potato, or a not too *french* french [sic] bean') for him to be justified in giving the same name to it as to what he would feel for Mary or Kate.

The platonic condition (always in the gilbertian [sic] sense) is essential, then, also to the existence of *beauty*. The ideas of beauty, of a god, or of love, depend severely on separation and differentiation. (*ABR*, 227; emphasis in original)

Associating Butler's 'devouring' affection with the post-Darwinian social vision (i.e. "the struggle for existence"), Lewis takes a next step to juxtapose art and science as a diametrically opposite pair. Just as the propagation of Darwin's biology has provoked a widespread disillusionment, around this time science comes to represent for Lewis a ruthless exposure of life's naked truth which might be unfavourable for human self-conceit. In opposition to this scientific search for interior (yet potentially destructive) truth, Lewis proposes art as a creator of exterior meaning which, albeit only in the surface, keeps life and love going. Lewis says elsewhere; "We are surface-creatures, and the 'truths' beneath the surface contradict our values" (*TWM*, 377). Thus he formulates; "Science is the science of the *inside* of things: art is the science of their *outside*. Art is the differentiator: science is the identifier" (*ABR*, 232; emphasis in original).

It is certainly counterintuitive to speak of Lewis's 'surface' aesthetic in

terms of love and beauty as against science, especially since Lewis's pre-war Vorticism is often associated with the cult of science and machinery. But this should be properly recognised as a point of major ambivalence in Lewis's thought, especially in his reaction to the aesthetics of abstraction. A better way to understand this problem will be to retrace the development of Lewis's aesthetics as a gradual turn away from abstraction. In the period of pre-war Vorticism, T. E. Hulme has once observed that the abstraction of modern art is driven by an impulse to purify the accidental qualities of phenomenal objects into something more necessary and lasting. "Expressed generally," Hulme claims, "there seems to be a desire for austerity and bareness, a striving towards structure and away from the messiness and confusion of nature and natural things."³⁸ For Hulme, as for other partisans of European modern art, abstraction is achieved through stripping away the phenomenal superfluity, and thus reducing objects to their naked essentials. And Lewis is no exception: at the most abstract, Lewis's Vorticist paintings and drawings consist of a few elements of dashing lines and angular shapes which stand for

³⁸ T. E. Hulme, "Modern Art and its Philosophy" (1914) in *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*, ed. Herbert Read (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1924), 73-109, 96. A number of scholars have lavished detailed attention on the connection among T. E. Hulme, Wilhelm Worringer (a German aesthetic philosopher who influenced Hulme) and Lewis's Vorticism, each with different emphases and contexts. See, Geoffrey Wagner, *Wyndham Lewis: A Portrait of the Artist as the Enemy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1957), 153-8; Charles Harrison, *English Art and Modernism 1900-1939* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981, 1994), 95-7; Tom Normand, *op. cit.* 61-8; David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 222-33.

either mechanised human bodies or intersecting high-rise buildings.

Similarly, when he calls for a drastic reform of London architecture in *Caliph's Design* (1919), Lewis dogmatically announces his policy to “reduce everything to the box” by “abolish[ing] the stylistic architectural rubbish.”

It is not difficult to hear in this assertion an echo of Adolf Loos's call for “plain, undecorated simplicity” by the total removal of ornamental details, which Loos notoriously materialized in his design for the tailors Goldman & Salatsch in 1911.³⁹ Lewis insists: “if you say that the design and ornament over the body of the building is the same as the clothes on a man's back, there is still something to be said about the naked shape of the man or even for his skeleton” (*CD*, 48). From this angle, the aesthetic of abstraction might be regarded as an almost maniacal, and perhaps scientific, obsession with the elemental nakedness.

But Lewis's attitude to abstraction is not without ambiguity. Even in the heyday of *Blast 1* (1914), for instance, Lewis suggests that “The finest Art is not pure Abstraction, nor is it unorganised life.”⁴⁰ By the time of *Blast 2* (1915), Lewis comes to articulate a reservation about most extreme of abstract paintings (as then represented by Kandinsky's *Composition* series.) “The painters have cut away and cut away warily, till they have trapped some essential. European painting to-day is like the laboratory of an anatomist:

³⁹ Adolf Loos, “Ornament and Crime” (1908) in *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (California: Ariadne Press, 1998), 167-176, 68. For this design, see, Tobias G. Natter and Max Hollein, eds. *The Naked Truth: Klimt, Schiele, Kokoschka and Other Scandals* (Munich: Prestel, 2005), 140-6.

⁴⁰ Wyndham Lewis, ed. *Blast 1* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), 134.

things stand up stark and denuded everywhere as the result of endless visionary examination.” However abstract and denuded they are, for Lewis true paintings should be always connected to lively materials of nature by means of unavoidable representation. “The moment the Plastic is impoverished for the Idea,” thus Lewis warns, “we got out of direct contact with these intuitive waves of power, that only play on the rich surface where life is crowded and abundant.”⁴¹ In his post-war writings, Lewis extends the same scheme of thought beyond the immediate context of modern art, and finds its rather unexpected application in the fields of fashion and feminism in *Time and Western Man*. According to Lewis, “the more a woman complicates her attire, the more she ‘develops her personality.’ The nude is a platonic abstraction” (*TWM*, 78). Lewis here argues that post-war lightening of female clothes and women’s participation in work should be grasped at once, as false promises of ‘personal freedom’ which conceal the deeper system of exploitation and standardization. “Skirts are short for work,” Lewis therefore insists, “not love” (*TWM*, 80). Abstraction and denuding now come to be seen by Lewis as part and parcel of dubious ‘revolutionary’

⁴¹ Wyndham Lewis, ed. *Blast 2* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1981), 39-40. This comment can be taken as an attack on the mystical neo-Platonist theory of abstraction which informed some of the practitioners of European modernism. For instance, see, Wassily Kandinsky *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. M. T. H. Sadler, (1911; rpt, New York: Dover Press, 1977). An excerpt from this important avant-garde document was published as “Inner Necessity” with some favourable comments by Edwards Wadsworth in *Blast 1* 119-25. Critical association of neo-Platonist abstraction and impoverishment recurs in the 1930s debate over the British abstract art by Ben Nicholson and Barbara Hepworth. See, Harrison, op. cit. 277-9.

progress, dupes of which are only trapped into deprivation and impoverishment.⁴²

Yet it seems that there is a rhetorical leap in Lewis's thinking about abstraction and denuding. After all, how persuasive is it to discuss the innovative technique of modern art and the new situations of socio-cultural reality in one and the same terminology, especially without any effort of mediation between the two? Revealing in this respect is Lewis's discussion of German culture in *The Doom of Youth* (1932). Here Lewis quotes from Cicely Hamilton's travelogue *Modern Germanies* (1931), in which Hamilton observes a tendency for simplification in every branch of culture such as clothing, architecture and industrial designs. In post-war Weimar, light summer clothing is becoming common, and sometimes even a cult of nudity (nudism) is becoming acceptable. In a parallel manner, buildings and furniture are increasingly reduced to straight lines and flat surfaces without thick ornaments. Hamilton's name for this tendency is "the Cult of the Bare." As she argues: "It is one of the symptoms of a tendency of widespread and strong, one of the manifestations of the modern German spirit of economy.... I should call it a spirit of fundamentalism; a spirit, that is to say, which in all things desire to face the essential and sets little store by the

⁴² Similarly, when he accuses the Time-philosophy of decomposing the perceptual reality into multiple, evanescent sensations, Lewis claims that "[i]t is of the nature of the cartesian [sic] return to *naked, direct, vision*" (*TWM*, 388; emphasis in original). Lewis also commented on the question of female fashion in "The Long and the Short of It" (1922) and "The Dress-Body-Mind Aggregate" (1924). See, *CHCC*, 80-2, 100-2.

superfluous.”⁴³ And this provokes Lewis to exclaim: “That ‘modern German spirit of economy’ is so strangely coeval with *modern German poverty*—an unprecedented poverty—that there is no occasion to speculate whether they *might* not—*perhaps*—have influenced each other!”⁴⁴ Equating “economy” and “poverty” in one bold stroke, Lewis in effect asserts that the “Cult of the Bare”—that of naked abstraction—is inexorably preconditioned by the politico-economic cul-de-sac to which European society as a whole is falling.

But if we take him at his own words, we might detect a note of fatality in Lewis’s assigning the spirit of economy to the reality of poverty. For it is to argue that the modernist innovations are merely in the nature of making the best of a bad bargain; and ultimately it is to this spirit of modernism that Lewis as an artist finds his ultimate affiliation (however dissenting he might stand against it).⁴⁵ The spirit of fundamentalism is after all never far from

⁴³ Cicely Hamilton, *Modern Germanies: As Seen by an Englishwoman* (London: Dent, 1931), 16. As she also refers to the Bauhaus building in her discussion of the “Cult of the Bare” (186-96; photograph reproduced between p. 176 and p. 177), what Hamilton has observed in her travel across the Weimar Germany can be understood as the emergent culture of modernism in art, architecture and design. Also see, Alan Colquhoun, *Modern Architecture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), esp. Chapter 8 “Weimar Germany: the Dialectic of the Modern 1920-33”, 159-181.

⁴⁴ Wyndham Lewis, *The Doom of Youth* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932), 252. Emphasis in original. Hereafter abbreviated to *DY*.

⁴⁵ Lewis’s ambivalent opposition to modernist art and literature was intensified as the 1930s wears on, especially around the issues of applied art and machine aesthetics. See, for instance, “Power-Feeling and Machine Age Art” (1934) *CHCC*, 236-40; “Art in a Machine Age” (1934) *WLA*, 268-75. Lewis’s anti-abstract art tract, *The Demon of Progress in the Arts* (London: Methuen, 1954) earned a reaction of extreme hostility from Clement Greenberg, the guru of American abstract expressionism. See Greenberg, “Wyndham Lewis against Abstract Art” in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 164-6.

his bone, and on this account, Lewis's programme of 'surface' aesthetic—his commitment to love and beauty—is also inevitably compromised. Lewis seems to be following Friedrich Nietzsche in *The Gay Science* (1882, 87) more loyally than he cares to admit:

And as for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who endanger temples by night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, uncover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons. No, this bad taste, this will to truth, to 'truth at any price,' this youthful madness in the love of truth, have lost their charm for us: for that we are too experienced, too serious, too merry, too burned, too *profound*. We no longer believe that truth remains truth when the veils are withdrawn; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, or to be present at everything, or to understand and 'know' everything.

'Is it true that God is present everywhere?' a little girl asked her mother; 'I think that's indecent'—a hint for philosophers! One should have more respect for the bashfulness with which nature has hidden behind riddles and iridescent uncertainties. Perhaps truth is a woman who has reason for not letting us see her reason?⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kauffman (1882, 87; rpt. New York, Vintage, 1974), 38. Emphasis in original. Lewis quotes from the same passage with cunningly unfavourable commentary in *ABR*, 113-5.

Driven by a fateful attraction to the naked truth, yet also trying to stick to the beautiful surface, Lewis is torn between two contradictory imperatives. We can therefore see Wyndham Lewis's art of the interwar years from two different, yet not unrelated viewpoints. It can be characterised as a dire conflict with his own sense of inner hatred and humiliations, or it can be seen a product of compromised love, namely, a spirit of decency or bashfulness, or to be more precise, a sense of shame.

4.

In many respects, *The Apes of God* (1930) is the most programmatic production of Wyndham Lewis's 'Enemy' project. A huge volume, six hundreds odd pages of interminable satire on contemporary arty society, its physical presence as a book alone was aggressive (it was nearly three inches thick and weighed more than three pounds) when it was first published in the limited edition of 750 copies, each with its author's signature. Even before its publication, Lewis had noisily announced its forthcoming release in the editorial of the *Enemy* 3 (as the "square peg" which wouldn't be properly accommodated by stupid commercial reviewers). And its publication was quickly followed by *Satire and Fiction* (1930), a companion volume of blatant apologia, in which Lewis dogmatically defends his 'external' approach as an appropriate tool for satirical observations. He insists on his own creativity

as a professional artist and not merely a critic, thus trying to draw a sharp contrast with non-creativity of indulgent and wealthy amateurs. “Just as the housemaid of an expansive and ambitious turn would scribble romances, so do they: and so it comes about that everything included under the label FICTION they regard as their peculiar preserve. As a consequence of this, their peace of mind is not at all disturbed when a real writer spends his time writing *pamphlets*.”⁴⁷ Seen from this angle, *The Apes of God* is a very deliberate attempt at invading “their peculiar preserve,” provoking trouble and disturbance. As such, its connections with Lewis’s previous discursive works are too clear to miss. In *Time and Western Man*, Lewis had resentfully spoken of the “phenomenon of ‘the revolutionary rich,’ of a gilded Bohemia” (*TWM*, 123) as a social contamination of the purity and zeal of authentic artistic innovations. In *The Art of Being Ruled*, Lewis had analysed the same phenomenon as a widespread cult of escapism; of those who wilfully flee from their responsible positions and covet the privilege of irresponsible freedom traditionally enjoyed only by women, children and artists. “To state in its awful simplicity the true inner nature of what is happening,” Lewis asserts, “*every one wants to be a child, and every one wants to be an artist*” (*ABR*, 136; emphasis in original).

The Apes of God starts in a scene of the aristocratic mansion of Sir James and Lady Fredigonde Follett, an aged Victorian couple still clinging to a moribund way of life in 1926, the year of the failed General Strike. The

⁴⁷ Wyndham Lewis, *Satire and Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), 20. Emphasis in original. Hereafter abbreviated to *SF*.

initial description of the senile Fredigonde toileting is an announcement of the novel's will to concentrate on the awkward movement of characters as a physical presence. The successive arrivals of Dick Whittington and Horace Zagreus, nephews apparently competing for the favour of their wealthy relative, introduce a submerged narrative tension of some sorts, which is not taken up again until the very end of the novel. Meanwhile, what occupies the readers' attention is the flourishing of Wyndham Lewis's satirical energy in his practice of style. The following description of Dick is typical:

The young spalpeen turned on the excited naïf illumination, at once, for the eager baby eyes. The switch for all that was open, boyish and enthusiastic if anything over-functioned, and those qualities abounded in the apartment. He tossed one huge foot out, threw back his head, the dark hair streaked with grey waving bravely around the patch of tanned common—chucked a mouthful of laughs up in the welkin, at the ceiling, and exclaimed with a super-crashing heartiness;

“Yes I feel terribly fit!”

...

His hand knotted, presented symmetrically like buffers in the pockets of the soiled mauve bags—face inclined to the ground—the bright essence, regardless-of-cost, left burning in his staring head-lights—the spacious involuntary tonsure now visible as he slightly rolled forward his head, the good Dick paced away from her,

faced unstably about and returned—with the action of the refractory child being dragged along by something like its umbilical cord, while mischievously but indolently it kicks objects in its path, to obstruct high-handed Nanny's dragging.⁴⁸

This passage—what Hugh Kenner has described a “verbal impasto”⁴⁹—initially conveys a confused impression of mutually conflicting vocabularies, which turn up successively as though to cancel each other out: his babyish eyes with “the excited naïf illumination” is soon converted into the mechanical “head-lights,” and his hair “waving bravely” gives way to patches of “spacious involuntary tonsure.” Yet it congeals once we recognise Dick's declaration of youthful fitness as a performance of a man actually in his middle age. The description's more-than-visual nature is manifest in the final prepositional phrase, itself followed by a long subordinate sentence which introduces the violent image of a child still tied to the umbilical cord, dragged along yet grudging. Dick's mimicry of youth, at once wilful and mechanical, represents a subjection to the widespread cult of the child; heartiness is compulsively performed in front of aunt Fredigonde's censoring eyes.

The Apes of God is filled throughout with such ‘external’ descriptions of physical movement which are, paradoxically, a way penetrating a character's

⁴⁸ Wyndham Lewis, *The Apes of God* (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1997), 30-1. Ellipsis mine. Hereafter abbreviated to *AG*.

⁴⁹ Hugh Kenner, *Wyndham Lewis* (Norfolk, CT.: New Directions, 1954), 103.

mental complacency. For all its descriptive brilliance and thematic relevance as a satirical style, as critics have noted, it also obstructs the development of plot and sometimes disperses the forward momentum of the narrative.

Equally damaging, the characters under attack—wealthy and pretentious artists of Chelsea, Mayfair and Bloomsbury—seem important to latter-day readers only in terms of Wyndham Lewis's biographical interests. Dick Whittington is said to be modelled on Richard Wyndham, a wealthy art-lover and one-time patron of Lewis. In 1923, he participated in a group-scheme of providing Lewis a monthly stipend of £ 16. But Lewis was uncomfortable with the scheme of a joint fund from the beginning, and instead wished his benefactors to purchase some of his unsold drawings, a wish they respectfully refused. The short-lived scheme met with Lewis's prickly reaction and led to a termination of his friendship with Richard Wyndham. "Rarely did financial aid to Lewis come free from reciprocal hostility," Paul O'Keeffe comments, "and even the most generous of gestures were no guarantee that a benefactor might one day find himself castigated and spurned."⁵⁰

In the act of writing *The Apes of God* in such a distinctive style, Lewis seems to be following a strict logic of exchange. As Pierre Bourdieu has put it: "Generous exchange tends towards overwhelming generosity; the greatest gift is at the same time the gift most likely to throw its recipient into dishonour by prohibiting any counter-gift."⁵¹ The refusal of a counter-gift

⁵⁰ O'Keeffe, *op. cit.* 250-55, 251.

⁵¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 14.

ends up converting the act of generosity to that of provocation. The result is a gratuitous offering of verbal portraits (instead of pictorial ones) to those who offended Lewis in *The Apes of God*. However logical his proceedings are, they mar the importance of Lewis's work in so far as his satirical energy is directly charged with his personal, extratextual venom.

Consequently, the interest of the novel is less in its catalogue descriptions of the vices of the rich gossip-stars (however truthful they are as a historical fact) than in the possibility of an alternative Lewis seems to offer.⁵² After we leave the Follett mansion, the figure of Horace Zagreus engages our attention as he provides a nominal plot to advance the narrative. Zagreus comes to see a potential of genius in the unlikely figure of Dan Boleyn, a nineteen-year-old Irish boy and “an authentic *naïf*” (*RA*, 214; emphasis in original), and offers to introduce him to the ‘high-brow’ salons of wealthy Londoners. Yet it is an ironic socializing neither to solicit favour nor to gain patronage, but to get acquainted with the sham arty attitudinizing which Dan should eschew in his apprenticeship. The “encyclical,” which Pierpoint, Zagreus's master, once handed to him, is in turn passed on to equip Dan with an insight into this artistic pageantry. The “encyclical” tells Dan that it is outright irrational to expect any help from the hordes of wealthy socialites.

⁵² Among others, the satirical attacks on the Sitwells (the model of the Finnian Shaws) and the youth-cult are more or less accurate and justifiable if we compare them with other sources about the fashionable society of the 1920s. See, Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History of Great Britain 1918-1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 124-5. Martin Green, *Children of the Sun: A Narrative of 'Decadence' in England after 1918* (New York: Basic Books, 1976).

“They are the *unpaying* guests of the house of art: the crowd of thriving valets who adopt the livery of this noble but now decayed establishment, *pour se donner un air*—to mock, in their absence, its masters” (AG, 121). Those who had been servants of genuine artists (by means of patronage) in past ages have now started to become amateur artists by themselves; they are ‘dithyrambic spectators’ who invade and disturb the fictional performance on stage.⁵³ They are “the Apes of God,” “*those prosperous mountebanks who alternately imitate and mock at and traduce those figures they at once admire and hate*” (AG, 123; emphasis in original). Their primary interest in art is only to appropriate its freedom and glamour to themselves by means of imitation, not by means of any serious effort. Their identity as amateur artists is simply second-hand, and the reality of society consisted of such ‘Apes’ is thus completely inauthentic. It is the vision of generalized social mimesis turned into a fierce damnation.

Subsequent chapters follow Dan engaged in his apprenticeship in “the Gentle Art of Bearding the Ape in his Drawing-room” (AG, 322), yet it soon turns out that Dan is extremely shy to the extent of moronic, and his time is all taken up with the vacuous rounds of dinners and tea-parties. And even the authority of his master, the trickster-like Zagreus, is gradually undermined by gossips circulated around every salon. He is a one-time “practical joker” turned into “New Thought crank” (AG, 214-5) by his submission to the

⁵³ Wyndham Lewis developed this idea of “dithyrambic spectator” in his 1925 essay, “The Dithyrambic Spectator: An Essay on the Origins and Survivals of Art” especially with reference to Jane Harrison’s anthropological theory. See, *DSDP*, 159-238.

preaching of Pierpoint, a “painter turned philosopher” (*AG*, 129). Pierpoint is always absent from the society of ‘high-brow’ salons as he has jealously “moved outside” such circles. Zagreus seems to be acting as a worldly correlative of the detached Pierpoint, yet his adherence to his master is so thorough that Zagreus frequently repeats, indeed “broadcasts,” Pierpoint’s oratories word-for-word in an uncanny mimicry. Even Dan’s mind comes to be affected by this performance, and stuffed with “words of his master, that his master had got from *his* master. Always the shadow of the mystery-man—the god-like Pierpoint, whom he hates!” (*AG*, 241; emphasis in original) Zagreus suffers from the same illness of secondary imitation as the Apes themselves. Willie Service, his servant, has mockingly written on Dan’s notebook that Zagreus is himself “an Ape of God... who says we are gibbering gibbons but what about himself?” (*AG*, 321; ellipsis mine) As some critics have argued, his counter-aping appears particularly disingenuous because his relation with Pierpoint is primarily mercenary, the former paying to the latter in exchange for what he “broadcasts.” Zagreus is, after all, the once well-off patron now hard-up, scheming for new sources of funds, and therefore vulgarizing what he has bought from the figure of the authentic artist. “Is he now essentially a rich dilettante? Is it not owing to his *money*—not that he always *pays!*” (*AG*, 481; emphasis in original)⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Mark Perrino argues; “He is the arch-Ape, a renegade Ape, a renegade Pierpointian, and finally a con-man, one of the post-war criminals-by-necessity.” See, Mark Perrino, *The Poetics of Mockery: Wyndham Lewis’s The Apes of God and the Popularization of Modernism* (London: MHRA, 1995), 109. For the specific reference to Zagreus’s financial problem in the novel, also see *AG*, 295-7, 453. Also for the inauthentic identity of Zagreus, see, Scott W. Klein, *The Fictions of*

In the end, the followers of Pierpoint seem as inauthentic and unreal as the Apes themselves. As such, there is no alternative to the indulgence of Apery. *The Apes of God* is therefore a devastating satire that lacks any positive pole of value. This is underscored in the long penultimate chapter, “Lord Osmund’s Lenten Party.” This party, held by the Finnian Shaws—“God’s own Peterpaniest family” (*AG*, 498)—is supposed to illustrate a point where the vices and follies of Apery culminate; a powerfully wealthy family as a whole that indulges in the cults of artistic publicity, artificial childhood, and a sham revolt against authority. Zagreus, Dan and others are invited to the party as a troupe of bogus magicians assigned to provide some entertainments—an undignified role. Other Pierpointians reveal themselves; Bertram Starr-Smith, “Pierpoint’s political secretary” (*AG*, 477), costumed as a fascist “Blackshirt” simply because it’s the cheapest outfit; and Julius Ratner, a Jewish Ape who serves as a publisher for Pierpoint and a money-lender for Zagreus (*AG*, 508-10).⁵⁵ Their mutual invectives—the Blackshirt’s open anti-Semitism towards Ratner, countered with the latter’s

James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis: Monsters of Nature and Design (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 121.

⁵⁵ Blackshirt speaks to Dan; “Why do you suppose I am here with two more, who are volunteers, as ‘fascists’ of all things, to-night? Nothing to do with *Fascismo*—the last thing—can you guess? It’s because I picked up three khaki shirts for a few pence and dyed them black—the whole outfit for the three of us did not cost fifteen bob! That is the reason” (*AG*, 509). For the question of his fascist identity, see, James F. English, *Comic Transactions: Literature, Humor, and the Politics of Community in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), esp. its chapter 2 “Imagining a Community of Men: Black(shirt) Humor in *The Apes of God*”, 67-97.

derision of the former's stupidity—expose a grave internal rift within the tiny group of Pierpoint followers, which also hints at the self-contradiction of their master's teachings. The tension between the two reaches a snapping point after the performance of "Vanish," in which Zagreus's spell is supposed to effect a disappearance of Dan. But it fails ridiculously in spite of its cheap and easy tricks. The Blackshirt suddenly leaves the audience and mounts to the stage, accusing Zagreus of disloyally exploiting Pierpoint's script. A quarrel ensues, and the Blackshirt, excited, assaults Ratner in a fit of irrational violence. Yet Zagreus seems strangely contented, and even recommends the spectators to take pleasure in the accidents: "In any event, this resourceful member of the audience, in substituting his own melodrama for mine, has proved an excellent entertainer. I suggest that he be offered a hearty vote of thanks. That Ladies and Gentlemen will conclude the performance!" (AG, 598)

Mark Perrino suggests that the performance of "Vanish" comes originally from Wyndham Lewis's interest in the anthropological account of sacrificial ritual, most notably as it was expounded in Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*.⁵⁶ A ritual of sacrifice is essentially a process whereby a community transfers its accumulated vices to a scapegoat which is then sent to death, thus

⁵⁶ See, Mark Perrino, *op. cit.* 76, 116-123. Also see, Peter L. Caracciolo, "'Carnivals of mass-murder': The Frazerian Origins of Wyndham Lewis's *The Childermass*" in *Sir James Frazer and the Literary Imagination*, ed. Robert Fraser. (London: Macmillan, 1990), 207-31. As Carrachiolo suggests, Lewis's interest in scapegoat ritual can be traced as far back as a wartime short story, "The French Poodle" (1916), in Wyndham Lewis, *Unlucky for Pringle: Unpublished and Other Stories*, eds. C. J. Fox and Robert T. Chapman (Plymouth: Vision, 1973), 53-59.

attaining a periodic purgation. In *The Lion and the Fox*, Lewis had admirably written of William Shakespeare in his tragic plays as an executioner, an agent of ritual sacrifice, by quoting comparable examples in Frazer's *The Scapegoat and The Dying God* (*LF*, 135-45). Yet if he understands the ritual of purgation and the tragic catharsis in terms of one and the same mechanism of scapegoating, nevertheless Lewis draws a sharp distinction between two ways of disposing such dramatic and violent passions, one in the realm of life itself, the other in that of art. The art of tragedy is fictional and means to satisfy those passions without the actuality of death and violence. Therefore, for Lewis, there is an absolute, almost ethical distinction between Art and Life, performers and spectators; any attempt to elide that distinction results in inciting a great amount of actual aggression (whether deliberately or not).⁵⁷ From this angle, the failure of Zagreus's "Vanish" is understood as a failure in ritual purgation. Bringing the real violence onto the stage in his assault on Ratner, the Blackshirt brands himself as one of those 'dithyrambic spectators,' whom even Pierpoint despises as "troublesome 'supers' that swarm all over the stage" (*AG*, 122). The fact that Zagreus doesn't mind this breaching of the artistic barrier, and even gleefully exploits its dramatic effect as an 'entertainment,' finally reveals his identity as an opportunist, a perverse vulgarizer of his master's 'infallible'

⁵⁷ Lewis argues that, in the modern period, "the mixture of the sensations of vengeance, superstition, hatred, envy, worship, all bound up with the ancient animal cunning, of which the 'tragic' and dramatic instinct is composed, have to dispense with the gushing of blood, the vinegar and the fainting god, every murderous instinct translated into, and compressed in, civilized reserve" (*LF*, 145). Also see his 1925 essay, "The Politics of Artistic Expression", *CHCC*, 114-9.

doctrines.

The trouble is that, exactly because of his domineering presence in the novel, it is not always easy to distinguish Zagreus from Pierpoint, or, for that matter, Lewis himself. As Hugh Kenner has suggested: “The casual eye is unlikely to distinguish Zagreus from Wyndham Lewis, whose knowingness he for his part apes very carefully.” And not even casual eyes, in fact: whether one is misled, not without some justifications, to understand Zagreus as a figure of the ideal trickster-artist that his author approves of, or, whether, in a more critical spirit, one argues that Lewis shares the similar vice of dodgy financing with his own central creation in *The Apes of God*.⁵⁸ Even if one recognises Zagreus as a scheming vulgarizer, it is still possible to point out that Lewis indulges in the same sort of mercenary exploitation in his attempt at exacting profits from the deliberate monumentality of modernist satire.⁵⁹ In a sense, Wyndham Lewis works as his own vulgarizer. We are back to the old question, whether we can truly distinguish “*What the Puppets Want*” from

⁵⁸ Kenner, op. cit. 100. Thomas Kush asserts that “Zagreus is Lewis’s exemplary artist.” Thomas Kush, *Wyndham Lewis’s Pictorial Integer* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1981), 113. Douglas Mao suggests that Zagreus’s magician costume “happily conforms to Lewis’s practical prescriptions for the regeneration of art in the twentieth century, which call for a revival of the virtually lost practice of patronage—a practice upon which Lewis depended frequently, if resentfully, over the course of his difficult career.” Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), 109.

⁵⁹ After suggesting that Zagreus has purchased his oratories from Pierpoint, David Trotter argues; “The problem, once again, is that in describing Zagreus’s practice Lewis was in effect describing himself.” David Trotter, op. cit. 323. About Lewis’s tactics to sell *The Apes of God*, see, Perrino, op. cit. its chapter 6, “Marketing Insults: The Arthur Press and Scientific Satire,” 139-154. Also see, Tyrus Miller,

“*What the Public Wants.*” Lewis is contradicting himself. A similar self-contradiction can be found in his poetics of satire. In *Satire and Fiction*, Lewis defends his satirical “external” approach as scientifically objective: “Satire is in reality often nothing else but *the truth*, in fact that of Natural Science. That objective, non-emotional truth of the scientific intelligence sometimes takes on the exuberant sensuous quality of creative art” (*SF*, 48; emphasis in original). Yet this is Lewis at his most irresponsible if we remember that he has previously tried to define the externality of art as opposed to the internality of science. Even Zagreus, in his first broadcasting of Pierpoint, suggests that the claim of objective science for art is inevitably spurious. As he insists; “*The impersonality of science and ‘objective’ observation is a wonderful patent behind which the individual can indulge in a riot of personal egotism, impossible to earlier writers, not provided with such a disguise*” (*AG*, 260; emphasis in original). And Lewis is perfectly susceptible to this kind of charge in his satirical practice.

Zagreus also states: “none of us are able in fact, in the matter of quite naked truth, to support that magnifying glass, focussed upon us, any more than the best complexion could support such examination.” Thus he concludes that “any truth... the kind of naked, ‘scientific’ truth... is too horrible to contemplate. Such things should not be mentioned in polite society” (*AG*, 257, 67; ellipsis mine). But it is exactly such an exposure of naked truth that Lewis is aiming at by his satire of ‘scientific’ objectivity. Yet again, there is a strong defence mechanism of self-complacency on the

part of the satirized, so that they fail to recognise themselves in the naked truth as it is reflected in the mirror of satire. “Everybody gazes into the public mirror. No one sees himself! What is the use of a mirror then if it reflects a World, always, without the principal person—the Me?” (*AG*, 255)

Indeed, nobody in *The Apes of God* consciously confronts and suffers from the truth of nakedness—except for Dan Boleyn, the figure of the ambiguous scapegoat. The first time, he is forced to play the part of nude model for a lesbian artist whose studio he visits by sheer mistake. “Dan struck several attitudes. All were designed, as far as possible, to minimize the immodesty of the glaring white crown-to-foot exposure of his animal self” (*AG*, 229).

With a pain of embarrassment, Dan eventually faints; when he awakes (“with an eel-like agility born of shame and terror he rolled off, and as he did so he sprang to his feet” [*AG*, 232]), he promptly escapes. The second time is in the Lenten Party. After he has scorched his clothes in the kitchen, Dan is forced to undress and redress as a girl by the hand of Mrs. Bosun, an elderly matron. Of course Dan resists “with burning cheeks,” yet Mrs. Bosun mercilessly denudes him—“behaving as though the body were a smoking-room joke in fact of which *the legs* were the cream (but in which *the bust* ran them pretty close)—as if some Rowlandson had come back to earth to spread the view that human beings were worth nothing more than *things*” (*AG*, 439-40; emphasis in original). The result of this immodesty is Dan’s violent blushing. It is the shame of nakedness made more intense exactly because the denuded body is like an animal’s, not located within the canon of humanity in its isolation.

Gazing at the follies of the Finnian Shaws, the Blackshirt exclaims; “they are puppets not people” (*AG*, 503). Sometimes this vision is taken as one of the main messages of *The Apes of God*. Yet one of the funniest moments in the novel is when, in one of the gathering of Apes, the narrator tries, but, fails to make Dan into the subject of vision which regards them as mere puppets. When he was looking at the noisiest, and the most childish guest: “So unusually active were Dan’s piercing glances that... he might have been regarding one of those life-size dolls, with mechanically revolving eyes, made for the children of the rich” (*AG*, 203-4; ellipsis mine). In reality, Dan is only thinking of the growing soreness of his feet, without ever recognising “people” as “puppets.” The disunity of vision reaches a climax of sorts in the final chapter, “The General Strike,” when Dan is after all dismissed from Zagreus as a false-genius, and walks along the pavements of London alone, listlessly. Cars of bourgeoisies are around to provide a lift to those employees stranded in the midst of transport strike. Not understanding the situation at all, Dan shyly averts his eyes from drivers kindly accosting him, and he pretends to look into a shop window.

Unluckily as it turned out, this was the inside of a lady’s bedroom, in the shop. There were two ladies undressed. The ladies were nothing but wax and puppets only but they were terribly lifelike undressed women, and wherever he looked their eyes seemed to be seeking him out to smile at him. All sorts of nether garments for nude ladies were there—some were horribly round and there were splits in them with

buttons—he blushed all the way up the backs of his legs. He had a centripetal shame in him, for all this immodesty—though in this case it was wax decoy-ducks, and not actual ladies. For nothing in the world would he be found looking! (*AG*, 615)

Such a misperception is obviously the hallmark of Dan’s authentic naïveté.⁶⁰ All the same, we might also say that his vision is so profoundly humanizing that, not only does Dan not recognize Apes as puppets, but he also mistakes puppets for human beings. His “centripetal shame” indicates a moment of bewilderment, a moment when this humanizing vision is perforce drawn toward the exposure of the naked, and unfavourable, truth of material existence.

It might sound paradoxical to argue that this failure of vision is nevertheless a sort of saving grace for Dan, and for the novel itself. It is certainly a distant cry from Lewis’s earlier project of ‘surface’ aesthetic, the only means by which the precarious ideals of love and beauty could be preserved. When Dan gets a momentary vision of apocalyptic disorder, he

⁶⁰ For the ambiguity of Dan’s authentic naïveté, see, Ian Patterson, “Beneath the Surface: Apes, Bodies and Readers,” *Volcanic Heaven: Essays on Wyndham Lewis’s Paintings & Writings*, ed. Paul Edwards (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1996), 123-4, 128-9. It is also important to note that what Lewis has attacked in his criticism of ‘Child-Cult’ is *faux-naïf* rather than “authentic naïf.” See, *CD*, 51-5. It seems, for Lewis, that similar difference exists between ‘precocity’ and ‘immaturity.’ See, *DY*, 46. 124. Also see the following passage in *The Art of Being Ruled*, in which Lewis places artists and children in a similar position: “If, however, one artist, and a single child, are preserved intact and unpolluted owing to my words, I should consider my pains richly rewarded” (*ABR*, 136).

muses: “Nothing could live thought Dan, or *love* thought he and sighed, where he had been looking, where alas he had looked and seen the battle-parks and the spikes planted for trees, he thought!—He would never look again!” (*AG*, 418; emphasis in original) In a sense, this is also taken as a self-reflexive commentary on *The Apes of God* itself, insofar as it is obsessed with the vision of bottomless disorder. By his own hatred and humiliation, Wyndham Lewis is led to denude the glittering surface and reveal the absolute zero point of human potential. Yet the compromised love is still there to cry for articulation, and the desire to avert the eyes is most memorably expressed in Dan’s spirit of shame and bashfulness.

In *Time and Western Man*, Lewis had called for the creation of new beauty as an alternative to the Time-Cult (which he had fiercely attacked in the works of Joyce, Stein and Ezra Pound.) Yet there is also for Lewis a moment of flickering doubt in the imperative of creativity. “From this devastating alternative—the creation of new beauty—most people shrink in horror. ‘Create!’ they exclaim. ‘As though it were not already difficult enough to live!’—But it is questionable if even bare life is possible, denuded of all meaning” (*TWM*, 81). By the time Lewis publishes *Men Without Art* (1934), this difficulty of bare living comes to be understood as the generalized condition that modernity has brought forth. “All the influences in fact of the machine-age, political and intellectual, are productive of this back-to-nature, or *back-to-the-body*, movement, where our persons are concerned: an abstracting and abstracting of distinctive marks, of distinctive dress, until we

get down to the puritanic bedrock of the bare body and no nonsense.”⁶¹

Abstraction and denuding has become such a gigantic process that any effort of contrary creativity has been effectively annulled. Apparently artists are the most important casualties of this bare existence. Yet this is a point of major ambivalence for Lewis, for in some moments of honesty he is compelled to admit his own complicity with (or involvement in) this process of abstraction. Consider Lewis in “Plain Home-Builder: Where is Your Vorticist?” (1934): “we come to the paradox of this same artist applauding many of the features peculiar to this frugal and denuded—‘nudist’ and needy—scene, and having indeed been in part responsible for them (as was Vorticism, as I have said)” (*CHCC*, 254). The spirit of economy, the drive towards the essentials, has reduced humanity to the level of bare existence, yet it has also fostered the artistic invention of great value, that of naked abstraction; such is the contradiction in which Lewis is bodily captured, with no easy escape.⁶²

The Apes of God has traditionally been the most difficult work to evaluate in Wyndham Lewis’s entire oeuvre. Some critics are openly negative, saying that it is “often tedious” or “virtually unreadable”; while others admire it

⁶¹ Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*, ed. Seamus Cooney (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), 128. Emphasis in original. Hereafter abbreviated to *MWA*.

⁶² Cf. Vincent Sherry, “Wyndham Lewis” in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 7 Modernism and the New Criticism*, eds. A Walton Litz, Louis Menand and Lawrence Rainey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 138-50. Sherry points out that the major contradiction of Lewis’s criticism exists between his determinist accounts of contemporary society and his assertion of his own creative independence.

superlatively as Lewis's "greatest work" or "neglected masterpiece."⁶³ Instead, perhaps we should view it essentially as a work of ambivalent compromise. If we follow Lewis's lead to understand those forces of abstraction and denuding as somehow productive of the highest qualities of modernist art, we might see his own work as one of them. Yet there is also in Lewis a persistent, if still minor, pull towards the ideals of love and beauty, which requests him to refrain from facing the naked truth. The resulting conflict, one between an urge to expose the nudity and a desire to avert the eyes, creates a work haunted by moments of profound shame. In the end, Dan's burning cheeks are the most effective synecdoche to express *The Apes of God* in its entirety.

5.

But *The Apes of God* is not quite the terminal station that Wyndham Lewis's 'Enemy' project has arrived at. Satire, as we have seen above, is not exactly

⁶³ See respectively, Reed Way Dasenbrock, *The Literary Vorticism of Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis: Towards the Condition of Painting* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 169; Fredric Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 5; Geoffrey Wagner, op. cit. 250; Paul Edwards, "The Apes of God: Form and Meaning" in *Wyndham Lewis: A Revaluation*, ed. Jeffrey Meyers (London: Athlone Press, 1980), 133-48, 148. I think the formulation of Robert Chapman, "the biggest *succès de scandale* of a very controversial career" is most accurate. See, Chapman, *Wyndham Lewis: Fictions and Satires* (London: Vision, 1973), 99. In other words, its status as a *succès d'estime* is still precarious.

what Lewis's 'surface' aesthetics of love and beauty has initially aimed at, but it is a logical consequence of his intense antipathy towards, and his deep humiliations in, the modern commercialized institutions whereby books and art objects are widely yet selectively circulated. His hatred for the system of "What the Public Wants" has led him to embrace a pessimistic vision of a puppet-like audience, who are all too willing to be deceived and manipulated by cynical middlemen. Yet such an obsessive vision is itself potentially destructive, and *The Apes of God* registers a narrow escape from the danger of the naked truth in Dan's blushing cheeks. It also marks the cul-de-sac where Lewis has trapped himself in his adversarial modernist practice. Before Lewis resigns his 'Enemy' stance and makes a decisive turn away from the "Cult of the Bare," perhaps it is necessary for Lewis to recognise, shamelessly (as it were), the potential destructiveness of his hatred in its full implications. As a coda to this chapter, I shall offer a reading of *Snooty Baronet* (1932), his next novel after *The Apes*, exactly as such a moment of recognition, which can be also regarded, appropriately enough, as an ambiguous turning point for Lewis.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ This is not to claim that Lewis had ceased to be combatively polemical after *Snooty Baronet*. Indeed, Lewis continued to publish intensely controversial political pamphlets throughout the 1930s, such as *Left Wing over Europe: or, How to Make a War about Nothing* (1936) and *Count Your Dead: They are Alive!* (1937). Yet Lewis in his novels, such as *Revenge for Love* and *The Vulgar Streak*, became less and less uncomfortable with the orthodox narrative lines and conventionally romantic elements such as love and friendship (although they are in their way satirical novels; the former against the fashionable British Left, the latter against the bogus monetary system.) *Snooty Baronet* has been until recently an underrated novel among Lewis's canons. But see, Timothy Materer, *Wyndham Lewis the*

If *The Apes of God* has struck a deadly blow against pretentious ‘highbrow’ coteries, *Snooty Baronet* chooses the shallows of the cheap fiction industry as its direct satirical target.⁶⁵ Its first-person narrator, Sir Michael Kel-Imrie (the eponymous Snooty Baronet), is a First World War veteran with a wooden leg and silver plate on his head. He was once a big-game hunter, yet after his reading of Melville’s *Moby Dick* he is convinced that he belongs to the side of hunted Nature rather than hunting Mankind, and decides to “hatch a plot against Mankind.”⁶⁶ This he executes by writing supposedly ‘scientific’ behaviorist observations of people, published as *People Behaving*. Yet this inadvertently brings him unwanted dealings with contemptible commercial ‘men of letters’: Mrs Valerie Ritter (Val), a gossip-mad, aspiring authoress and his girlfriend, and Captain Humphrey Cooper Carter (Humph), his rich literary agent and ex-war-colleague. Humph commissions Kel-Imrie to do research on the survival of the Mithraist cult in Persia, yet actually it is a publicity stunt to create an artificial boost for a best-seller. It is arranged by Humph that Kel-Imrie be kidnapped by a band of bogus brigands and then ransomed during the trip to Persia. At first unwilling, Kel-Imrie eventually obliges when he thinks that the trip might be a good occasion to get rid of

Novelist (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1976), 98-111. Daniel Schenker, *Wyndham Lewis: Religion and Modernism* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 83-93.

⁶⁵ Another of Lewis’s novel which takes up the same subject is *The Roaring Queen*, a satirical attack on Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf, written around 1930 but remain unpublished until 1973, a posthumous publication from Secker & Warburg. By general agreement it is a much weaker novel.

⁶⁶ Wyndham Lewis, *Snooty Baronet*, ed. Bernard Rafourcade (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1984), 63. Hereafter abbreviated to *SB*.

Humph and Val all at once by making them fancy each other. Yet this contrivance fails as it emerges that they had known each other before Kel-Imrie had made them meet, and the trip becomes a ridiculously quarrelsome one. Kel-Imrie puts a period to all this in the momentary flurry of an arranged meeting with the brigands, by impulsively shooting Humph dead. After returning to London, Kel-Imrie publishes a true narrative of his gratuitous murder, one that rebuts Val's attempt to exonerate him and ironically turns out to be *Snooty Baronet* itself, a promised bestseller ("a sale of a hundred thousand copies as a minimum" [SB, 251]) with its contract with The Book of the Month Club and the prize from The Book Society.

As a story about the artificial creation of a best-seller, *Snooty Baronet* obviously reflects Lewis's view that the marketplace of books is thoroughly controlled by the manipulative hands of influential reviewers, advertisers and literary agents. Equally manifest is Kel-Imrie's glaring contempt for his fellow creatures, especially fellow workers in the same industry such as Val and Humph. When he is having a dinner with Val, Kel-Imrie is easily depressed with "a manikin-parade of all her poshest social attitudes and a whole wardrobe of complexes" (SB, 47). Humph he freely describes as "a big carnival doll" with "a sculptured figurehead" (SB, 59). This optical reduction of people to puppets is perfectly in line with Kel-Imrie's 'scientific' research books, which follows the doctrine of the 'behaviorist' psychology that regards human beings merely as bundles of external stimuli and responses (without any introspective realms such as intention, thought, feeling, and

imagination).⁶⁷ Yet what dismays Kel-Imrie is that his ‘scientific’ works are not received as such, but only as “*Works of Art*,” specifically those of the “perfect naïf” like Rousseau the Douanier. Adding insult to injury is Humph’s promotional disclosure that Kel-Imrie’s identity is an impoverished Baronet (as he says; “As ‘Sir Michael’ I became a new person. My game-leg became an aristocratic embellishment, my authorship became a harmless joke” [SB, 69]). Kel-Imrie’s dilemma, the source of his animus towards Humph, is that of a serious author inadvertently trapped in the mercenary world of commercial publications; as such, it is perfectly comparable to that of Wyndham Lewis himself. Moreover, if Kel-Imrie is a writer who aspires to advance claims of ‘Science’ which are mistaken as those of ‘Art’ (much to his dismay), Lewis is first and foremost a writer aspiring to the claim of ‘Art’ whose predilection to satire deflects himself away into that of ‘Science.’ Their practices as writers are criss-crossed in the same region of the categorical ambiguity between works of ‘Art’ and those of ‘Science’: never ‘Fiction,’ “Big Business,” and that is certain. What then, in fact?

⁶⁷ It is noteworthy that his practice also follows that of anthropology. As Kel-Imrie explains: “In these books I have taken up the study of Man upon the exactly the same footing as ape of insect. The regular anthropologist has done that, it is true, but only with a ‘backward’ race, or an ‘inferior’ class. I on the other hand make no distinctions. My victims are ‘progressive,’ popular, even ‘fashionable’ persons, of topdog race and showy class” (SB, 64). It is well known that the behaviorist psychology of J. B. Watson is one of the major targets of Lewis’s criticism. ABR, 339-42. TWM, 289-344. For the paradoxical connection between *Snooty Baronet* and Lewis’s critique of behaviorism, see, Kenner, op. cit. 107. Stephen E. Lewis, op. cit. 633-7. Paul Scott Stanfield, “‘This Implacable Doctrine’: Behaviorism in Wyndham Lewis’s *Snooty Baronet*” *Twentieth Century Literature* 27.2 (Summer 2001), 241-67, 256.

In a self-reflexive fashion, Kel-Imrie's wayward first-person narration is perpetually concerned with this question of its own status and motivations. *Snooty Baronet* starts with a third-person description of a man (with a wooden leg) emerging out of a taxi, yet in the third paragraph the narrative abruptly switches into the first-person, with a striking acknowledgement; "The face was mine." Kel-Imrie goes on to offer an excuse for this: "I can't help it if this has opened as if it were a gunman bestseller.—The fact is I am a writer: and the writer has so much the habit of the anonymous, that he is about to experience the same compunction about opening a book in the First Person Singular [...] as an educated man must feel about commencing a letter with an 'I'" (*SB*, 15; ellipsis mine). Yet as Jessica Burstein argues, this subjective dislocation (swift shuffle between 'I' and 'he') might be a symptom of his prosthetic dispersal (an effect of his artificial leg), as well as his professional compunction—a dispersal wherein the boundaries between self and other, mind and body, organic and inorganic, are elided in an uncanny facility.⁶⁸ I would argue that this dispersal also substitutes, or removes, his sense of shame. The second subjective dislocation in the novel happens at the moment of Kel-Imrie having sex with Val:

No very long time at all had elapsed certainly, when the

folding-doors once more came violently open, pulled from the inside

⁶⁸ Jessica Burstein, "Waspish Segments: Lewis, Prosthesis, Fascism," *Modernism/Modernity* 4:2 (April 1997), 139-64, 141-3. Another essay which considers Lewis within the context of prosthesis is Hal Foster, "Prosthetic God" *ibid.*, 5-38.

on this occasion. A one-legged man hopped out. He was as naked as God ushered him into the world and as the Grave will take him back. Sitting down upon the end of the settee, and bending over the gilt-flowered slop-vessel, this man proceeded to be ill. Eventually he sank into an arm-chair, whose big square hollow shelf fronted the fireplace. Repeatedly he carried his hand to that part of his skull where there was a silver place.

That one-legged naked man in the sumptuous second-hand Chelsea arm-chair—carrying his hand, as if in pain, to a spot upon the rear portion of his skull—within his abundant corn-yellow crest-line—was me (Upon my opening page I had to introduce myself, as you will recall. This time again I have to perform that office, as you might otherwise not have recognized me unclothed). (*SB*, 49-50)

Kel-Imrie says that owing to “that unaccountable feminine aversion for all that is direct” (*SB*, 49) he daren’t describe the sexual act itself; yet what is instantly observable in the passage is the unflinchingly external depiction of his own nakedness, combined with a will to neglect the painful qualm (caused by his head-injury incurred during the war) as a subjective experience.

Indeed, Kel-Imrie’s declared intention to write *Snooty Baronet* is to expose his nakedness thoroughly without caring about its pain of shame. “If I bare my heart and my imagination—holding the one like a slickly-skinned blood-orange in the left paw, and the other like a prodigious glow-worm within the palm-hollow of the right—it is not for your *applause*” (*SB*, 103;

emphasis in original). In short, his behaviorism is turning on to himself.

Yet what is the consequence of this shameless exposure?

The answer seems to be despair and madness. This is illustrated in the middle chapter, “The Hatter’s Automaton,” which Kel-Imrie himself calls his “turning-point” (*SB*, 251). After his meeting with Humph to arrange the Persia trip, Kel-Imrie walks into the Strand to get his favourite lunch (his mouth already starting to water in a Pavlovian manner), yet he stops in front of a hatter’s shop window as his attention is attracted by an automaton advertising a new straw hat. Kel-Imrie is first both amazed at its life-likeness and amused by its resemblance to Humph, but as the other passers-by gaze alternately at the automaton and Kel-Imrie (who wears a hat), Kel-Imrie is struck by a mad illumination. That is, he is himself looked at as though he were automaton, and he is surprised by how little they differ.

‘Behavior’ had as it were turned round upon me as well. As the man at my side observed me putting on my hat, I was for the first time placed in the position *of the dummy!* I saw all round Behavior as it were—for the first time. I knew that I was not always existing, either: in fact that I was a fitful appearance. That I was apt to go out at any moment, and turn up again, in some other place—like a light turned on by accident, or a figure upon a cinematographic screen.—and must I confess it? I was very slightly alarmed. I saw that I had to *compete* with these other creatures bursting up all over the imaginary landscape, and struggling against me to be *real*—like a

passionate battle for necessary air, in a confined place. (*SB*, 138; emphasis in original)

In a sense, this has been already implicit in Kel-Imrie's fitful third person reference to himself; that external description of his bodily movement as though he were a puppet without any internal realm of consciousness. Yet the full implication of this vision is not recognised until he encounters an actual automaton which is, appositely enough, a mere commercial gimmick for advertisement. By succumbing to Humph's publicity programme, Kel-Imrie is, as it were, threatened with the possibility of being reduced to a position analogous to that of the hatter's automaton, whose function is merely to satisfy the avarice of its master. Yet if he is himself fundamentally an unreal puppet, which is the naked truth for Kel-Imrie, escape might still be possible by competing with, and asserting his wilful reality against, those hordes of threatening commercial automatons. "They desire me to be their automaton! *I would in the end become their Frankenstein!*" (*SB*, 131; emphasis in original)

From the heat of competition to the murderous impulse is only one step further for Kel-Imrie; hence the gratuitous killing of Humph as the conclusion of his action. It is at this point that Lewis fully reveals the inhumanity of the vision which renders people puppets, without shame. An irony of the novel is, however, that Kel-Imrie seems to understand this shameless act in terms of its sensational value. After his return to London, Kel-Imrie says that he is "stepping into Humph's shoes and acting as my own publicity agent" when he

issues “a statement which was a bare outline” of what happened in Persia (*SB*, 251). Even the murder of the literary agent, which was nothing but the symbolic act against the system of mercenary publication, can be cynically exploited as a tool of further publicity. This marks the ultimate demoralization of Kel-Imrie’s ‘scientific’ spirit. Yet the message might be also that there is no way out from the commercial world in modernity, whether one holds it in violent contempt or not.

This ambiguity can be taken as the sign of Lewis’s gradual retreat from his ‘Enemy’ project, which has troubled him for more than ten years from the mid-1920s. In the 1934 essay, “‘Detachment’ and the Fictionist,” we can find Lewis, surprisingly enough, defending reading of fiction as a certain kind of individual entertainment, which in past years is nothing more than exploitation by the “Big Business.” He suggests that “the printed book (when it is art and not information) is indicated as the natural refuge of the romantic and individualist spirit” (*CHCC*, 219). A further surprise is that Lewis defines “Romance” as “an appeal to something outside the machine, an individualistic emotion” (*CHCC*, 225), which Lewis has consistently counterposed with his own modernist “Classicism.” If this can be understood within the context of his strategic move against the new collective pressure put upon the writing profession during the politicized 1930s, it is nevertheless true that Lewis is now in a spirit more responsive to the production of fiction as such, which is inevitably steeped in the commercial process, yet might allow a breathing space for the spirit of negative, individual freedom now apparently under the threat of mechanical

extinction.⁶⁹ It is not until he has reached this new standpoint that Lewis manages to set out to produce his later, more conventional narratives such as *The Revenge for Love* and *The Vulgar Streak*, hoping to gain a certain measure of commercial success. This is the way Wyndham Lewis bid his ambiguous farewell to the modernist obsession with the naked truth, as well as the spirit of shame and humiliation.

⁶⁹ This is not to suggest that Lewis has completely discarded his hostility towards the flourishing cheap fiction industry. For instance, when he turns to attack the German Nazism in *The Hitler Cult* (1939), Lewis identifies Adolf Hitler with the best-seller authors as a product of artificial publicity: "In the world of authorship and journalism there are persons who are called best-sellers, whose names are as well-known as that of Shakespeare. Nat Gould and Edgar Wallace, to take two examples. They come to the tongue as readily as the name of the author of King Lear. I hope it will not be regarded as lèse-majesté if I remark that I have always suspected that Hitler, as a politician, bore certain analogies to that." Wyndham Lewis, *The Hitler Cult* (London: Dent, 1939), 64.

CHAPTER 4

Dress of the People: Body, Fashion, and Common Readers in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*

1.

While Virginia Woolf is now firmly established as a central figure in the history of British literary modernism, in a sense she still remains a unique presence in that her relations with the general public of the day are often considered to have been relatively unproblematic. Unlike Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, or even T. S. Eliot, Woolf was seldom interested in striking a cavalier attitude against the supposed massification of the English reading public. Instead she willingly fashioned herself as a common reader, even while keeping a distance from the commercialization of the modern literary marketplace by establishing the Hogarth Press, her private publishing firm. This view of Woolf, while containing a certain amount of truth, unfortunately deflects our attention from the real troubles she actually suffered in the modern literary marketplace. More importantly, it can also prevent us from recognising how deeply the process of her writing was itself informed by her awareness of the tides of literary commodification.

To avoid this potential pitfall, in this chapter I shall first re-examine Woolf's attitudes to her contemporary reading audience. By fashioning herself as a common reader, Woolf tactically tried to reject the isolated authority of solitary artistic creation, and attempted to replace it with an ideal of reciprocal exchange with a collectivity of common readers. Yet her ideal exchange was not perfectly immune from moments of real conflict, nor was it sustained without certain difficult negotiations between public and private institutions. Her upholding of common readers and their power to decide

“all the claim to poetical honours” should be properly recognised as a defensive measure, a defence of the ideal of disinterested reading and writing against the false literary publicity which appears for her singularly contaminated with shame and humiliation.

The significance of this vision of common creativity for Woolf can be gauged from the fact that it is actually itself the important object of her creative imagination. She especially tried to envision the common creativity as a sort of bodily presence, or even, an organic process. It was with a view to express this bodily presence more openly that Woolf gradually began her search for new literary conventions. Woolf also imagined modernity as a powerful drive towards the exposure of the collective ancestral body after the long history of its suppression. I shall suggest that she paid a keen attention to the changing directions of contemporary female fashion during the 1920s precisely because she recognised certain potentials for the liberation of the suppressed body in fashion’s rapid development. Yet her direct involvement with the tides of fashion provoked an intensely ambivalent reaction in Woolf, as she grew increasingly aware of an aspect of fashion which might ensnare her artistic project with the hateful commercialism of the modern marketplace. It might threaten to transform the resurfaced ancestral body once again, not into the common naked body, but into the commodified body of abject prostitution. I shall therefore suggest that Woolf kept a keenly ambivalent attitude towards the tides of fashion as well as the exposure of the naked body, an ambivalence crucially expressed in her fiction as a sense of shame.

It is from these viewpoints that I shall offer my readings of two of

Woolf's important novels, *Orlando* (1928), and *Between the Acts* (1941). On the one hand, I shall first read the fantasy world of *Orlando* as the high point of Woolf's flirtations with the world of contemporary fashion. Modelled on the fashionable novelist Vita Sackville-West, and organized as a rapid succession of variously historical, regional, and exotic fashions, the novel gleefully envisions a radical potential of sex transformation in Orlando's practice of cross-dressing. It works to dispel the truth of the physical sexuality which is imagined as a timeless essence. Yet at the same time, Woolf makes Orlando confront the powerful conformity of Victorian fashion, which dictates a compulsive subjection at the risk of shame and humiliation. What is more, the novel describes the interaction of literature and fashion in the disingenuous commercialism of Sir Nicholas Greene in the Victorian period. Though Woolf playfully mocks the modern literary marketplace in *Orlando*, she cannot go so far as to uphold the traditional practice of aristocratic patronage as a viable alternative. I shall finally observe that the novel stages out a momentary flagging of Woolf's faith in the common reader when it issues an unusually direct appeal to uncommon readers.

On the other hand, I shall suggest that Woolf had undergone a crucial turn against modern fashion by the time she started writing *Between the Acts* under the threat of the Second World War. Although the novel is sometimes understood to represent an ideally direct exchange between artists and audience in its focus on a village pageant, I shall argue that the pastoral atmosphere remains merely superficial. Instead, in this novel, Woolf describes a village encroached on by the forces of modern market and

financial interests. In this divided world where most of its inhabitants are forced to assume split identities, Mrs. Manresa's modish performance of natural identity signifies a dangerous temptation of moneyed fashion.

Against this, Miss La Trobe's direction of a thrifty costume play can be regarded as posing a challenge to the vanity of outward appearances among different classes. But I shall also argue that the suggestion of the fundamental body beneath the clothes is itself a dangerous temptation for Woolf. The novel ultimately resists this temptation by describing how the audience reacts with a strong feeling of shame to La Trobe's will to exposure in the final scene of her pageant. In the end, far from envisioning the organic unity of the artist and her audience, Virginia Woolf dares to expose both as crucially isolated, fragmented, and humiliated. It is exactly upon this note of disillusionment, and in this shame, that Woolf aspires to continue her imaginative efforts, minimally within the modern literary marketplace.

2.

Virginia Woolf begins her first collection of essays, *The Common Reader* (1925), by famously salvaging the figure of the 'common reader' from a minor passage of Samuel Johnson. According to Woolf, the 'common reader' must be emphatically distinguished from critics and scholars. "Hasty, inaccurate, and superficial, snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be so long as it

serves his purpose and rounds his structure, his deficiencies as a critic are too obvious to be pointed out.”¹ Once this recounting of deficiencies could be easily taken as a self-referential description of her own ability and inclination as a writer of essays rather than pieces of criticism in a strict sense. Yet since then, it has been gradually recognised that Woolf’s identification with the ‘common reader’ is a deliberate rejection of authority. In “Hours in a Library” (1916), she establishes a distinction between learning and reading: “A reader... must check the desire for learning at the outset; if knowledge sticks to him well and good, but to go on in pursuit of it, to read on a system, to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading.”² For Woolf, a process of reading should ideally be different from the self-interested pursuit of expertise and authority. Woolf’s defence of a “pure and disinterested” readership is in turn informed by her conviction that it sustains an indispensable ground for the process of writing itself. As she suggests: “The standards we raise and the judgement we pass steal into the air and become part of the atmosphere which writers breathe as they work. And influence is created which tells upon them even if it never finds its way into print.”³

¹ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: First Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (1925; San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, 1984), 1. Hereafter abbreviated to *CRI*.

² Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume II 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, 1987), 55. Ellipsis mine. Hereafter abbreviated to *E2*.

³ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: Second Series*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (1932;

Woolf's self-fashioning as a reader rather than a critic disavows her authority as a solitary agent of artistic creation. She prefers to stand as a mere writer, a member of the group of common readers, engaged in an active dialogue which "allow[s] of affection, laughter, and argument," yet is to decide, in the words of Dr Johnson, "all the claim to poetical honours" (*CR1*, 1). The relationship between writer and reader as envisioned by Woolf thus appears to be exceptionally mellow and tender for a modernist author, and as such, a number of critics have recognised it as a model of desirable conditions. The relationship is claimed to be that of "highly intimate equals," or even similar to "sexual partners" in its emotional charge. It is also regarded as anti-authoritarian and highly democratic in its political orientations.⁴ True, Virginia Woolf's writings are solidly founded on a high Victorian cultural tradition; she was, after all, a daughter of Leslie Stephen, a prominent man of letters, in spite of her lack of university education. Yet Woolf's commitment to her audience is argued to be benevolently pedagogical, with her early career of teaching in Morley College (a workers' educational institution in London) as a formative experience.⁵ In a recent study, Melba Cuddy-Keane insists on

San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, 1986), 270. Hereafter abbreviated to *CR2*.

⁴ See Jeanne Dubino, "The Conditions of Life: Virginia Woolf and the Common Reader," in *Re: Reading, Re: Writing, Re: Teaching Virginia Woolf: Selected Papers from the Fourth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Eileen Barret and Patricia Cramer (New York: Pace University Press, 1995), 129-37. Beth C. Rosenberg, "Conversation and the Common Reader," in *Virginia Woolf Miscellanies: Proceedings of the First Annual Conference on Virginia Wolf*, eds. Mark Hussey and Vara Neverow-Turk (New York: Pace University Press, 1992), 1-8.

⁵ Beth Carole Daugherty, "Virginia Woolf Teaching/Virginia Woolf Learning:

this image of “pedagogical Woolf” by revealing her distrust of authoritative universities, a view shared with G. D. H. Cole, then a leader of the Workers’ Educational Association. According to Cuddy-Keane, both Woolf and Cole opposed one-way imparting of knowledge in the form of authoritative lecturing, arguing to replace it with open dialogue and discussion found in the style of seminars: “The give and give relation that G. D. H. Cole articulated as the ideal relation between the teacher and student is for Woolf the ideal relation between text and reader.”⁶ The reciprocity of mutual exchange thus emerges as a significant ideal for Woolf and her audience.

Despite all this, reciprocity of exchange alone doesn’t guarantee the harmonious co-existence between a writer and her audience. As Kate Flint has suggested, exactly because Woolf imagines the writer-reader relationship as intimate and passionate communication, “Woolf always has half an eye on the inevitable egocentric power struggles which simultaneously are in play.”⁷ Taking the experience of reading *Robinson Crusoe* as example, Woolf describes how difficult it is to adjust the perspective of the reader to that of the writer. “For we have our own vision of the world; we have made it from our own experience and prejudices, and it is therefore bound up with our own

Morley College and the Common Reader” in *New Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed Helen Wussow (Dallas: Contemporary Research, 1995), 61-77. For the biographical details, see Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography Volume One Virginia Stephen 1882-1912* (St Albans, Herts.: Triad Paperbacks, 1972), 105-107, 202-204. Virginia Stephen taught in Morley College from 1905 to 1907.

⁶ Melba Cuddy-Keane, *Virginia Woolf, the Intellectual, and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 132-3.

⁷ Kate Flint, “Reading Uncommonly: Virginia Woolf and the Practice of Reading,” *Yearbook of English Studies* 26 (1996), 187-98, 198.

vanities and loves” (*CR1*, 52-3). In “How Should One Read a Book?” in *The Second Common Reader* (1932), Woolf postulates that it would be desirable to “banish all such preconceptions when we read” (*CR2*, 259). Yet this ideal is admittedly difficult to achieve completely. As she writes: “there is always a demon in us who whispers, ‘I hate, I love,’ and we cannot silence him. Indeed, it is precisely because we hate and we love that our relation with the poets and novelists is so intimate that we find the presence of another person intolerable” (*CR2*, 268). In some cases, the passionate involvement in reading will certainly make for the intensity of intimacy between a particular text and its readership. Yet as Woolf cautions: “how [a book] will not suffer itself to be read passively, but takes us and reads us; flouts our preconceptions; questions principles which we had got into the habit of taking for granted, and, in fact, splits us into two parts as we read, making us, even as we enjoy, yield our ground or stick to our guns” (*CR1*, 48). In this instance, the open and personal dialogue between the writer and the reader begins to look like a powerful clash, a dire struggle between two opposing ideological standpoints.

The mutual benefit of reciprocal exchange threatens to lapse into mutual conflict partly because the ideal terms of intimate equality between the writer and the reader is always disrupted by forces of historical change. The conditions of authorship, as well as those of the reading public, are subject to the process of drastic shift. As Woolf argues: “take Cervantes and his audience—we, coming four centuries later, have a sense of breaking into a happy family party.” This is so because the group feeling of readers has

been now dispersed “since we have become educated and isolated and read our books by our own firesides in our own copies.”⁸ In a key 1924 essay “The Patron and the Crocus,” this fragmentation of unified readership is depicted in a more ominous colour:

For the present supply of patrons is of unexampled and bewildering variety. There is the daily Press, the weekly Press, the monthly Press; the English public and the American public; the best-seller public and the worst-seller public; the high-brow public and the red-blood public; all now organised self-conscious entities capable through their various mouthpieces of making their needs known and their approval or displeasure felt. Thus the writer who has been moved by the sight of the first crocus in Kensington Gardens has, before he sets pen to paper, to choose from a crowd of competitors the particular patron who suits him best. It is futile to say, ‘Dismiss them all; think only of your crocus,’ because writing is a method of communication; and the crocus is an imperfect crocus until it has been shared. (*CRI*, 206-7)

This passage reveals Woolf’s observation that the intimate relation between the writer and the reader is now inexorably mediated through the commercial

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume III 1919-1924*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, 1988), 157. Hereafter abbreviated to *E3*.

institutions such as press, journalism and advertising. Elsewhere she describes the change at issue as that “from a small audience of cultivated people to a larger audience of people who were not quite so cultivated” (*CRI*, 216). The coming of the mass reading public and the commercialization of the book-trade in the early twentieth century have now risen as a figure of threat to Woolf’s ideal model of authorship, insofar as they alienate writers from the intimate conversation with a knowable audience. The question of address—“for whom should we write?”—here imposes itself on writers like Woolf as a great difficulty, indeed as “our own predicament” (*CRI*, 206).

From 1904 on, years before she started writing her novels, Woolf had continued writing often anonymous reviews and short essays for various periodical papers such as the *Guardian*, the *Cornhill Magazine*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. This experience as a reviewer and journalist is said to have served her well as an apprenticeship in writing, yet it also first acquainted her with the unwelcome attention of male editors and possible censorship in the world of commercial journalism.⁹ Publishing her first novels, *The Voyage Out* (1915) and *Night and Day* (1919), from the press of her half-brother Gerald Duckworth didn’t help her either, as Woolf recorded in her diary in 1918: “[Gerald’s] commercial view of every possible subject depressed me, especially when I thought of my novel destined to be pawed &

⁹ For a good discussion of Woolf’s lifelong, often complexly ambivalent, dealings with journalism, see Leila Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf’s Essays and Journalism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), esp. 58-68 for her relation with Bruce Richmond, the editor of *TLS*.

snored over by him.”¹⁰ The latent undertone of sexual harassment, together with the commercial rules of trade, worsened her well-known anxiety about publication—addressing her private writings to the wider, unknown, and fragmentary public. Critics agree that the founding of the Hogarth Press in 1917, a joint venture of Leonard and Virginia Woolf, was a major turning point for her. John Mepham suggests that the Hogarth Press liberated Woolf’s spirit of literary experiment from the control of editorial censorship in the commercial world. Laura Marcus also argues the “Hogarth Press represented work, but work that cut out the middleman and escaped literary commodification. It gave Woolf a way of negotiating the terms of literary publicity, and a space somewhere between the private, the coterie, and the public sphere.”¹¹ The Press indeed gave her a material footing of exceptional independence, as she thought in 1925: “I’m the only woman in England free to write what I like.”¹²

Yet this creation of a space “somewhere between the private, the coterie, and the public sphere” might have been more ambiguous, at least in its early days. This is partly because the Press was at first a venture supported largely

¹⁰ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 1 1915-1919*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), 129. Hereafter abbreviated to *D1*. According to her recollection, Virginia Stephen as a child suffered sexual abuse from Gerald Duckworth.

¹¹ John Mepham, *Virginia Woolf: A Literary Life* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 52-53. Laura Marcus, “Virginia Woolf and the Hogarth Press,” in *Modernist Writers and the Marketplace*, eds. Ian Willison, Warwick Gould, and Warren Chenaik (London: Macmillan, 1996), 124-150, 144-5.

¹² Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 3 1925-1930*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), 43. Hereafter abbreviated to *D3*.

by her friends in the Bloomsbury group, and publication through it practically entailed a drastic reduction in the number of copies available for the general reading public. Private publication demanded a small-scale audience and presumed a strategic retreat from the modern mass readers. In April 1921, when her *Monday or Tuesday* was met with a relative silence, Woolf wrote in her diary:

Well, this question of praise & fame must be faced.... One wants, as Roger said very truly yesterday, to be kept up to the mark; that people should be interested, & watch one's work. What depresses me is the thought that I have ceased to interest people—at the very moment when, by the help of the press, I thought I was becoming more myself. One does not want an established reputation, such as I think I was getting, as one of our leading female novelists. I have still, of course, to gather in all the private criticism, which is the real test. When I have weighed this I shall be able to say whether I am 'interesting' or obsolete. Anyhow, I feel quite alert enough to stop, if I'm obsolete. I shan't become a machine, unless a machine for grinding articles. As I write, there rises somewhere in my head that queer, & very pleasant sense, of something which I want to write; my own point of view. I wonder, though, whether the feeling that I write for half a dozen instead of 1500 will pervert this?—make me eccentric,—no, I think not.¹³

¹³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 2 1920-1924*, ed. Anne

As Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace point out, Woolf here introduces an implicit distinction between writings to meet financial necessity (her periodical articles) and writings to express “my own point of view” (her books), which roughly corresponds to the difference between the audience of “1500” and that of “half a dozen.”¹⁴ This passage invites the argument that Woolf needed the supportive coterie of elite readers (which can offer the authentic “private criticism”) in order to save her art from compromising with the wider audience.¹⁵ Even if non-commercial publication was important for Woolf, to the extent that it helped her to preserve the ideal of “pure and disinterested” readership, it also courted the risk of turning her artistic pursuit into a very private world created for coterie consumption.

Woolf was aware of these dangers. In April 1920, she wrote a review on a collection of letters of Henry James for the *TLS*. As she explains, Henry James attributed the poor reception of his works to the incapacity of the

Olivier Bell (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 106-7. Ellipsis mine. Hereafter abbreviated to *D2*.

¹⁴ Bridget Elliott and Jo-Ann Wallace, *Women Artists and Writers: Modernist (Im)Positionings* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 70-73.

¹⁵ For a well-balanced argument on this point, see Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (Berkeley, L.A.: University of California Press, 1986), 111. Patrick Collier also notes that Woolf much preferred the private form of literary criticism to written reviews. “Woolf, Privacy, and the Press,” in *Virginia Woolf: Turning the Centuries: Selected Papers from the Ninth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf*, eds. Ann Ardis and Bonnie Kime Scott (New York: Pace University Press, 2000), 223-9. Also see, Virginia Woolf’s 1936 memoir, “Am I a Snob?” in *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind (London: Pimlico, 2002), 68: “The only criticisms of my books that draw blood are those that are unprinted; those that are private.” Hereafter abbreviated to *MO*.

general public, as a “failure on the part of the public to receive,” although it did not immediately “make less desirable the vision of an order of things where the public gratefully and with understanding accepts at the artists’ hands, what is, after all, the finest essence, transmuted and returned of the public itself” (E3, 202). Yet James eventually chose to seclude himself, regarding the wider public only as “a barbarian crowd,” unworthy of receiving his gift. “A select group, representative of civilization, had at the same time protested its devotion, but how far can one write for a select group?” (E3, 202) Woolf indeed leaves several question marks to such an arrangement of writing only for a small coterie. And it is two year later in 1922, in reviewing Percy Lubbock’s *The Craft of Fiction* (1921), that Woolf finally started to demand popular support for contemporary creative efforts: “the common reader will refuse to sit any longer open-mouthed in passive expectation.... We must press close on his heels, and so bring to bear upon the novelist who spins his books in solitude the pressure of an audience” (E3, 344; ellipsis mine). The secluded craftsman like Henry James should meet the gathering pressure of re-united common readers.

Woolf’s summoning of common readers should be thus understood in opposition to her sporadic susceptibility to the allure of a coterie. Seen from this angle, it is highly ironic that Woolf’s self-publication and her Bloomsbury network of influential friends started to attract a number of hostile criticisms especially towards the middle of her career as a novelist. As Hermione Lee puts it neatly: “The Press freed her, but it also led to her being seen as a

protected species.”¹⁶ Reviewing Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), Arnold Bennett easily dismissed it as “a high-brow lark”; next year, he went on to label Woolf herself as “the queen of high-brows,” while he contentedly classified himself as “a low-brow.”¹⁷ Q. D. Leavis in her *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) repeatedly quotes Woolf’s works as examples of “highbrow art,” too sophisticated to be understood by ordinary readers, saying that “[her work] is especially calculated to baffle the general public of the twentieth century.” Wyndham Lewis probably represents the worst of these attacks on the Bloomsbury group in *Satire and Fiction* (1931) and *Men Without Art* (1934), condemning them for monopolizing and manipulating the market to exclude Lewis’s own works from their rightful share of public recognition.¹⁸

Yet Woolf’s counter-attacks can be as vehement as any. In a self-suppressed 1932 letter to the *New Statesman*, later titled “Middlebrow,” Woolf contemptuously calls the works of middlebrow writers “this mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calves-foot jelly.” She even accuses them of conspiring to separate the natural unity of the highbrow writers and the lowbrow audience. She asserts: “the true battle in my opinion lies not between highbrow and lowbrow, but between highbrows and lowbrows joined together in blood brotherhood against the

¹⁶ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1996), 367.

¹⁷ Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin, eds. *Virginia Woolf: the Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1975), 232, 258.

¹⁸ Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932; rpt, London: Pimlico, 2000), 60-61, 222-3. Wyndham Lewis, *Satire and Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1930), 8. Wyndham Lewis, *Men Without Art*, ed. Seamus Cooney (Santa Rosa: Black Sparrow Press, 1987), 131-150.

bloodless and pernicious pest who comes between.”¹⁹ As Woolf re-imagines the relation between her writings and the public as the mutual exchange of honours (“Lowbrows need highbrows and honour them just as much as highbrows need lowbrows and honour them” [CE2, 198]), it is as though the conflict of viewpoints between the writer and the reader were now displaced onto a deadly combat between the non-commercial highbrow and the mercenary middlebrow. In “The Dream” (1940), a review of the biography of Marie Corelli, Woolf called her “as damning an indictment of Victorian taste in one way as the Albert Memorial is in another.” The problem is that Corelli made an outrageous performance out of her obscure, indeed shameful, background: “society blew that golden bubble, as Miss Corelli herself might have written, from the black seed of shame.... But nature had endowed her with a prodigious power of making public confession of this small ignoble vice. Instead of hiding herself she exposed herself.”²⁰ The press exposure was for Corelli a sort of addictive opium to mitigate the pains of her shame. Her fiction of dreamy fantasies was, to use the words of Woolf in “Bad Writers” (1918), only a means of “revenging themselves upon reality” (E2, 328).

Although Woolf wishes to stay with the group of common readers which decides “all the claim of poetical honours,” she is inexorably drawn into the

¹⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays: Volume Two*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: The Hogarth Press, 1966), 196-203. Hereafter abbreviated to CE2. The occasion of writing this letter, and her decision not to send it, is detailed in Cuddy-Keane, *op. cit.* 13-34.

²⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Collected Essays: Volume IV*, ed. Leonard Woolf (New York: Harcourt, 1967), 98. Ellipsis mine.

entrenched conflict of the stratified publics. Woolf's attacks on the commercial journalism become even harsher as she finds it difficult to avoid the spotlight in the world of publication and publicity, which appears, for her, singularly contaminated with shame and humiliation.²¹ In a pamphlet "Reviewing" (1939), Woolf condemns the public profile of authors as "that hybrid between the peacock and the ape" (CE2, 214), and proposes to abolish the system of periodical reviews as the main venue of unwholesome publicity. In her opinion, the review articles can never be a genuine work of criticism. Their only effect is rather to inflate the vanity of authors, and, if they are hostile, to damage their sensibility. "Tennyson and Dickens are both angry and hurt; they are also ashamed of themselves for feeling such emotions. The reviewer was a louse; his bite was contemptible; yet his bite was painful" (CE2, 206). In Woolf's image, authors as reviewed in periodicals are almost like a seamstress as she is exhibited in a shop-window for officious passers-by in the main street. Once the review system is abolished, it would be possible to excise the vanity of authorship all at once, with its attendant troubles of insidious shame. Only then would the writer become "an obscure workman doing his job in the darkness of the workshop and not unworthy of respect" (CE2, 214-5). Doubtlessly, such is the genuine hope of Woolf; yet the impracticality of her proposed abolition might only reveal the depth and

²¹ As Leila Brosnan points out, Woolf's hostility and contempt for the journalistic middlemen is most typically and violently expressed in her satirical poem, "Fantasy upon a Gentleman Who Contrived His Impression of a Private House into Cash," occasioned by a visit of a *New York Times* reporter to her private house without appointment, in 27 May 1937. This poem is included as an appendix to Quentin Bell, *op. cit.* vol. 2, 253-4. Brosnan, *op. cit.* 70-89.

extent of her exasperation over the mire of modern publicity.

3.

In her final years, as we have seen above, Woolf prefers that authors be like an obscure seamstress rather than “that curious hybrid between the peacock and the ape.” While her violent dislike of press publicity can account for her hostility towards these animals (considered vain and imitative), we might be slightly puzzled by the seamstress which she offered as a preferable image for authorship. Yet in fact, she is here invoking a very traditional image, an association between writing and clothing in Western literary conventions. According to Claude Rawson, under the *ancien régime* there was “a tradition in which language was commonly referred to as the dress of thought.”²² The problem is rather in the fact that her use of this dress image did not prevent Woolf from considering her literary practice in terms of bodily metaphors at other times. For instance, in her 1923 polemical essay “Character in Fiction,” Woolf attacks the naturalist conventions of the Edwardian novelists (Wells, Bennett, and Galsworthy) for their cumbrousness, and suggests that literary conventions should be instead like agreeable manners at party occasions, as both are necessary means of “bridging the gulf between the hostess and her unknown guest on the one hand, the writer and his unknown

²² Claude Rawson, *Satire and Sentiment 1660-1830: Stress Points in the English Augustan Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 141.

reader on the other” (E3, 431). Woolf’s point of innovations is to create a new means of reaching “this common meeting-place” with a certain immediacy and swiftness: “easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one’s eyes shut” (E3, 431). As Gillian Beer argues, Woolf often imagines this common ground of creativity also as a sort of bodily presence, or even an organic process. She famously declares in *A Room of Ones Own* (1929): “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice.”²³ This view conforms with her tactic of transferring the solitary authority of the isolated writer to the collaborative authority of a common audience.²⁴ But if this potentially jars with the image of clothing in her literary imagination, it is because the presence of the collective “body of the people” is never conspicuously visible, nor is Woolf inclined to presuppose it so facilely.

Occasionally, in some fugitive, passing references, Woolf assumes the body to be the cornerstone of a collective mentality that distinguishes the English literary tradition. “English fiction from Sterne to Meredith bears witness to our natural delight in humour and comedy, in the beauty of earth, in

²³ Gillian Beer, *Virginia Woolf: the Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), esp. Chapter 3, “The Body of the People: *Mrs Dalloway* to *The Waves*,” 48-73. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own/Three Guineas*, ed. Michèle Barret (1929, 1938; London: Penguin, 1993), 59-60. Hereafter abbreviated to *ROO* and *TG*.

²⁴ For this point, see Christine Froula, “Modernism, Genetic Texts and Literary Authority in Virginia Woolf’s Portraits of the Author as the Audience,” *Romantic Review*, 86 (1995), 513-26.

the activities of the intellect, and in the splendour of the body” (*CRI*, 154). This “natural delight” in humour and comedy is so ingrained in the tradition that, even when contemporary English readers take delight in a comedy of past ages, spontaneous laughter always brings them back to the ancestral body of the people in the national past: “Humour, after all, is closely bound up with a sense of the body. When we laugh at the humour of Wycherley, we are laughing with the body of that burly rustic who was our common ancestor on the village green” (*CRI*, 36). Yet on other occasions, Woolf evokes a recognisable narrative of historical process in which the open splendour of the collective body has been gradually suppressed, a process that is subtly coordinated with the historical change of literary style. In “The Pastons and Chaucer,” for instance, her admiration for the frankness of Chaucer is contrasted with a sense of its impossibility for modern writers:

Much of Chaucer—a few lines of perhaps each of the Tales—is improper and gives us as we read it the strange sensation of being naked to the air after being muffled in old clothing. And, as a certain kind of humour depends upon being able to speak without self-consciousness of the parts and functions of the body, so with the advent of decency literature lost the use of one of its limbs. It lost its power to create the Wife of Bath, Juliet’s nurse, and their recognisable though already colourless relation, Moll Flanders. Sterne, from fear of coarseness, is forced into indecency. He must be witty, not humorous; he must hint instead of speaking outright.

Nor can we believe, with Mr Joyce's *Ulysses* before us, that laughter of the old kind will ever be heard again. (*CRI*, 15)

Woolf's repeated charge that *Ulysses* was "indecent" (*CRI*, 151-2) is contextualized here by her perception that "the advent of decency" has imposed a new restraint on the freedom of expressing the body openly. In "Notes on an Elizabethan Play," she writes: "Theirs is that broad humour based upon the nakedness of the body, which, however arduously the public-spirited may try, is impossible since the body is draped" (*CRI*, 55). While Woolf still recognises the common humour of the naked body in Elizabethan plays, it is in the same Elizabethan age that she finds the origins of restrictive costume. Whereas this great seafaring period resulted in material accumulation, "the lumber room crammed with sea beasts and horns and ivory and old maps and nautical instruments," which inspired English poetry of the day, Woolf suggests that the same cannot be said about English prose: "Rhyme and metre helped the poets to keep the tumult of their perceptions in order. But the prose writer, interminable catalogues, tripped and stumbled over the convolutions of his own rich draperies" (*CRI*, 43). The expanding colonial empire had given rise to material abundance and long-winded prose of "rich draperies," which later culminated in the squeamish morality of the Victorian England as experienced by the young Virginia Stephen.

Virginia Woolf's revolt against Victorian conventions leads her to imagine her attempt at artistic innovations as a paradoxical return to the

nakedness that she recognised in the past literature. As early as in “The Decay of Essay-Writing” (1905), she writes that becoming naked is one of the options to rekindle the interests of the age-old British public: “we confine ourselves to no one literary medium; we try to be new by being old; we revive mystery-plays and affect an archaic accent; we deck ourselves in the fine raiment of an embroidered style; we cast off all clothing and disport ourselves nakedly.”²⁵ When the post-First World War Britain saw the gathering force of experimental spirits in art and literature, this casting off of old clothing seemed to become one of the dominant strands of Woolf’s thought. In her 1919 review of Dorothy Richardson’s *Tunnel* (the fourth volume of *Pilgrimage* [1915-38]), Woolf argues that Richardson “denuded” the consciousness of Miriam Henderson by “cast[ing] away” all the conventions of realistic novels (*E3*, 10). Reviewing an exhibition of African tribal sculptures in 1920, Roger Fry excitedly declares that modernity has seen a radical destruction and decentralization of the narrowly European worldview: “in the last sixty years, knowledge and perception have poured upon us so fast that the whole well-ordered system has been blown away, and we stand bare to the blast, scarcely able to snatch a hasty generalisation or two to cover our nakedness for a moment.”²⁶ In Fry’s excitement, we might hear an echo of Woolf’s earlier experiment in the short story form, “The Mark on the Wall” (1917). “The wonder is that I’ve any clothes on my back, that I sit

²⁵ Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume I 1904-1911*, ed. Andrew McNeillie (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, 1987), 25.

²⁶ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (1920; Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 1998), 70.

surrounded by solid furniture at this moment. Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour—landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked!"²⁷ The fresh perception of modernity is conveyed through its explosive force and accelerated speed. It is an irresistible yet comical power of wind blowing the old clothes off, stripping the self and body naked.

More than a metaphorical expression is surely at issue here, for, in the 1920s, the most visible change in British social life was seen in women's everyday appearance. While female clothes of the Victorian period were characterized by their volume and a cumbrousness which restricted bodily movements, the post-war period saw a drastic lightening which was taken to symbolize the new freedom of women. Looking back from 1938, Cicely Hamilton observes: "It is not only that our skirts are shorter than they were in times past; they are also fewer in number—gone are the petticoats that flapped round the ankle and were once considered a necessity." Robert Graves and Alan Hodge suggest that the wartime labour of women and absence of men resulted in a liberation of women from old conventions, which included the wider use of cosmetics adapted from American culture.²⁸ For Peter Walsh in

²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Dick (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt, 1989), 84. Hereafter abbreviated to *CSF*. This connection is suggested in Sue Roe, "The Impact of Post-Impressionism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, eds. Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 169.

²⁸ Cicely Hamilton, *Modern England: As Seen by an Englishwoman* (London: Dent, 1938), 83. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge, *The Long Week-End: A Social History*

Mrs Dalloway (1925), this change is keenly felt because of his recent return to London after long absence in the colonial empire:

Those five years—1918 to 1923—had been, he suspected, somehow very important. People looked different. Newspapers seemed different. Now, for instance, there was a man writing quite openly in one of the respectable weeklies about water-closets. That you couldn't have done ten years ago—written quite openly about water-closet in a respectable weekly. And then this taking out a stick of rouge, or a powder-puff, and making up in public. On board ship coming home there were lots of young men and girls—Betty and Bertie he remembered in particular—carrying on quite openly; the old mother sitting and watching them with her knitting, cool as a cucumber. The girl would stand still and powder her nose in front of every one. And they weren't engaged; just having a good time.²⁹

He seems to understand the use of make-up in the public space as a part of new visibility of sexuality by associating it with open flirtations. Yet the curious parallel of make-up with the periodical article about “water-closets” in this passage suggests that Woolf's attention is directed more to the

of Great Britain 1918-1939 (London: Faber and Faber, 1939), 39-40. On the connection between the restrictive cumbrousness of Victorian dress and subordinate role of women, see Helen E. Roberts, “The Exquisite Slave: The Role of Clothes in the Making of the Victorian Woman,” *Signs* 2:3 (Spring 1977), 554-569.

²⁹ Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway*, ed. Stella McNichol (1925; London: Penguin, 1992), 78.

discursive possibility opened by the new freedom of writing about bodily functions—a licence most memorably exploited in the fourth episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, which, incidentally, Woolf didn't like. Lifting the inhibitory pressure of decency is also a major concern for J. C. Flügel, who wrote a book titled *Psychology of Clothes* (1930). Flügel argues that "our attitude towards clothes is *ab initio* 'ambivalent'," because clothes are only a conventional device to strike a balance between two contradictory impulses; innate, narcissistic impulse of self-display, especially that of the naked body, and secondary, socially constructed impulse of modesty. From this angle, clothes are seen only as a compromise between the impulses of nudity and modesty, and therefore, "it may indeed be said that clothes resemble a perpetual blush upon the surface of humanity," a blush of shame which he thinks will disappear in the future, as a desirable goal of contemporary fashion of lightening female clothing.³⁰

Woolf seems to have been keenly aware of this tide of contemporary fashion as well as this power of inherited shame. Yet the relation between the drift of fashion and the agency of artistic innovation is a more ambiguous issue for her. In "Modern Fiction," in *The Common Reader*, she repeats her critique of the Edwardian novels, which, despite being "the form of fiction

³⁰ J. C. Flügel, *Psychology of Clothes* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930), 17-21. This book is published from the Hogarth Press, as one of the series of the International Psycho-Analytic Library. His opinion is oriented by a psychoanalytic observation that the body represents a superior significance of reality principle, and the cultural acquisition of traditional modesty has only obstructed it to be properly recognised. Flügel's book on clothes paradoxically concludes by prophesying their future disappearance and advent of the age of nudity.

most in vogue,” fail to capture what she is eagerly seeking for. “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide” (*CRI*, 149). For Woolf, being “dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour” only means a spirit of conformity, very much similar to a subjection to some external influences. In order to give voice to the fleeting nature of everyday perception—“an incessant shower of innumerable atoms”—an artist should stick to the independence of her own inspiration. Therefore she suggests: “if a writer were a free man and not a slave... there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style, and perhaps not a single button sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it” (*CRI*, 150; ellipsis mine). In *A Room of One's Own*, this objection to “the Bond Street tailors” is more recognisably inflected by her feminist interests. When she describes the creative efforts of Mary Carmichael, her exemplary female novelist, Woolf writes that Mary will approach the small rooms of “the courtesan, the harlot and the lady with the pug dog” not with the respectability of the upper middle class, but with “the spirit of fellowship.” “There they still sit in the rough and ready-made clothes that the male writer has had perforce to clap upon their shoulders. But Mary Carmichael will have out her scissors and fit them close to every hollow and angle” (*ROO*, 80). According to this, the creation of novelty by the emergent female novelists is still figured as a sort of tailoring, but it is a making of clothes neatly fit to the body of individual wearers, a turn against the uniform fashion observed in the way the dominant male novelists have

traditionally represented a number of marginalized women.

Woolf's ambiguous involvement in fashion is most conspicuous around the mid-1920s, when she contributed to *Vogue*, following a solicitation of Dorothy Todd, its editor from 1924-26, who aspired to make it more than a mere fashion paper by drawing on contemporary artistic movements. As Aurelea Mahood points out, *Vogue* under Todd's editorship deliberately cultivated the confluence between the novelty of fashion and that of high art. It is not only Virginia Woolf and other members of the Bloomsbury Group, but also other highbrow figures such as Aldous Huxley, Richard Aldington, and Edith Sitwell, who cheerfully festooned the pages of the fashion magazine with articles on Joyce and Stein, Picasso and Brancusi.³¹ Although Woolf published four essays in *Vogue* at a good rate of payment, her personal reaction to its editor was remarkably ambivalent, informed by a perception that the mass cultural arena of the fashion paper was perhaps not worthy of a high cultural work like that of the Bloomsbury Group. When one of her friends privately challenged Woolf by that line of argument, she retorted: "whats [sic] the objection to whoring after Todd? Better whore, I think, than honestly and timidly and coolly and respectably copulate with the Times Lit.

³¹ Aurelea Mahood, "Fashion Readers: The *avant garde* and British *Vogue*, 1920-9," *Women: A Cultural Review* 13:1 (2002), 37-47. For the relation of the Bloomsbury Group and *Vogue* magazine, see Jane Garrity, "Selling Culture to the 'Civilized': Bloomsbury, British *Vogue*, and the Marketing of National Identity," *Modernism/Modernity* 6:2 (1999), 29-58. For the complete list of contributions by these writers, Elgin W. Mellown, "An Annotated Checklist of Contributions by Bloomsbury and Other British Avant-Garde Writers (and of Articles Relating to Them) in *Vogue* Magazine during the Editorship of Dorothy Todd, 1923-1927," *Bulletin of Bibliography* 53 (1996), 227-34.

Sup.”³² Yet if this sounds more like a bravado statement than a sincere self-defence, it is because the language of “whoring” blurts out her uneasiness with the commodification of literature, which the later Woolf turns to attack severely, in *Three Guineas* (1938), as “the vicious circle of prostituted culture” (*TG*, 225). Jane Garrity argues that Woolf displaces her ambivalence with the *Vogue* contribution on to Todd, figuring her in the letters and diaries as ugly and money-grubbing, almost like a real prostitute.³³ If Woolf’s interests in the fashion of clothing are motivated by her desire to witness the return of the naked “body of the people,” her awareness of modern commercialization threatens to transform the ancestral body once again, not into the common, but into the commodified body of abject prostitution.

But we might recognise in Woolf’s reaction something more than a mere elitist aversion to the commercial world. By its nature, modern fashion is a system which moves forward on a gentle balance between distinction and conformity.³⁴ As Georg Simmel argues in “The Philosophy of Fashion” (1905), “fashions are always class fashions” as fashion always operates to keep the internal conformity of a given social group while jealously closing it off from others. It provides a collective solution to a conflict of two human

³² Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf* Volume III: 1923-1928, ed. Nigel Nicolson (London: The Hogarth Press, 1977), 200.

³³ Jane Garrity, “Virginia Woolf, Intellectual Harlotry, and 1920s British *Vogue*,” *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. Pamela L. Caughie (New York and London: Garland, 2000), 185-218, 196. Also see Lisa Cohen, “‘Frock Consciousness’: Virginia Woolf, the Open Secret, and the Language of Fashion,” *Fashion Theory*, 3:2 (1999), 149-174, 165.

³⁴ On this point, see, Michael North, *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 21-29.

needs, “the need for distinction” and “the need for social adaptation.”

Simmel also observes that “The feeling of shame is eradicated in matters of fashion,” because, however conspicuous a piece of fashion item can be (and the individual conspicuousness is one of the main causes of shame), it is relieved by its sheer fashionability, or group conformity.³⁵ Yet this is the very emotion most painfully felt by Mabel Waring in “The New Dress” (1927). Preparing a new dress for Mrs. Dalloway’s party, she meditates: “she could not be fashionable. It was absurd to pretend it even—fashion meant cut, meant style, meant thirty guineas at least—but why not be original? Why not be herself, anyhow?” (*CSF*, 170) She deliberately chooses a style of the period of her mother’s, secretly expecting a delight in her own original appearance. Yet when she actually goes to the party, her private fantasy is shattered by the contrast with others’ modishness, and she imagines herself as a fly trapped in a saucer of milk, writhing “from shame, from humiliation” (*CSF*, 173).

That wretched fly—where had she read the story that kept coming into her mind about the fly and the saucer?—struggled out. Yes, she had those moments. But now that she was forty, they might come more and more seldom. By degree she would cease to struggle any more. But that was deplorable! That was not to be endured! That made her feel ashamed of herself!

³⁵ Georg Simmel, “The Philosophy of Fashion,” in *Simmel on Culture*, eds. David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (London: Sage, 1997), 187-206, 189, 199.

She would go to the London Library tomorrow. She would find some wonderful, helpful, astonishing book, quite by chance, a book by a clergyman, by an American no one had ever heard of; or she would walk down the Strand and drop, accidentally, into a hall where a miner was telling about the life in the pit and suddenly she would become a new person. She would be absolutely transformed. She would wear a uniform; she would be called Sister Somebody; she would never give a thought to clothes again. (*CSF*, 176)³⁶

The pathos of the passage is of course in the fact that the kind of sudden transformation is unlikely to be forthcoming for Mabel. Lacking money, she cannot keep up with the tide of fashion which allows other attendants of the party to indulge in their private desire for distinction while happily conforming to the imperative of their group conformity. As a result, Mabel's fantasy of originality is violently thrown back into shame and humiliation. Her moment of shame enables Woolf to reveal that the fashioned body can never be the common "body of the people" insofar as it is inevitably involved in the system of class distinction.

And if this is indeed the case, J. C. Flügel's (and Mabel Waring's) desire to abolish clothing all at once as "a perpetual blush upon the surface of

³⁶ As Susan Dick annotates in the note (*CSF*, 303), the image of the fly can be a reference to a passage in Anton Chekhov's novella "The Duel" (1891). Woolf seems to be setting a curious parallel between female sense of shame and male sense of dishonour which used to be repaired by means of the traditional ritual combat of duelling. See *The Oxford Chekhov Volume V Stories 1889-1891* ed and trans. Ronald Hingley (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 133-224.

humanity” might in the end turn out to be a vain speculation. Although Woolf persists in regarding the naked body as a source of empowerment for artistic agency, even this is not immune from certain anxiety. In a foreword to a 1930 exhibition of Vanessa Bell’s paintings, Woolf praises her sister as “she has looked on nakedness with a brush in her hand.” This is unusual for a female painter, since “it was held, until sixty years ago that for a woman to look upon nakedness with the eye of an artist, and not simply with the eye of mother, wife or mistress was corruptive of her innocence and destructive of her domesticity. Hence the extreme activity of women in philanthropy, society, religion and all pursuits requiring clothing.”³⁷ Woolf therefore celebrates Bell’s nude paintings as a radical breach of this traditional taboo, a potent sign of her artistic originality. Yet in another place, Woolf is not so unreservedly positive about this display of artistic potency. In her short story of the same year, “The Lady in the Looking-Glass: A Reflection,” this agency of art is symbolized by a large looking-glass hung in a house of Isabella, a single lady, around whose life the narrative circulates a series of pleasant fancies. Yet this is all abruptly cut short and killed off at the end of

³⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (London: Penguin, 1993), 97-8. This particular issue is a recurrent motif in Woolf’s work which exemplifies the narrow morality of Victorian period, which restricted not only female painters but also a man from strict religious background such as Roger Fry. See, Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940; London: Vintage, 2003), 59-60. Also see, *TG*, 318. For a similar debate in the contemporary France, see Tamar Garb, “The Forbidden Gaze: Women Artists and the Male Nude in Late Nineteenth-Century France,” in *The Body Imaged: The Human Form and Visual Culture since the Renaissance*, eds. Kathleen Alder and Marcia Pointon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 33-42.

the story by the truth revealed in her encounter with the looking-glass. “At once the looking-glass began to pour over her a light that seemed to fix her; that seemed like some acid to bite off the unessential and superficial and to leave only the truth.... She stood naked in that pitiless light. And there was nothing. Isabella was perfectly empty” (*CSF*, 225; ellipsis mine). In this story, the artistic pursuit for the naked truth only ends in exposing a fearful void hidden beneath the private life of a quiet spinster.³⁸

Woolf’s desire to expose nakedness is informed by her desire to approach the creativity of the organic collective, the “body of the people” which has been long suppressed beneath the civilized reserve of the Victorians. Yet Woolf also appears to consider that the time is probably not yet ripe for such an exposure, especially in the present conditions of the public which threatens to trammel her artistic agency, a power of revealing the truth which nevertheless will be barren and futile if isolated (just like Isabella, a solitary woman) in the commercialized world. I shall therefore suggest that it is exactly this ambivalence, one that exists between her desire to expose nakedness and her keen sense of its blockage, that is expressed as recurrent moments of shame in Woolf’s modernist practices.

³⁸ On the image of mirror in the works of Virginia Woolf, see Allen McLaurin, *Virginia Woolf: The Echoes Enslaved* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 51-2, 171-2. Although Woolf’s biographical mirror-phobia and related trauma of sexual abuse (as described in *MO*, 81-3) have incited a number of psychological speculations, Hermione Lee questions the legitimacy of using this piece of autobiography as an ultimate code to read Virginia Woolf’s novels and inner life. Lee, “Introduction,” *MO*, x - x i .

4.

Published exactly in the middle of Virginia Woolf's career as a novelist, *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) provides a point of intersection between her concerns with authorship and readership, and the problems of fashion and the modern marketplace. Framed as it is with the styles and formulas of earnest biography (such as its subtitle, acknowledgements and index pages), it is in fact a novel of extravagant fantasies circling around Orlando, its aristocratic hero-heroine who grows from a boy of 16 to a lady of 36. The novel also becomes a historical romance spanning several centuries from the Elizabethan period to the present moment of the year 1928, the date of its own publication. Its main character is modelled on Vita-Sackville-West, a celebrity novelist of the day, with whom Virginia Woolf had cultivated a homoerotically charged friendship from around the mid-1920s. The fashionable life of Vita Sackville-West and her ancient aristocratic family, with a spice of contemporary lesbian gossip around her, provided Woolf with a perfect set of materials to be exploited for her spirit of wild escapade before she set out to confront the difficulties of writing her other more 'serious' work, *The Waves* (1931).³⁹

³⁹ For Woolf's initial intention to write *Orlando* as a joke, see *D3*, 131. Yet after she finished the novel, she said that she became increasingly serious in the process of writing: "The truth is I expect I began it as a joke, & went on with it seriously" (*D3*, 185). For the lesbian relation between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf as an inspiration for *Orlando*, see Sherron E. Knopp, "'If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?': Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*," *PMLA* 103:1 (January 1988), 24-34.

Yet Woolf's spirit of escapade doesn't prevent *Orlando* from sharing the concerns of her other works, for one of the novel's main topics is the difficulties of writing. Throughout the novel, Orlando is comically afflicted with an excessive passion for literature, and he continues trying to become a poet by writing a long poem titled, "The Oak Tree," which he starts writing as a boy, but somehow cannot complete for over 300 years. Early in the novel, Orlando as a young nobleman struggles to find an appropriate word to express his passion for Sasha, his exotic lover from Moscow. "Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed for Sasha."⁴⁰

While his expression at this point appears to be hampered both by his ignorance of life and by the immaturity of his language, he gradually develops a deeper doubt, apparently epistemological in nature, about the correspondence between life and language. At one point, Orlando exclaims: "if literature is not the Bride and Bedfellow of Truth, what is she? Confound it!" As even this earnest declaration for literary truth is inadvertently implicated in the use of conventional metaphors, "he despaired of being able to solve the problem of what poetry is and what truth is and fell into a deep dejection" (*O*, 98). While the novel is structured by Orlando's incessant quest for the truth of life, its quest structure is duplicated by the figure of an intrusive biographer whose difficulty in writing the life of Orlando runs parallel to the difficulty besetting Orlando's own writing. Both wrestle with

⁴⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, ed. Rachel Bowlby (1928; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 45. Hereafter abbreviated to *O*.

language as an intractable tool for capturing the elusive truth of life.⁴¹

Yet this biographer's concerns with truth are after all nothing but parodically hyperbolic. At one point in *Orlando*, the biographer confesses to the shortage of reliable documents to follow "the indelible footprints of truth" (*O*, 63), and even openly admits: "it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to use the imagination" (*O*, 115). Nowhere is his parodic attitude clearer than in the scene of Orlando's sex transformation, which the biographer allegorizes as a struggle between, on the one hand, "Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer," and on the other hand, the three elegant goddesses, "Lady of Purity," "Lady of Chastity," and "Lady of Modesty" (*O*, 129). The biographer describes himself compelled by the masculine trumpets calling for the exposure of truth, however shamefacedly he might resist against it. The three goddesses try to cast their veils against this, ordering: "Hide deeper, fearful Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone; you unveil the shameful" (*O*, 131). Yet their attempts turn out to be in vain:

They retire in haste, waving their draperies over their heads, as if to shut out something that they dare not look upon and close the door behind them.

We are, therefore, now left entirely alone in the room with the

⁴¹ As for this point, see Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (London: Methuen, 1977), 154.

sleeping Orlando and the trumpeters. The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast:—

‘THE TRUTH!’

at which Orlando woke.

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth!

Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman. (*O*, 132)

The syntax suggests that it is not only Orlando, but also the “austere” God of Truth, who undergoes ironic feminization as both rise to vanquish the feminine shame of the three ladies. While Woolf here parodies the powerful tropes of veiling and unveiling in various discourses, she seems to draw also on the iconography of “*nuda Veritas*” in the tradition of Renaissance and Baroque art, which, according to Erwin Panofsky, was purified of the physical by the influence of the Neoplatonist movement.⁴² In this case, however, there is no denying that the physical and living character of Orlando embodies the naked truth. It inevitably provokes a further dispute over the nature of her sexuality, but the biographer casually dismisses: “let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can. Orlando had now washed, and dressed herself in those Turkish coats and trousers

⁴² See, Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of Renaissance* (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row Publishers, 1962), 159. For the tropes of veiling and unveiling in the philosophical discourses, see, Mary Ann Doane, “Veiling over Desire: Close-ups of the Woman,” in *Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, eds. Richard Feldstein and Judith Roof (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 105-141.

which can be worn indifferently by either sex” (*O*, 134). A single unveiling is not enough; there is, as Rachel Bowlby argues, “a potentially endless series of layers through which the sex is not just contingently but necessarily ‘in dispute’,” which both Orlando and the biographer wilfully ignore.⁴³

In “The Profession for Women” (1931), Woolf argues that one of the difficulties for a female novelist lies in mental blockage she feels in trying to speak out truth about her body, which Woolf attributes to censorial expectations of conventional male audience (*CDML*, 104-5).⁴⁴ Woolf neatly stages out this problem in *Orlando* by re-organizing the question of truth around the problem of sexual difference, at the same time displacing it to “those Turkish coats and trousers” which are sexually ambiguous. It is a significant gesture, for Orlando goes on to magnify the sexual ambiguity in her practice of cross-dressing. The biographer’s meditations on this issue are famously contradictory. At first, he puts forth a theory that it is our clothes rather than our body that “mould our hearts, our brains, our tongue to their liking” (*O*, 180). But then, he introduces a contrary viewpoint which regards the change of clothes only as an outward manifestation of “something hid deep beneath” (*O*, 180), the change in the sexuality of Orlando herself.

⁴³ Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 47.

⁴⁴ This essay is based on a lecture she delivered in the meeting of the National Society for Women’s Service in January 1931. The manuscript of the original lecture is printed in Virginia Woolf, *The Pargiters: The Novel-Essay Portion of The Years*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (London: The Hogarth Press, 1978). This lecture is recognised as an important turning-point for Woolf, which inspired her later works such as *Three Guineas* and *The Years* (1937).

Yet again, if it is admissible to think of sexuality as a changeable entity, it is no longer possible to assume an easy correspondence between appearance and reality. “Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above” (*O*, 181). While this passage reads very much like the famous theory of androgyny as Woolf expounded it in *The Room of One’s Own*, Pamela L. Caughie argues that the novel’s philosophy of clothes runs parallel to its troubling view on the relation between language and truth: both clothes and language are rhetorical, and it is impossible to get beneath them to expose whatever is imagined to be a timeless essence, such as truth, body, or even, androgyny.⁴⁵ Orlando’s cross-dressing is after all liberally pragmatic: “she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally” (*O*, 211). Critics have noticed that it anticipates Judith Butler’s theory of performativity which claims that gender is constructed by historically contingent repetitions of performance.⁴⁶

By expanding its temporal span, the novel introduces the elements of

⁴⁵ Pamela L. Caughie, “Virginia Woolf’s Double Discourse,” in *Discontented Discourse: Feminism/Textual Intervention/Psychoanalysis*, eds. Marleen S. Barr and Richard Feldstein (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 41-53; rpt, in *Virginia Woolf: Critical Assessment*, vol. III, ed. Eleanor McNeese (Helm Information, 1994), 483-496.

⁴⁶ See, Nancy Cervetti, “In the Breeches, Petticoats, and Pleasures of *Orlando*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 20:2 (Winter 1996), 165-75, 168.

historical contingency which disrupt any attempt at imagining sexual difference as a stable, timeless essence. Yet its emphasis on contingency can also work towards an opposite direction, and might implicate the liberating fantasy into the problems of past history. For instance, the first sentence of *Orlando* reads: “He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters” (*O*, 13). As Jaime Hovey argues, this passage quickly stabilizes Orlando’s gender ambiguity (provoked by his period fashion) by means of his masculine, imperialistic act of “slicing at the head of a Moor.” According to Judith Butler, since “gender intersects with racial, class, ethnic, sexual, and regional modalities of discursively constituted identity,” it is impossible to unstitch gender construction alone from the tangled knot of political and cultural histories.⁴⁷ Revealing in this respect is the fact that the sexual ambiguity in this novel is often said to be an effect of historical, geographical, and ethnic fashions. At the first sight of Sasha, Orlando cannot determine whether the figure is a boy or a girl, “for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex” (*O*, 36). Staying with a group of gipsies after her feminization, Orlando “had scarcely given her sex a thought. Perhaps the Turkish trousers which she had

⁴⁷ Jaime Hovey, “‘Kissing a Negress in the Dark’: Englishness as a Masquerade in Woolf’s *Orlando*,” *PMLA* 112:3 (May 1997), 393-404, 398. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1990), 3. For a similar argument about the mutual entanglement of liberating and subjugating possibilities, see D. A. Boxwell, “(Dis)orienting Spectacle: The Politics of Orlando’s Sapphic Camp,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 44:3 (Autumn 1998), 306-27.

hitherto worn had done something to distract her thoughts; and the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men" (*O*, 147). But after her return to the 18th century England, she begins to be worried with the consequences of her sex transformation. As Karen Lawrence suggests, it might have been only Orlando's absence from England, as an ambassador in Constantinople, that provided the novel with suitably exotic, or indeed oriental, settings for the liberating fantasy of sex transformation. During the 1920s, according to Peter Wollen, Orientalism was employed in the field of popular culture, such as Russian ballet, opera, and fashion, to create a fantasy world of sexual extravagance.⁴⁸ It is not only Orlando as a character, but also *Orlando* as a novel, which appear to float on these tides of fashion.

The complex relation between the agency of Woolf's art and the drift of fashion has provoked a disagreement among critics. For Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Orlando's sex change is "simply a shift in fashion" analogous to "shifts in literary style and shifts in historical style." It shows that "all is in flux, no fixed hierarchy endures or should endure." But in Lois Cucullu's view, "*Orlando* grant[s] fashion a kind of historical agency, so that there is no telos outside of fashion." The result is "to empty history of political content."⁴⁹ Yet perhaps the most compelling case in point is to be

⁴⁸ Karen R. Lawrence, "Orlando's Voyage Out," *Modern Fiction Studies* 38:1 (Spring 1992), 253-77, 259. Peter Wollen, *Raiding the Icebox: Reflection on Twentieth-Century Culture* (London: Verso, 1993), chapter 1 "Out of the Past: Fashion/Orientalism/The Body," 1-34.

⁴⁹ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century: Volume 2 Sexchanges* (New Haven and London: Yale

found in Orlando's encounter with Victorian fashion. Whereas Orlando comfortably rides on the tides of the past centuries, "the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme" (*O*, 233), so that she grows keenly aware of its pressure. It takes a form of painful clothes consciousness:

Already she felt the tides of her blood run sluggishly. But what was more peculiar, a blush, vivid and singular, overspread her cheeks as she passed Buckingham Palace and her eyes seemed forced by a superior power down upon her knees. Suddenly she saw with a start that she was wearing black breeches. She never ceased blushing, till she had reached her country house, which, considering the time it takes four horses to trot thirty miles, will be taken, we hope, as a signal proof of her chastity.

Once there, she followed what had now become the most imperious need of her nature and wrapped herself as well as she could in a damask quilt which she snatched from her bed. (*O*, 223)

The Victorian "spirit of the age" is felt by Orlando as a compulsive blushing, so that she is henceforth obsessed with a task of covering herself up with layers of petticoats and crinolines. In this scene, fashion is less a perpetual aimless flux, more an imperative of conformity which throws her

University Press, 1989), 344. Lois Cucullu, *Expert Modernists, Matricide, and Modern Culture: Woolf, Forster, Joyce* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 55.

cross-dressing into shame and humiliation. Orlando even loses her power of writing, and in order to recover it, she has to follow the fashion of marriage to cover her “bare” finger with a wedding ring (*O*, 251-3). Earlier, the novel dares to expose “the shameful” truth of her transformation. Now it shows her covering herself and not risking a blush in a spirit of compulsive shame. The biographer suggests that, by not resisting the dictates of contemporary fashion, Orlando manages to carve out a margin for her creativity: “the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy.... Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself” (*O*, 254; ellipsis mine). But it is doubtful whether this compliance truly puts her in such an “extremely happy position.”

Given this nature of Orlando’s subjection to period fashion, it is not surprising that the novel somehow implies that she is not quite “of” her age. Reading the finished manuscript of “The Oak Tree,” Sir Nicholas Greene, an avatar of the Victorian professional critic, gives his full approval exactly because it is written in an antique style: “It reminded him, he said as he turned over the pages, of Addison’s *Cato*. It compared favourably with Thomson’s *Seasons*. There was no trace in it, he was thankful to say, of the modern spirit” (*O*, 267). This encounter with the re-incarnation of the Elizabethan pamphleteer is an important moment in the novel which illustrates Woolf’s view on the mutual embeddedness of literature and fashion in the modern marketplace. The Victorian Greene repeats habitual complaints of his Elizabethan counterpart: “all our young writers are in the pay of booksellers.

They turn any trash that serves to pay their tailor's bills" (*O*, 86, 265). Yet Orlando feels dismayed by this, for, in her observations, whereas he was noticeably shabby and wild in the Elizabethan period, now he "had grown sleek; literature had been a prosperous pursuit evidently" (*O*, 266). She silently exclaims: "She had thought of literature all these years (her seclusion, her rank, her sex must be excuse) as something wild as the wind, hot as fire, swift as lightning; something errant, incalculable, abrupt, and behold, literature was an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about duchesses" (*O*, 267). Nick Greene's disingenuous involvement in commercialism is evident in his neat fashionable clothes. And indeed, he goes on to propose a promotional manoeuvring for a successful publication of her poem, which she accepts without ever understanding (*O*, 268).⁵⁰

Earlier, Orlando as a boy had thought that "to write, much more to publish, was, he knew, for a nobleman an inexpiable disgrace" (*O*, 74). Yet when Orlando finishes "The Oak Tree," she feels a desperate need for readers as "[the poem] would die in her bosom if it were not read" (*O*, 250).

Although it is only by the channel of Greene's influence that Orlando secures the necessary readership for her work, she keeps apparently unconcerned with

⁵⁰ The character of Sir Nicholas Greene is often thought to be modelled on Edmund Gosse, an Edwardian novelist and critic, whom Woolf didn't like. But according to Michael H. Whitworth, Greene can be also a satirical portrait of Logan Pearsall Smith, who once challenged Woolf on the ethics of her contributions to *Vogue*. As Whitworth shows, Greene and Smith share several of their opinions about literary merits and commercial publication. Michael H. Whitworth, "Logan Pearsall Smith and *Orlando*," *The Review of English Studies* 55:221 (2004), 598-604. This can be another connection between *Orlando* and the problem of contemporary fashion.

the disgrace of commercial publication by professing a complete ignorance about the rules of the modern literary market. Such ignorance is possible only because, in the past years, her dealings with literature have been mainly mediated by her practice of patronage. True to the patrician tradition, Orlando has been “annually presented with perhaps a dozen volumes dedicated to his Lordship in rather fulsome terms by grateful poets” (*O*, 108), so that, even in the Victorian period, Orlando is only familiar with the manuscripts. She is comically amazed at the modern booksellers which store shelves of small printed editions (*O*, 270).

Nonetheless, the novel does not go quite so far as to uphold traditional patronage as an alternative to the modern marketplace. At first, this reservation is conveyed through Orlando’s initial encounter with Nick Greene in the Elizabethan period. Obsessed with “Ambition, the harridan, and Poetry, the witch, and Desire of Fame, the strumpet” (*O*, 78), Orlando invites Greene the famous pamphleteer to stay in his gorgeous country house. Stifled with the luxury and quiet afforded by Orlando’s courtesy, however, Greene soon takes flight with “a pension of three hundred pounds a year paid quarterly” (*O*, 87), and even repays Orlando’s patronage by writing a “very spirited satire” (*O*, 91) of his literary pretensions. Disillusioned with fame by this lesson, Orlando comes to conceive a contrary creed of “obscurity,” of “having no name, but being like a wave which returns to the deep body of the sea.” He thinks of “how obscurity rids the mind of the irk of envy and spite; how it sets running in the veins the free waters of generosity and magnanimity; and allows giving and taking without thanks offered or praise

given; which must have been the way of all great poets” (*O*, 101). An image suggestive of *The Waves*, “the free waters of generosity and magnanimity” confirms Woolf’s ideal of reciprocal exchange with her common readers.

Yet Orlando’s reactions to this creed of obscurity are often inconsistent, or at best contradictory. Sometimes, he tries to associate himself with “common people” by exploring the life of the streets, assuming disguise. This effort comes to an ironic consequence after her sex transformation, when Orlando joins an exotic group of wandering gypsies. Her alliance with them gradually develops into a wrangle over prestige, owing to the difference in their backgrounds and opinions. The gypsies even plot to kill her: “Honour, they said, demanded it, for she did not think as they did” (*O*, 146). But it remains luckily unexecuted when she leaves them to go back to England. At other times, Orlando is eagerly cultivating famous protégés by means of patronage, which she finds in the eighteenth century men of letters, Addison, Pope, and Swift. “And so she lavished her wine on them and put bank-notes, which they took very kindly, beneath their plates at dinner, and accepted their dedications, and thought herself highly honoured by the exchange” (*O*, 203). Yet this exchange abruptly terminates when Orlando offends Pope by her rough manners, and receives a quick revenge of his satirical words. Although she might be lavishing “the free waters of generosity and magnanimity,” they are actually far from being free; they are involved in the exchange, or, to be more precise, the contest, of honours. But the novel allows Orlando to slip away easily from shame and humiliation which is the potential risk of such a conflict.

This can be a serious problem for the novel, since it invalidates both the traditional practice of patronage and the modern literary marketplace, the existing means of mediating between text and its readers. Woolf's solution is to apostrophize her readers directly. At one point in the novel, the biographer summons his own readers who can perfectly comprehend Orlando's personality: "those who have done a reader's part in making up from bare hints dropped here and there the whole boundary and circumference of a living person; can hear in what we only whisper a living voice; can see, often when we say nothing about it, exactly what he looked like; know without a word to guide them precisely what he thought." And he boldly adds, "it is for readers such as these we write" (*O*, 70-1). But if these figures have a marked resemblance with Woolf's ideal common readers, the biographer is obviously stretching their power of comprehension, for to "know without a word" can never be such a common art of decoding. Near the end of the novel, Orlando is able to dismiss the prize given to her poem only by imagining literature as a similar art of secret exchange.

What has praise and fame to do with poetry? What has seven editions (the book had already gone into no less) got to do with the value of it? Was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice? So that all this chatter and praise and blame and meeting people who admired one and meeting people who did not admire one was as ill suited as could be to the thing itself—a voice answering a voice. What could have been more secret, she thought,

more slow, and like the intercourse of lovers, than the stammering answer she had made all these years to the old crooning song of the woods, and the farms and the brown horses standing at the gate, neck to neck, and the smithy and the kitchen and the fields, so laboriously bearing wheat, turnips, grass, and the garden blowing irises and fritillaries? (*O*, 310)

In a concrete situation, Orlando appoints Shel, her fantastic husband, as the special addressee of her “secret transaction.” In a moment of excitement after she surrenders her manuscript to Greene for publication, Orlando impulsively sends a telegram message to Shel. It is written in “a cypher language which they had invented between them so that a whole spiritual state of the utmost complexity might be conveyed in a word or two without the telegram clerk being any wiser” (*O*, 269). The biographer knowingly adds: “if the reader puts all his intelligence at our service he may discover [its proper meaning] for himself” (*O*, 270). Yet this message, “Rattigan Glumphoboo,” flatly resists any attempt at decoding. As Patrick Collier suggests, this might be an allegory of the language of modernism, a language which attain an infinite degree of subtlety, but often “at the cost of a loss of accessibility, of communicability—a loss, in short, of audience.”⁵¹ Requiring an impossible,

⁵¹ Patrick Collier, “Virginia Woolf in the Pay of Booksellers: Commerce, Privacy, Professionalism, *Orlando*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 48:4 (Winter 2002), 363-392, 376. Cf. J. J. Wilson, “Why is *Orlando* Difficult?” in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 170-184. It is also important to note that Orlando’s apostrophising of Shel often happens after she experiences the moments of self-censorship. The secrecy

or indeed uncommon, degree of comprehension from her common readers, Woolf is actually gesturing toward a limit, a point of break in this fantasy world of ultimate secrecy.

The publication of *Orlando* was a definite turning point for Woolf towards a commercially successful career. It sold more than 8,000 copies in the U. K. for the first six months, and its U. S. sales was well over 10,000 for the same length of time, whereas, by contrast, *To the Lighthouse* (1927) took an entire year to sell less than 4,000 in the U. K. only.⁵² Whatever discontents Woolf might have had about the literary marketplace, the good sales gave her a momentary breathing space to prepare for an even more daring experimentation. The irony is that the success and fame had their own particular discontents. In “The Niece of an Earl,” published just a month before *Orlando*, Woolf notices that “literary success invariably means a rise, never a fall, and seldom, what is far more desirable, a spread in the social scale.” It enables her to gain access to the upper-class society, so that she becomes “familiar enough with the cut and fashion of aristocratic life to write about it with authority” (CR2, 217). Yet if this is exactly what Woolf is doing in *Orlando*, there is a serious drawback in such a social rise, insofar as it distances the novelist from the life of the common “working-class” people, eventually trapping her into “class distinctions” and therefore hampering the wider social imagination (CR2, 214). As Woolf came to be keenly aware of

of modernist language can be seen as a defence against censorship. See, Adam Parkes, *Modernism and the Theatre of Censorship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), esp. chapter 4, 144-179.

⁵² John Mepham, op. cit. 130.

the social pressure of the politicized 1930s, an awareness vividly expressed in *Between the Acts*, the fantasy of fashionable aristocracy would have lost some of its enchanting glamour. It is increasingly evident that fashion is never a solution, but an integral part of the problems of modernist authorship.

5.

Written from April 1938 and still in the form of final draft when Virginia Woolf committed suicide in March 1941, the progress of writing *Between the Acts* (1941) kept pace with the progress of political crises which led to the outbreak of the Second World War. As she continued writing the novel during the summer of 1940, the battle for Britain was fought in the sky above her head. One effect of these political events is that it returned Woolf's thoughts to the public nature of her writings. Yet the public made itself felt not because of its presence, but, painfully, because of its absence. During this period, Woolf repeatedly bemoaned in her diary that the war deprived the due attention of the audience from her writings. When she published the biography of Roger Fry, she wrote: "I have so little sense of a public that I forget about Roger coming or not coming out."⁵³ Several days before, this felt absence of the audience led Woolf to an ominous meditation. "It struck me that one curious feeling is, that the writing 'I,' has vanished. No

⁵³ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume 5 1936-41*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell (London: Penguin, 1985), 299. Hereafter abbreviated to *D5*.

audience. No echo. Thats [sic] part of one's death" (D5, 293).

Disappearance of the audience spells the death of the author. It seems that the presence of the sympathetic readers is such a crucial factor for Woolf that their absence also deprives her of the agency of writing altogether.

Somewhat symbolic in this respect is the fact that the Hogarth Press, then in Mecklenburgh Square, was destroyed by an air raid in September 1940, forcing the Woolfs to consider its evacuation to Letchworth, Hertfordshire.⁵⁴

The crisis of the war not only distracted the attention of the audience from her, but also threatened to deprive her of the necessary means of addressing common readers. Read against these backgrounds, *Between the Acts* is sometimes understood as a result of Virginia Woolf's despair, steeped with the tragic mood which eventually led her to commit suicide.⁵⁵ Granting the undeniable pressure of the approaching warfare, however, the novel is not so explicit about its author's desperation, nor is its tone unilaterally tragic.

Between the Acts follows a movement of a day set in June 1939, when an amateur historical pageant is performed in front of a country house called Pointz Hall, somewhere in the heart of England. Expecting the outbreak of the Second World War in three months' time, characters in the novel are

⁵⁴ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, 741-2, 754.

⁵⁵ For instance, Mitchell A. Leaska comments on the novel's typescript version that it is "the longest suicide note in the English language." *Pointz Hall: The Earlier and Later Typescripts of Between the Acts*, ed. Mitchell A. Leaska (New York: New York University Press, 1983), 451. Also for a 'tragic' reading of the novel, see Sallie Sears, "Theatre of War: Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," in *Virginia Woolf: A Feminist Slant*, ed. Jane Marcus (London: Macmillan, 1983), 212-35, 229-30.

shown to be not quite comfortable with the deceptive peacefulness of the rural event. Yet the choice of the village pageant as its central event, and the constant narrative focus on the audience's reactions, suggest that the novel is written not as a direct reflection of Woolf's loss of audience, but as her active contemplation on the changing relations between the author and the audience. Many critics argue that *Between the Acts* has a crucial connection with her final, posthumously published essays, "Anon" and "The Reader." In these, Woolf imagines a prehistory of printing as a happy union between the author and the audience. The author was then an anonymous wandering minstrel, hardly individualized. "Thus the singer had his audience, but the audience was so little interested in his name that he never thought of give it. The audience was itself the singer."⁵⁶ If "It was the printing press that finally was to kill Anon" (*AR*, 384) by destroying the unity between the author and the audience, it did not directly develop into the alienation of modernist writers; for Woolf recognises a desirable unity also in the Elizabethan playhouse. She argues that "the play was a common product, written by one hand, but so moulded in transition that the author had no sense of property in it. It was in part the work of the audience" (*AR*, 395). The direct exchange between actors and audience, unique to the stage art as a genre, is favourable for Woolf as it realizes her ideal vision of shared, common creativity, a vital cure for the author's isolation in the modern literary marketplace. It is but a

⁵⁶ "'Anon' and 'The Reader': Virginia Woolf's Last Essays," edited with an introduction and commentary by Brenda R. Silver, *Twentieth Century Literature* 25:3/4 (Autumn-Winter 1979), 356-441, 382. Hereafter abbreviated to *AR*.

step further to recognise a similar cure for Woolf also in *Between the Acts*, as it depicts the performance of the traditional village pageantry.⁵⁷

If there is a problem in such a view, it is partly because the village pageant, which a critic calls “a survival of a folk carnival form,”⁵⁸ is not quite a survival of historical tradition, but a form that underwent a drastic re-invention in the early twentieth century. According to Ayako Yoshino, the pageant play in Woolf’s time was actually created in 1905 by an impresario called Louis Napoleon Parker, who subsequently set off a “genuine nation-wide” vogue of pageant in the Edwardian England. Attracting a huge number of participants and spectators, the pageant form à la Parker espoused a democratic creed and participatory ethos in its reinforcement of community feeling, which was nevertheless channelled to “a patriotic sentiment” linked with regional and national identities. Jed Esty points out that this vogue of the pageant continued well into the 1930s, when a number of highbrow writers were drawn into this supposedly popular art form, such as John Cowper Powys in *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), T. S. Eliot in *The Rock* (1934), and E. M.

⁵⁷ Brenda Silver in her commentary on “Anon” and “Reader” suggests several connections between these essays and *Between the Acts* (AR, 380, 425). Nora Eisenberg argues that the essays and the novel are actually “companion pieces, sharing a single hero and theme.” David McWhirter goes so far as to claim that the novel is “a fulfilment of Woolf’s prediction in ‘Anon’,” a resurrection of the Elizabethan playhouse in a modernist fiction. Eisenberg, “Virginia Woolf’s Last Words on Words: *Between the Acts* and ‘Anon’” in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 253-66, 253. McWhirter, “The Novel, the Play, and the Book: *Between the Acts* and the Tragicomedy of History,” *ELH* 60:3 (Autumn 1993), 787-812, 792.

⁵⁸ Christopher Ames, “Carnavalesque Comedy in *Between the Acts*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 44:4 (Winter 1998), 294-408, 395.

Forster in “Abinger Pageant” (1934) and *England’s Pleasant Land* (1937).⁵⁹

If we consider the fact that Woolf famously proclaimed the pacifist anti-nationalism in *Three Guineas*, saying that “as a woman, I have no country” (*TG*, 234), her involvement with this potentially nationalistic form of the pageant in *Between the Acts* signifies a relative re-adjustment of Woolf’s political stance in the realities of the Second World War. As Karen Schneider argues, the wartime situations “forced her to establish new priorities and thus to modify her previous seemingly inflexible stance.” Although Woolf in *Three Guineas* has conflated English patriarchy and fascist virility in one bold stroke, the open aggressions of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany lead her to re-examine her stance to make a room for the pastoral ideal of rural England.⁶⁰

From this perspective, it is noteworthy that, whereas the historical imagination was given full reign in the fantasy world of *Orlando*, in *Between the Acts* the exploration in history by means of the pageant is always framed with the audience’s sense of entrapment in the present moments which lead to an uncertain future. “The future shadowed their present, like the sun coming through the many-veined transparent vine leaf; a criss-cross of lines making

⁵⁹ Ayako Yoshino, “Between the Acts and Louis Napoleon Parker—the Creator of the Modern English Pageant,” *Critical Survey* 15:2 (2003), 49-60, 50, 51. Jed Esty, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), esp. Chapter 2, “Insular Rites: Virginia Woolf and the Late Modernist Pageant-Play,” 54-107.

⁶⁰ Karen Schneider, “Of Two Minds: Woolf, the War and *Between the Acts*,” *Journal of Modern Literature* 16:1 (1989), 93-112, 99.

no pattern.”⁶¹ While the novel evokes a traditional rural community in which most of the villagers have their names in the “Domesday Book” (*BA*, 21), Woolf chooses to focus on one particular group of relative newcomers: the Olivers in Pointz Hall, consisting of Bart Oliver, a retired officer of the Indian Civil Service, his sister Lucy Swithin, Bart’s son Giles, and Isa, his wife. They are soon joined by two self-invited guests, Mrs. Manresa, wife of a wealthy Jew, and William Dodge, her friend and an obscure artist.

Introducing Pointz Hall, the narrative assumes the perspective of a passing driver, who speculates: “I wonder if that’s ever come into the market?” (*BA*, 7)

It is ironic to notice that Pointz Hall did once come into the market about a century ago and was bought by the Olivers, aliens to the region and a family of merely two or three hundred years’ history (*BA*, 21). A further twist to this irony is that the family seems to be unable to keep the house unless Giles Oliver works during the week in the City as a stockbroker, a profession he resentfully dislikes. “Given his choice, he would have chosen to farm. But he was not given his choice” (*BA*, 30-1). Just as Giles can’t afford to be a pastoral farmer, his wife Isa can’t be a poet in spite of her aspirations. When Isa is struck by a false inspiration, she muses: “The words weren’t worth writing in the book bound like an account book in case Giles suspected” (*BA*, 12). Isa’s poetic spirit is trapped in her disguised account book, which is a domestic correlative of Giles’ stockbroking profession. The encroachment of finance into the pastoral world is further emphasized by a newspaper line

⁶¹ Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts*, ed. Gillian Beer (London: Penguin, 1992), 70. Hereafter abbreviated to *BA*.

quoted twice, near the beginning and the end of the novel as if to frame the actions in the middle: “M. Daladier... has been successful in pegging down the franc” (*BA*, 11; ellipsis mine, 128). The stabilization of the franc by devaluation, which Eduard Daladier (the French prime minister, 1938-1940) managed to attain in May, 1938, was a vital issue for France which was successively battered by the major slumps during the 1930s. The debilitation of the French industrial economy, and the delusive prospect of its recovery, was a matter of crucial interest for the defence of Britain as its foremost ally against the threat of the fascist countries.⁶² The pastoral world of Pointz Hall, and, for that matter, England itself, is thus shown to be beleaguered by larger financial interests.

The peacefulness of the pastoral village in this novel is superficial, while the disruptive force of the modern marketplace is constantly at work underneath. The resulting duality of this world reappears in the split identities of its inhabitants. What is of interest here is the fact that Woolf suggests their split identities by means of their clothes. Coming down from London for the weekend, Giles changes his clothes to look like “a cricketer, in flannels, wearing a blue coat with brass buttons” (*BA*, 30), whereas by the end

⁶² After the pageant, one of the audience muses; “I agree—things look worse than ever on the continent” (*BA*, 118). This can be a reference not only to the Nazi Germany but also to France under the economic slump. When the German Army entered Paris in June 1940, Woolf wrote in her diary; “Fight in our fortress: are conquered” (*D5*, 297). For the issue of French economic depression and financial policies against it, see, H. W. Arndt, *The Economic Lessons of the Nineteen-Thirties* (London: Frank Cass & Co, 1944, 1963), 135-151. On the Anglo-French relation at that time, see, Piers Brendon, *The Dark Valley: A Panorama of the 1930s* (London: Pimlico, 2001), 492-515.

of the day he returns to “the black coat and white tie of the professional classes” (*BA*, 127). His change of clothes is said to be highly conventional in nature, a reaction to the presence of visitors in his house: “The ghost of convention rose to the surface, as a blush or a tear rises to the surface at the pressure of emotion” (*BA*, 30). Also conventional is Isa’s reaction to his change. Evoking a phrase, the “father of [her] children’,” which she recognises as “that old cliché,” Isa still feels a keen affection to Giles, who now looks “not a dapper city gent, but a cricketer” (*BA*, 31). It seems that her passion is also split between two conventional categories, attracted by a “gentleman farmer” Rupert Haines, yet tied to her husband the “stockbroker,” a profession which she doesn’t like (*BA*, 10). Earlier, her dealings with clothes are said to be revealingly irresolute;

‘Abortive,’ was the word that expressed her. She never came out of a shop, for example, with the clothes she admired; nor did her figure, seen against the dark roll of trousering in a shop window, please her. Thick of waist, large of limb, and, save for her hair, fashionable in the tight modern way, she never looked like Sappho, or one of the beautiful young men whose photographs adorned the weekly papers. She looked what she was. (*BA*, 12)

If there are some uncertainties in her identity, it is simply because she is defined by conventions only negatively, neither Sappho, nor figures in fashion pictures. A sharp contrast is drawn between her and Mrs. Manresa, a

self-styled “wild child of nature” (*BA*, 29). “I take off my stays,” she boldly declares, “and roll in the grass.” And the novel adds: “She had given up dealing with her figure and thus gained freedom” (*BA*, 28). Yet this gesture of unconventionality, her “complete faith in flesh and blood” (*BA*, 26), is silently resented by Isa as a vanity performance for men’s eyes: “Her hat, her rings, her finger nails red as rose, smooth as shells, were there for all to see” (*BA*, 26). The narrative goes on to assume a gossipy tone, retailing stories about her obscure background and her Jewish husband. “Ralph, a Jew, got up to look the very spit and image of the landed gentry, supplied from directing City companies—that was certain—tons of money” (*BA*, 26-7). If Woolf here implies a critique of the moneyed fashion, it seems also to be linked with an obscure anti-Semitism in her use of the conventional Jewish figure.⁶³

Another unconventionally clothed character is Miss La Trobe, the author and director of the village pageant. A stranger suspected to be a lesbian, and not purely English in her origin, La Trobe is described to be “swarthy, sturdy and thick set.” Worse still, she “strode about the fields in a smock frock; sometimes with a cigarette in her mouth; often with a whip in her hand” (*BA*, 37). Her impatience with disorderly actors, her imperious desire to control the audience, her “look of a commander pacing his deck” (*BA*, 39)—all these have led some to suggest, not unconvincingly, that La Trobe has a disturbing

⁶³ For this point and more on the problem of Woolf’s unconscious anti-Semitism around this period, see, Marina MacKay, “Putting the House in Order: Virginia Woolf and Blitz Modernism,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 66:2 (July 2005), 227-52, 237, 246.

likeness to the fascist dictators like Hitler or Mussolini, a trait designed to be Woolf's satirical target.⁶⁴ Yet at least at one point, she is shown to be truly revolutionary; her ability to be a competent dresser for the pageant as a small-budget costume play.

She splashed into the fine mesh like a great stone into the lily pool. The criss-cross was shattered. Only the roots beneath water were of use to her. Vanity, for example, made them all malleable. The boys wanted the big parts; the girls wanted the fine clothes. Expenses had to be kept down. Ten pounds was the limit. Thus conventions were outraged. Swathed in conventions, they couldn't see, as she could, that a dish cloth wound round a head in the open looked much richer than real silk. So they squabbled; but she kept out of it. (*BA*, 41)

And indeed, her economical contrivances are seen to have great effects in the actual performance. In the playlet of the Elizabethan period, Eliza Clark, a shopkeeper selling tobacco, is "splendidly made up" as Queen Elizabeth. "Sixpenny brooches glared like cats' eyes and tigers' eyes; pearls looked down; her cape was made of cloth of silver—in fact swabs used to scour

⁶⁴ See, Judith L. Johnston, "The Remediable Flaw: Revisioning Cultural History in *Between the Acts*," *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury*, ed. Jane Marcus (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 253-277, 264. Patricia Klindienst Joplin, "The Authority of Illusion: Feminism and Fascism in Virginia Woolf's *Between the Acts*," in *Virginia Woolf: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Margaret Homans (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993), 210-226, 212.

saucepans. She looked the age in person” (*BA*, 52). Later, when Mabel Hopkins, another villager, turns up as a personified Reason in the eighteenth-century playlet, the audience are all impressed by her beauty. “Her cheeks had been powdered; her colour glowed smooth and clear underneath. Her grey satin robe (a bedspread), pinned in stone-like folds, gave her the majesty of a statue” (*BA*, 75). The pageant seems to draw a large part of its comic effects from these alternate rhythms of dressing up and undressing, which magically transform the common villagers into elevated personalities, and vice versa.

What is implied here is not only the vanity of different outward appearances between classes, although they are decisively displaced and levelled down by this budget performance. The quick succession of different ages, marked merely by the changes of their fashions, has an effect of breaking down the illusion of historical progress, suggesting the timeless stability of the common body underneath. When the actors are joyfully dressing up, they whisper to each other: “D’you [sic] think people change? Their clothes, of course... But I meant ourselves... Clearing out a cupboard, I found my father’s old top hat... But ourselves—do we change?” (*BA*, 73-4; ellipsis in original) Later, inspired by the performance of the Victorian playlet, Lucy Swithin, a religious “one-maker,” echoes their speculation: “‘The Victorians,’ Mrs. Swithin mused. ‘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’” (*BA*, 104). It seems such a vision of a timeless body that persists beneath changing fashion has by this time become a great

temptation for Woolf herself. In “Anon,” when she imagines “the world beneath our consciousness; the anonymous world to which we can still return,” Woolf describes it as “ourselves, stripped of the encumbrances that time has wrapped about us” (*AR*, 385). A chorus in the pageant in *Between the Acts* sounds; “*Summer and winter, autumn and spring return... All pass but we, all changes... but we remain forever the same...*” (*BA*, 84; emphasis and ellipsis in original). Nora Eisenberg claims that “disguises—costume and name—change, but the people beneath remain the same” in the historical pageant. Melba Cuddy-Keane also asserts that the different historical eras are thus “reduced to comic clichés,” but they “transcend trivialities once they are seen as repetitions, in different guises, of enduring human situations.”⁶⁵ From this angle, the most significant message of this costume play might be conveyed by the naked body underneath, “ourselves, stripped of the encumbrances,” the vision of the submerged organic collective which provides solace and assurance of the continuity beyond any historical contingency.

Nevertheless, this revelation, or this exposure, of the naked body remains only a suggestion that is perpetually resisted in *Between the Acts*. As though Woolf were shying away from the decisive exposure, the novel’s way of expressing this resistance is itself rather obscure and circumspect. In the garden of Pointz Hall are several trees bearing fruits, from which servants sometimes reap pots of jam. This year, “three apricots were worth enclosing in muslin bags. But they were so beautiful, naked, with one flushed cheek,

⁶⁵ Nora Eisenberg, *ibid*, 256. Melba Cuddy-Keane, “The Politics of Comic Modes in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*,” *PMLA* 105:2 (March 1990), 273-285, 281.

one green, that Mrs. Swithin left them naked, and the wasps burrowed holes” (BA, 34). Soon after this, Mrs. Manresa asks questions about “this entertainment—this pageant, into which we’ve gone and butted,” a comment that makes the pageant seem “like the apricot into which the wasps were burrowing” (BA, 36). This strangely casual conflation of the worm-eaten apricots and the pageant performance conveys the crucial vulnerability of the body denuded of any protections. Wandering in the stable yard during the interval of the play, Isa overhears cryptic voices of some audience member saying: “‘It’s a good day, some say, the day we are stripped naked. Others, it’s the end of the day’.” This quickly reminds Isa of the incident of rape she has read in the newspaper article this morning: “the brawl in the barrack room when they stripped her naked” (BA, 94).⁶⁶ The body denuded of all superfluous clothes might be “beautiful naked,” as Lucy thinks of the apricots, yet the naked body is also seen to be pathetically vulnerable to the voracious appetites of nature. Or the body beneath the clothes might even be imagined as a stimulant of libidinal aggression. The naked body—that of the organic collective—is typically both the site of attraction and aggression in *Between*

⁶⁶ Some feminist critics has argued that the reported rape, which haunts Isa’s mind throughout the day, is the central narrative of the novel which calls for the “sorority,” or solidarity of feminism against the masculine sexual aggression. They tend to associate the rape report with the poetry of Swinburne about the Greek myth of rape and its revenge, which Bart Oliver suggestively recites all the day. See, Jane Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and Language of Patriarchy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 93-95. Eileen Barrett, “Matriarchal Myth on a Patriarchal Stage: Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 33:1 (Spring 1987), 18-37. Also see Gillian Beer’s reservations on this line of interpretation, op. cit. 136-142.

the Acts. Woolf's reaction is thus crucially ambivalent. When Lucy introduces her mother's bedroom to William Dodge before the beginning of the pageant, "He half expected to see somebody there, naked, or half dressed, or knelt in prayer. But the room was empty" (*BA*, 44). Throughout, the novel invokes, and evades, such an expectation of bodily exposure—maternal, sexual, mystical, or whatever.

In the final playlet of the pageant, titled "Ourselves," La Trobe directs the actors to carry forward numerous glasses and mirrors and to reflect back the images of the audience trapped in the time and place of "here and now." La Trobe "wanted to expose them, as it were, to douche them, with present-day reality" (*BA*, 107). "Mopping, mowing, whisking, frisking, the looking glasses darted, flashed, exposed" (*BA*, 109). This is a fitting climax to the novel's perpetual ambivalence with exposure, which duly drives the latent shame into the daylight. Yet what is exposed, or what the audience has to confront here, is not the unity of the organic collective, but a jazzy disorder of conflicting fragments.

So that was her little game! To show us up, as we are, here and now. All shifted, preened, minced; hands were raised, legs shifted. Even Bart, even Lucy, turned away. All evaded or shaded themselves—save Mrs. Manresa who, facing herself in the glass, used it as a glass; had out her mirror; powdered her nose; and moved one curl, disturbed by the breeze, to its place.

'Magnificent!' cried old Bartholomew. Alone she preserved

unashamed her identity, and faced without blinking herself. Calmly she reddened her lips.

The mirror bearers squatted; malicious; observant; expectant; expository.

‘That’s them,’ the back rows were tittering. ‘Must we submit passively to this malignant indignity?’ the front row demanded. Each turned ostensibly to say—O whatever came handy—to his neighbour. Each tried to shift an inch or two beyond the inquisitive insulting eye. Some made as if to go. (*BA*, 110-1)

The sudden exposure does not produce a moment of calm self-reflection for the audience. Rather, the violence inherent in the act of exposure is registered in their reactions which vary from evasion, through outrage, to a strong feeling of shame. Yet the reaction of Mrs. Manresa, who preserves her identity “unashamed” by mending her make-up, is also irrelevant, or even hostile. In “Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid” (1940), Woolf argues that “the subconscious Hitlerism” of military men is reinforced by the vanity of fashionable women. “We can see shop windows blazing; and women gazing; painted women; dressed-up women; women with crimson lips and crimson fingernails. They are slaves who are trying to enslave” (*CE4*, 174). Citing this, Elizabeth Abel asserts that the figure of Mrs. Manresa, the “wild child of nature” indulging in the artifice of make-up, represents the ominous conflation of nature and culture; she is “the novel’s reconstruction of the fascist mother, and the sole intact identity amidst the fragment of the

present.”⁶⁷ More humbly, I would add that Mrs. Manresa also represents to Virginia Woolf a daunting force of commercial fashion, which might channel the exposed body back into the libidinal currents of the modern marketplace.

Read in this way, the final exposure of the pageant can be understood as a confrontation between the moneyed fashion of Mrs. Manresa and the thrifty art of Miss La Trobe. Neither of them seems to be entirely triumphant by the end of the novel. On the one hand, Mrs. Manresa has been heartily approved by the male characters throughout the day, especially Bart Oliver. At the moment of parting, Bart, “taking Mrs. Manresa’s gloved hand in his, pressed it, as if to say: ‘You have given me what you now take from me’” (*BA*, 119). Woolf’s ideal exchange of give and take is about to be parodically achieved; yet “alas, sunset light was unsympathetic to her make-up; plated it looked, not deeply interfused” (*BA*, 119-20). In the end, the novel gently ironizes the showy assertion of her make-up by means of the sunset light. On the other hand, La Trobe, left alone in the field after the pageant, tries to convince herself of her success. “She could say to the world, You have taken my gift! Glory possessed her—for one moment.... It was in the giving that the triumph was. And the triumph faded. Her gift meant nothing” (*BA*, 124; ellipsis mine). Maria DiBattista interprets this to mean that La Trobe offered “the prime symbol of that disinterested culture she advocated, art as gift, mere gift, free gift.”⁶⁸ Yet the rhetoric of “free gift” is far from something we can

⁶⁷ Elizabeth Abel, *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 126.

⁶⁸ Maria DiBattista, *Virginia Woolf’s Major Novels: The Fables of Anon* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 234.

uphold disinterestedly. In the final part of *Three Guineas*, Woolf offers her guinea as “a free gift, given freely” (*TG*, 272). She defines the guinea “a free gift” because “no right or privilege is asked in return.” “The giver does not claim in return for the gift admission to any profession; any honour; title, or medal” (*TG*, 226). Yet as Andrew John Miller points out, quoting from Lawrence Rainey, the guinea was a currency used until 1971 for the special purpose of professional fees. It is, after all, “a form of remuneration that carries with it an aura of social distinction.”⁶⁹ Even though it is not directly involved in the commercial exchange of mercenary capitalism, this form of gift-giving inevitably constitutes an integral part of the exchange of symbolic capital, i.e. a search for social recognition. Similarly, La Trobe’s assertion, “You have taken my gift!” connotes a certain sort of professional pride. It is a cry, if not for the counter-gift from the audience, then certainly for the recognition of her distinction as an artist from the world. Without receiving anything in return, La Trobe sinks back into moody exhaustion. “It was here she had suffered triumph, humiliation, ecstasy, despair—for nothing” (*BA*, 124).

In this final novel of Woolf, the author is neither suffering a sudden violent death, nor is she returning into an ideal world of prehistoric anonymity.

⁶⁹ Andrew John Miller, “‘Our Representative, Our Spokesman’: Modernity, Professionalism, and Representation in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*,” *Studies in the Novel* 33:1 (2001), 34-50, 43. Miller quotes from Lawrence Rainey, op. cit. 16. This is not to deny that Woolf managed to provoke a genuine exchange of critical opinions with her readers by means of its epistolary form in *Three Guineas*. See, Anna Snaith, *Virginia Woolf: Public and Private Negotiations* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 113-129.

Rather, she remains an isolated individual, suffering shame and humiliation gratuitously—“for nothing”—as her ideal of mutual exchange is shown to be utterly dysfunctional. Yet perhaps the honours are even with the audience. For they also suffer a shameful exposure at the end of the pageant, which dispels the vision of their mystical organic unity, and reveals to be “orts, scraps, and fragments” (*BA*, 111) as they are under the sway of “the vicious circle of the prostituted culture.” Yet again, if there is a hope, it might be also in the shame and humiliation of being an author. It is a curious irony that Bart Oliver complains, expecting solicitations of charity donation after the pageant performance, “Nothing’s done for nothing in England” (*BA*, 105). From this angle, the shame of La Trobe, which she suffers “for nothing,” might be seen literally as “nothing,” therefore minimally within the commercial logic of the modern literary marketplace. This is not to suggest that shame is immune from the force of commodification; yet at least it signifies a negative moment of resistance to the all pervading logic of the universal capitalist exchange. It is from this position of gratuitous shame that the author takes up the task of imagination once again at the end of *Between the Acts*, suggesting continuation of creative efforts rather than reaching the finality of closure.

CONCLUSION

Humiliating Modernism

In his 1922 survey of the contemporary literary scene in Britain, Ford Madox Ford called the group of younger writers—a group he specified by naming Joyce, Lewis, Lawrence, and Richardson—a “haughty and proud generation.” Applying a phrase taken from Pushkin, Ford has claimed that they were “vigorous and free in their passions and adventures,” i.e. their attempts to push beyond the perfections of their predecessors (such as Henry James and Joseph Conrad) and to continue “the new explorations of method” with a dogmatic determination.¹ A “haughty and proud generation” is a highly appropriate phrase to describe a movement with a colourful career of controversies. Yet as modernism has gradually consolidated its status as a canonical aesthetics within the twentieth century literature, its haughtiness and pride have understandably stirred a number of intense reactions. Among others, that by Iris Murdoch in her 1959 essay “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited” is notable in its power. In her opinion, modernism has fatally lost touch with the valuable liberal tradition of tolerance in its extreme reaction against romanticism. She condemns the orthodoxy of high-modernist aesthetics (represented by T. E. Hulme and T. S. Eliot) for “a fear of contingency.” Its emphasis on aesthetic autonomy is in fact fuelled by “a yearning to pierce through the messy phenomenal world to some perfect and necessary form and order.” “Its fear of contingency and history is a fear of the real existing messy modern world, full of real existing messy modern

¹ Ford Madox Ford, “A Haughty and Proud Generation,” *Yale Review* 11 (July 1922), 703-17; reprinted in Ford Madox Ford, *Critical Essays*, ed. Max Saunders and Richard Stang (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 208-17, 208.

persons, with individual messy modern opinions of their own.” As an alternative to this solipsism, Murdoch urges her readers to return to the tradition of nineteenth century prose literature, a tradition of great novels that represent the sublime heterogeneity of real existing “other people.”²

In the subsequent history of anti-modernist polemics, we can often hear distant, submerged reverberations of Iris Murdoch’s powerful rhetoric. If we replace her “real existing messy modern world” with the rise of modern mass culture or that of mass readership as was done by Andreas Huyssen or John Carey, we might understand modernism’s “paranoid fear” of its others as a version of Murdoch’s “fear of contingency.” In recent years, David Trotter has added considerable elaborations on these polemics, and has redefined modernist reaction to the “messy modern world” essentially as that of “paranoid disgust.” According to Trotter, disgust and nausea are integral elements in “that genius for system-building on which the essential dignity of paranoia depends.” It is an attempt to impose order and structure on experience, a reaction to the threats posed by mess and mimesis to the boundaries of the symbolic universe in which the paranoid inhabits. Seen from this angle, the disgust of writers such as Ford, Lewis, and Lawrence is nothing more than a symptom of their paranoid modernism, a brand of modernism obsessed with a desire to assert and protect their professional

² Iris Murdoch, “The Sublime and the Beautiful Revisited,” *Yale Review* 59 (1959): 247-71, 259-60. To be precise, Murdoch didn’t use the term “modernism” in her essay. Her generic name for the position of Eliot, Hulme, and I. A. Richards was “the Symbolists.”

charisma against the messiness and effeminacy of modern democratic society.³ By reading modernist texts in terms of emotions such as fear and disgust, these arguments have successfully exposed the mythical nature of modernist aesthetic autonomy. They have also uncovered some of the worst consequences of the modernist haughtiness: elitist contempt for the general public, exclusiveness, and problematic psychology veering towards a mere private fantasy.

To a certain extent, my exploration into the shame and humiliation of modernist literature was first conceived as a follow-up to the strength of these arguments. After all, if fear and disgust, why not shame and humiliation? Yet my interest in these emotions has gradually deflected the focus of my research away from the private fantasies of haughty modernism, towards a closer examination on the complex relations between the public and the private in the novels of some modernist writers. Although shame is nowadays often considered as a very private emotion, traditionally it has been an integral factor in the public code of honour and its conventions of exchange, such as duelling and gift-giving. Yet by the beginning of the twentieth century, these conventions had been often distorted and encroached on by the pervasive effects of commercialization in the field of cultural production. Moreover, these conventions had been rendered increasingly unsustainable by

³ David Trotter, *Paranoid Modernism: Literary Experiment, Psychosis, and the Professionalization of English Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 65-73. Trotter quotes from Murdoch in his previous book on nineteenth-century realism, *Cooking with Mud: The Idea of Mess in Nineteenth-Century Art and Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 32.

the progressive disturbance of the normative gender distinction between the male and the female in the same period. Nevertheless, I have suggested that the code of honour and the public ideal of reciprocity and obligations still provided some indispensable vocabularies for modernist writers, especially when they considered their artistic pursuits as a public engagement, a social practice in constant negotiations with the literary marketplace and its reading public. It was the early May Sinclair in *The Divine Fire* who had most successfully employed the discourse of honour and shame in her advocacy of modern literary innovations. Yet given the realities of a market society and the gender imbalance inherent in the honour code, ultimately it was only a delusive success. Therefore, it is with a constant focus on these difficulties that I have examined the modernist moments of honour, shame, and humiliation in my succeeding chapters on the later Sinclair, Wyndham Lewis, and Virginia Woolf.

Shedding light on the aspect of modernism as a public engagement in this way, I have never tried to evade confronting some unpleasant sides of their artistic pursuits. After all, at one point or other in their careers, all these writers did entertain private fantasies and elitist strategies of exclusiveness devised against the mass readership of advancing modernity. In Pierre Bourdieu's words, this resulted in a split between "the field of restricted cultural production" and "the field of large-scale cultural production." In Sinclair, this was the distinction between "the heaven-born feminine genius" and "the last pitiful survivor of a competitive exam." In the early career of Woolf, a milder yet analogous distinction existed between the Bloomsbury

coterie of her intimate friends and the wider public of anonymous readers. Doubtlessly, the most extreme version of this distinction was that drawn by Lewis, his polarization of humanity into two groups, "Nature" and "Puppets." By considering these problems in terms of the dynamics of shame and humiliation, however, I have argued that these distinctions were not absolute, but rather, subject to ceaseless interaction through the porous boundaries between the public sphere and the private institutions. Sinclair's distinction was a reactive formation against the predicaments of single women in her period, and as such, her modernist exploration into the shame of spinsterhood had potentially undone her own exclusive and isolating definition of female creativity. Woolf constantly aspired to transcend the distinction by calling for the organic community of common readers. Even in Lewis, his shameless urge to expose the "naked truth" eventually turned in on itself, collapsing the all-important distinction between "Nature" and "Puppets." Yet to recognise this is not to claim that the collapse of such distinctions ultimately enabled the modernists to achieve an ideal reciprocal exchange with their contemporary reading public. In her final novel, Woolf did not delude herself into believing that the artist could successfully uncover the organic unity of a collective ancestral body, one free of shame or humiliation. In short, my focus on the shame and humiliation of modernism has allowed us to consider their haughty and proud pursuits in a more complex way, as both public and private ventures in endless negotiations with the modern literary market and its impersonal reading public, always haunted with a measure of success and failures.

Perhaps an additional gain of the focus on shame and humiliation will be to open modernist scholarship itself to a wider dialogue and more fruitful exchange with literatures of other periods. As I have briefly sketched out in my introduction, the concerns with shame, nakedness, and exposure have always provoked heated debates and controversies in art, literature, and science at least since the beginning of modernity. A number of scholars have already explored the meaning of shame and humiliation in a rich variety of historical contexts (for instance, Bernard Williams in ancient Greek tragedy, and Ewan Fernie in the Renaissance plays of Shakespeare and others.)⁴ Christopher Ricks has also examined a related emotion of embarrassment in the romanticism of John Keats.⁵ Giorgio Agamben has provocatively claimed the significance of shame in the post-war literature of the Holocaust.⁶ In recent years, some contemporary writers have started to explore the emotions of shame, humiliation, and disgrace in their novels both as a powerful narrative drive, and an important subject-matter in the postcolonial situations, such as Salman Rushdie in *Shame* (1983), and J. M. Coetzee in *Disgrace* (1999). To my mind, these instances of shame in postcolonial contexts suggest the most compelling possibility of further explorations. In fact, one of the reasons I didn't follow James Joyce's continuing interests in

⁴ Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002).

⁵ Christopher Ricks, *Keats and Embarrassment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974).

⁶ Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive (Homo Sacer III)*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

shame after *Exiles* is exactly this: in order to examine the moments of shame and humiliation in the text like *Ulysses* (for example, in the nighttown of “Circe” episode), we have to go beyond the focus of my research on the modern British literary marketplace. We have to relocate modernism within a yet wider cultural dynamics and more complex exchange between the metropolis and the imperial margin, the colonizer and the colonized. Yet this is beyond the scope of my present thesis.

To a certain extent, postcolonialism’s concerns with the question of shame were already announced in the immediate aftermath of the modernist period, in Jean-Paul Sartre’s preface to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963). Sartre makes it an impassioned denunciation of the complacency of Western imperialism. According to him: “In the colonies the truth stood naked, but the citizens of the mother-country preferred it with clothes on.” The process of colonization was accompanied with inculcation of humanist doctrines to the “native elites.” Yet this produced an ironic boomerang effect, as the colonized start to expose the complicity of Western humanism with the inhumanity of colonial exploitation. Therefore, Sartre asserts that “we must face that unexpected revelation, the strip-tease of our humanism. There you can see it, quite naked, and it’s not a pretty sight.” He urges his readers to confront the nakedness as exposed in Fanon’s book: “Have the courage to read this book, for in the first place it will make you ashamed, and shame, as Marx said, is a revolutionary sentiment.”⁷ Yet in

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Introduction,” to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1965), 7-26, 7, 21, 12.

spite of this powerful rhetoric, it is unclear whether this “strip-tease of our humanism” was the final, almost revolutionary revelation of naked truth. In fact, the succeeding generation of French postmodern thinkers were more sceptical than Sartre about whether strip-tease can really allow us to approach the truth of nakedness. Speaking about “at least Parisian striptease,” Roland Barthes claims that: “The end of the striptease is then no longer to drag into the light a hidden depth, but to signify, through the shedding of an incongruous and artificial clothing, nakedness as a *natural* vesture of woman, which amounts in the end to regaining a perfectly chaste state of the flesh.”⁸ Elaborating his point by resorting to the Freudian theory of castration and fetishism, Jean Baudrillard also argues: “Every piece of clothing that falls brings [the stripper] no closer to nudity, to the naked ‘truth’ of sex.”⁹ In a quite different context, here we are witnessing a recurrence of the disagreement between Kenneth Clark and John Berger on the aesthetic distinction between the naked and the nude.

The point is not to become cynical about any possibility of a revelatory moment. Rather, it is to recognise the difference of each particular historical context, concrete situations in which the rhetoric of shame, nakedness, and exposure has been mobilized. Apart from the unfortunate metaphor of “strip-tease,” Sartre’s serious commitment to the cause of decolonization is on

⁸ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, selected and translated by Annette Lavers (1957; London: Vintage, 1993), 84-5. Emphasis in original. According to Peter Brooks, Barthes also compares classic realist narrative to a striptease. See, Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 19.

⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976; London: Sage, 1993), 109.

a level quite different from Barthes' and Baudrillard's critique on the commodification of body and sexuality in the simulacra world of postmodern capitalism. Yet they are not completely disconnected. As we have observed in the case of modernists such as May Sinclair, Wyndham Lewis, and Virginia Woolf, in the modern world artistic and intellectual ventures are pursued in a field of cultural production which cannot be immune from modern market exchanges, forms that always pose a serious obstacle to any attempt at the ideal reciprocal exchange between self and other which is presupposed by any serious text. Even if we exercise extreme precaution, we may not be able to make our knowledge perfectly immune to the distortion and exploitation that seem to accompany an entry into the wider world of public exchange. Yet this should not lead us to withdraw into a private world, entrenched with a defensive shame. For perhaps it is only when we don't expect it at all that we suffer the truth of nakedness with a real sense of shame, as a sudden happening, as a moment of contingency. In this respect, it is important to remember that the shame and humiliation of modernism was a necessary reflex of their intellectual passions, their haughty and proud ventures to open new dimensions within creative activities. Attending to their moments of shame is not to humiliate their efforts, but to come to know a deeper moment of humility in their ceaseless negotiations with the public world. Only in this limited sense might we learn some lessons from our attempt at humiliating modernism.

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