

“An Ordinary Mind on an Ordinary Day”

RACHEL BOWLBY

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY COLLEGE

1. “Virginia Woolf among the Philosophers”—what a dream of a title. I’ll admit that when I first saw it, I thought that behind it there must be some famous and familiar phrase that was slipping my ignorant or forgetful mind. Someone among the philosophers or someone among the something elses—X among the Ys. But I couldn’t get hold of it. Was it some French allusion that I should have known about? *Parmi les philosophes*—it had a ring to it, and a much more philosophical ring in French than in English (but then that’s how French always looks and sounds to us English). I asked a couple of friends—among them philosophers, and literary critics, and French, and English, and hybrids of some of these. They were as much at a loss as I was. X among the philosophers—it had a lovely suggestiveness, but of what? Of whom?
2. At first sight, on first hearing, “Virginia Woolf among the Philosophers” calls up an image—or did to me—of the lady thrown into a cage with alarming beasts who are about to tear her apart. Daniel among the lions; Virginia among the wolves. On second thoughts, the situation might be almost reversed. If a philosopher can be seen as the quintessential case of the cultivated, super-logical man, then it might be the other way round, our heroine being not the hapless human victim of wild animals, but the out-of-place woman among the over-abstract men: VW among the Xs and Ys. And there is also a third possibility, in which that “among”—or that *parmi*, somehow more smooth in its semi-alliterative French—suggests not contrast but likeness. In this case, “Virginia Woolf among the Philosophers” means not that she is different, but that she is one of them, that she should herself be counted as a philosopher, that her writing is worthy of serious philosophical consideration, VW-XY as an inevitable sequence. Put like that, this presupposes that philosophy is somehow the highest category or cage into which it is possible to assign an author’s name, the ultimate royal box into which they might, as a special mark of appreciation, be invited.

3. Would Woolf herself have wanted to be included in this way as one of them, one of the philosophers, her place reserved at the philosophical table? (Think of a philosophical round table—when you’re not at it.) As we know, in real life, round real tables, Woolf had plenty of conversational contact with elite academic philosophy, but she was excluded, as a woman, from participation in the deliberations of the Cambridge Apostles, to which her brother and husband belonged; and of course, *a fortiori*, she was excluded in that she did not get to take a Cambridge degree in philosophy or anything else. In its keeping her formally out, but letting her partly in, philosophy is paradigmatic of the insider/outsider situation that Woolf analysed and wrote about with such incisiveness in *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One’s Own*.

4. Woolf was not a philosopher, but nor was philosophy, for her, in her particular intellectual world, set apart in splendid disciplinary isolation—much as some of its practices and some of its writing styles might indicate such a segregation. Ann Banfield’s illuminating work has demonstrated just how fully contemporary English philosophical thinking permeated Woolf’s literary writing.¹ Banfield’s work separates out the different atoms of a philosophical theory, for instance, and then shows how they can be seen to have fallen, quite recognisably, onto or into a piece of literary writing. And there are also vaguer modulations that cannot be specified so well—the sudden surfacings, say, of a turn of phrase or style of sentence that seems to have jumped out of one disciplinary box into a different one. The influences and interrelations of disciplines, practices and individual persons link the philosophy of the time to other cutting-edge fields such as art history, economics and psychoanalysis, emerging onto the London scene in the 1920s. Literary writers are also taking up (and passing on) bits and pieces of what they read and hear from these other thinking fields, without the boundaries between them being clearly demarcated.

5. And so to my title and prompt, Woolf’s memorable call to attention in the middle of her essay “Modern Fiction” (1925): “Examine, for a moment, an ordinary mind on an ordinary day”². Examine for a moment those words and you will agree, I think, that that is a philosopher’s sentence. It is the philosophical sentence that was current at the beginning of the twentieth century; behind it one can see Bertrand Russell and G.E. Moore and the rest. What does the sentence propose? It proposes that there is such a thing as an ordinary mind, one that is separable from any individual body or person whose private mind it might be. That there is the possibility of stopping to consider such a mind—to “examine” it, even, almost clinically correct—presumably by using the analytical or evidence-gathering equip-

1 See A. Banfield, *The Phantom Table* and “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time”.

2 V. Woolf, “Modern Fiction”, 160. Further quotations from this essay will be given within the main text.

ment that a mind that is not quite an ordinary everyday mind, but an examining mind, or a mind in its examining mode, might bring to bear. “Examine” is the characteristic philosophical imperative, sparse and surgical, almost: Woolf does not say “Imagine” or even—like Andrew Ramsay in relation to the philosophical kitchen table of *To the Lighthouse*—“Think of”. And then there is the rather magisterial form of address: a general appeal to a like-minded reader who will be competent to pause and share in the impartial examining of a neutral “mind”. There is the presumption that you are going to agree with what follows: here comes the evidence, there isn’t really any dispute about it.

6. There will be more to say about these words in a moment, but to say that that is a philosophical sentence is of course to echo and allude to *A Room of One’s Own*, where Woolf talks about what she calls “the sentence that was current at the beginning of the nineteenth century”, then makes up a couple of pseudo-samples, and then comments: “That is a man’s sentence: behind it one can see Johnson, Gibbon and the rest.”³ My pastiche of a pastiche is playing Woolf at her own game. But is it a mistake, philosophical or otherwise, to imply that a Woolfian sentence, what it’s about and the way that it says it, is normally non-philosophical in the way that it might also be non-manly? Would it be literary if not philosophical, feminine if not masculine—and what, if so, would this mean for the identities and relationships of any of these terms?
7. For all her ambivalent mockery of, for instance, the paternal philosophical figure of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*, it is not self-evident that Woolf sought to distance her own writing from philosophy. In some ways she may even have aspired to it. In *A Room of One’s Own*, the great value of finding yourself in possession of a secure and ample income in perpetuity is that it offers “a freedom to think of things in themselves”. This sounds like a quintessentially philosophical ambition, with “in themselves” being one clue here to the particular strand involved—Plato by way of Moore perhaps. It is telling that thinking of things in themselves is then exemplified not by some question of epistemology, but instead by specific aesthetic value judgements: “That building, for example, do I like it or not? Is that picture beautiful or not? Is that in my opinion a good book or a bad?”⁴ The capacity to appreciate a beautiful object is one of the things that are evidently “good in themselves” in G. E. Moore’s *Principia Ethica*, the book which so much influenced Leonard Woolf and his fellow Cambridge followers of Moore.⁵

3 V. Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 73.

4 *Ibid.*, 39.

5 G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, § 113: “No one, probably, who has asked himself the question, has ever doubted that personal affection and the appreciation of what is beautiful in Art or Nature, are good in themselves; nor, if we consider strictly what things are worth having *purely for their own sakes*, does it appear probable that any one will think that anything else has *nearly* so great a value as the things which are included under these two heads”.

8. The essay in which the “ordinary mind on an ordinary day” appears exhibits some striking oscillations between different modes of exposition. There is a movement between on the one hand rather grand, from-on-high pronouncements about the course of English letters, and on the other, quite small-scale appeals to a shared sense of everyday experience. The first kind of exposition is recognisably derived from Matthew Arnold, who regularly invoked an alternation between what he differentiated as “creative” and “critical” periods of literature, and regularly diagnosed its present situation as one of critical transition from one creative period to the next: a verdict not far from Woolf’s on her own present time. The other kind of exposition would include the paraphrase of a story by Chekhov and the description of its effects on a reader. The paragraph of the “ordinary mind” stands out for its combination or conflation of disparate rhetorical modes and argumentative assumptions. One can earmark the “ordinary mind” sentence as being philosophical, in a certain stylistic and thematic way; but the surrounding sentences, philosophical or not, are nothing like it. Is this an isolated moment of philosophy among the Woolf-words? Or, in the midst of numerous other kinds of voice and perspective which seem to come together, if not to clash, in this paragraph, is it as good an example as we might hope to find of Woolf among the philosophies?

9. The passage comes at a point in the essay when Woolf has just been using Arnold Bennett as her straw man, or her too well-tailored man, for her critique of the way that a dominant style of modern fiction fails to capture what it should be capturing; she gives this various names: “Whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality, this, the essential thing, has moved off, or on, and refuses to be contained any longer in such ill-fitting vestments as we provide”. She concludes her complaint with semi-rhetorical questions: “Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” (160). The following paragraph continues:

Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being “like this”. Examine, for a moment, an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old; the moment of importance came not here but there; so that, if a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, 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. Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (160)

10. To begin with, one of the most striking aspects of this is the presumption of a model of realism. Contemporary novels are condemned not for seeking to represent reality, but for getting reality wrong. The reality (or life, or spirit, or truth) that they are reproducing is only a matter of generic “convention”, the sorts of stories that writers tell; and the phrase “accepted

style” tips over into an unflattering association with fashion—fashion thought of not as innovation, but as unthinking imitation. Yet for all the disparagement of convention, there is a deployment of quite standard rhetorical moves: the triple conditional, “If ... if ... if”, the “no... no... no... no” of the rejected conventional plots; the caricatural contrast between the gig lamps and the halo—and the somewhat set-piece contrasts between convention and feeling, slave and free man, compulsion and choice.⁶ But by the same token, there is a fantastically heterogeneous mixture of elements in these lines. What exactly are gig lamps and haloes and buttons and tragedy doing in the same paragraph, or the same argument? These are some of the innumerable nouns, the many verbal atoms, that fly towards us in order, one by one, but without it being at all clear where the accent is meant to fall—what general genre they belong to, if they do, or how we are meant to put them together, if we are. We have to do with this paragraph exactly what Woolf is saying we do in our daily lives. The paragraph is a reading microcosm of the chaotic cosmic quotidian that it invokes.

11. At the beginning, the half-rhetorical questions—“Is life like this? Must novels be like this?” are given, perhaps unexpectedly, the would-be definite answer that stems from the sentence about the ordinary mind. There is an appeal to universal experience, presented in the mode of a proof that is readily available. “Examine for a moment”: any reader can do the test, and the test will confirm the hypothesis. “Look within” is almost homely, invoking the intimacy of a subjective world, a cosy acquaintanceship between writer and reader. “Examine ... an ordinary mind” is curt and general, now situating an observer outside a mind not tied to any particular you or me; and one that is evidently exposed to a relentless and inescapable hailing, a “shower of innumerable atoms”, “from all sides”, rather than being secure and separate inside itself. This entity available for scrutiny is the philosophical-psychological kind of mind that by this time figured, for instance, in the Cambridge journal *Mind*, founded in 1876. This mind has no particular variations of age, culture, or sex, or any of the other categories that might be thought to distinguish one mind from another (and which often do so distinguish them when Woolf is writing about literary authors, for instance). Aloof and aloft, it is “an ordinary mind”, open to objective study and remaining the same across all times and places. Having hesitated about the word for what the novel should be grasping at—“Whether we call it life, or spirit, truth or reality”—Woolf is here quite definite—no question about it—that there is such a thing as a mind, an ordinary mind, examination of which will furnish evidence for the other more nebulous, or less specifiable phenomenon.
12. “On an ordinary day” bolsters the generality of the thought-experiment or mind-test. As the natural foundation of the repeated temporal unit, the day seems to reinforce the conception of a mind as an equally given entity. But then what the examination purports to find in or around that ordinary mind, in or on its ordinary day, appears to come from an

⁶ See further on this R. Bowlby, “Untold Stories in *Mrs Dalloway*”, 397-416.

entirely different spatial and temporal world, as the safe speculative abstraction is suddenly hit by the unsorted infinity of multiply adjectivised and differently named “impressions” or “atoms”. Just like the ordinary mind itself, the presence of both these words in Woolf’s mental universe, her picture of a general mind, owes much to the swarm of philosophical and art-theoretical languages at the time, from Walter Pater to Bertrand Russell to Roger Fry—but also for centuries past, when Lockean impressions might or might not have collided with Lucretian atoms. In other words—in the same words—atoms and impressions had been coursing and swerving in the atmosphere of aesthetic and philosophical theory since time immemorial. But Woolf’s juxtaposition of the two—or even their assimilation, since the “myriad impressions” are glossed as, not separate from, “an incessant shower of innumerable atoms”—is her own; it is part of this profoundly idiosyncratic mental universe which is being held up for inspection and confirmation.

13. Two other writers’ versions of the ordinary mind on an ordinary day may indirectly have entered into Woolf’s distinctive conception here. Behind the “impressions” of Pater and Fry are those of Charles Baudelaire, most memorably and brilliantly recorded in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863). Here modern life, the life of the present “day” in both senses, is what, above all, before all, the artist should be recording. And as in Woolf’s description, the life of the day consists of a constant arrival of multiple “impressions”, of which the painter or person (Baudelaire doesn’t use anything like the word “mind”) is a passive recipient. Like Woolf, Baudelaire talks of “impressions” that are “received”, “*les impressions ... que nous reçûmes*”⁷ Woolf’s “trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel” harks back to Baudelaire’s definition of modernity as “the transitory, the fleeting, the contingent, half of art, of which the other half is the eternal and the unchanging”—“*le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent, la moitié de l’art, dont l’autre moitié est l’éternel et l’immuable*”⁸. Baudelaire, like Woolf in this passage, regards the day, any day, every day, as presenting the artist with the subject matter of his work, and both of them see that day as teeming with impressions that descend upon a recipient who does not or cannot filter or interpret them. But Baudelaire’s artist positively welcomes the rush of new impressions. He cannot wait to get them down, as fast as possible, before it is too late (before a new day has introduced a whole subsequent set of them). He celebrates the ever-renewing spectacle of the present. For Woolf’s writer, on the other hand, the point is not to get all the impressions down, but rather to sort out which ones matter, what they really meant: in other words, to find or make some order in what would otherwise be chaos.
14. This is a common process in Woolf’s discussions about modern writing. Take, for instance, the brief essay “Life and the Novelist”, a review in 1926 of a book by G.B. Stern:

⁷ C. Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863), in Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ch. 3, 552.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 3, 553.

Taste, sound, movement, a few words here, a gesture there, a man coming in, a woman going out, even the motor that passes in the street or the beggar who shuffles along the pavement, and all the reds and blues and lights and shades of the scene claim his attention and rouse his curiosity. [The novelist] can no more cease to receive impressions than a fish in mid-ocean can cease to let the water rush through his gills.

But if this sensibility is one of the conditions of the novelist's life, it is obvious that all writers whose books survive have known how to master it and make it serve their purposes. ...

So drastic is the process of selection that in its final state we can often find no trace of the actual scene upon which the chapter was based.⁹

15. The paradigm figure here is called “the novelist”, rather than “an ordinary mind”: perhaps a significant distinction, suggesting a special “sensibility” on the part of this creature, from which other beings are exempt. In that case, the contrast between the two stages of writing is all the more striking, since the first is entirely involuntary (and the second the opposite, implying a flip from one mode to the other). In her essay, Woolf compares the good novelist, the one who correctly performs the second stage of “mastery”, with the weaker one, who just lets all the impressions spill back out again onto the page (the unfortunate Stern is made into a case in point).
16. In “Modern Fiction”, the second stage is represented with more equivocation: in fact it is both idealised and excluded in the repeated unfulfilled conditional. “If the writer were...”—but by implication, that is not the case. “If the writer were a free man and not a slave” is both extreme and clichéd in its comparisons, and it applies perhaps less to Woolf than to almost any writer, since the existence of the Hogarth Press, the publishing house that she ran with her husband, meant that she really was a “free man” in this sense: she could publish as well as write whatever she chose. But the Baudelairean equivalent of this second, composing stage carries no suggestion of reshaping, let alone censorship. Rather, the pressure is to do with urgency and the consequent speed of execution required: it is always about to be, or it already is, too late, and the artist is pictured at the end of the day fighting to get his now mentally imaged impressions out there, as if afraid of losing them: “*comme s’il craignait que les images ne lui échappent*”¹⁰.
17. Freud is the other writer whose day and ordinary mind may be compared to Woolf's. Most obviously because of his theorisation of the quotidian, which he thereby brought into the thinking foreground: *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is surely one of the most brilliant titles of the twentieth century. But in particular for his representation of daily life as a matter of impressionistic overload: “Crowds [*Scharen*] of such impressions [*Eindrücke*] enter our minds and are then forgotten”¹¹. Before their disap-

9 V. Woolf, “Life and the Novelist”, *Essays* 4, 400-01.

10 C. Baudelaire, *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, ch. 3, 553.

11 S. Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 176 ; *Gesammelte Werke*, II/III, 182.

pearance, they have a short-term continuing existence as “day’s residues” (*Tagesreste*); *The Interpretation of Dreams* describes the way that dreams make use of these as padding to cover the unacceptable ideas that come up in the dreams of the night. Freud’s *Eindrücke* are not, in themselves, of any particular interest (as the day’s impressions are for Baudelaire’s curious artist); nor are they described as other than the leftover or aftermath of “residues”. But all three writers assume that the day delivers too many impressions—whether these are primarily stimulating (as for Baudelaire), or rubbish (as for Freud), or—Woolf’s very English middle ground—in need of filtering and reinterpretation.

18. Baudelaire and Freud can be thought of as modern “day” philosophers, perhaps the modern-day philosophers, *par excellence*. For the Baudelaire of *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*, each day is the source of new sights; there is perpetual, infinitesimal change, exemplified by the modulations of *la mode* (fashion being for him the antithesis of the negative, conventional phenomenon it is for Woolf); and the artist is the one whose mission and pleasure it is to go looking for these images of newness and to get them sketched out before the next day comes to supersede them. For Freud, each night-and-day cycle brings together the old and the new, the enduring and the ephemeral, in the compromise cluster that is a dream. A dream is a mutually accommodating mixture of repressed and continuing wishes: the dark core of the dream-thoughts, and the light additions of the remains of the day’s impressions, that come and go from one night to the next. Woolf is torn, I think, between on the one hand granting to the day’s experiences or “impressions” the greatest significance, and on the other diminishing them as essentially a preliminary phenomenon, before the writer’s real work of composition and ordering—and before the work of deciding what is going to “endure”. She castigates Arnold Bennett, H.G. Wells, and John Galsworthy for “making the trivial and the transitory appear the true and the enduring” (159); Baudelaire is more radical in making the case for “the transitory” as half of art, only the other half of which is “the eternal and the enduring” (another possible translation of *l’immuable*).

19. Yet throughout her writing career, Woolf is fascinated with the ambiguities and the possibilities of the day as a way of encapsulating life or reality (or any of those other names by which the to-be-captured “essential thing” can be suggested). She writes two one-day novels, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*. She calls another novel *Night and Day*. *The Waves* is framed by a series of lyrical episodes signalling the progress of a natural day, from sunrise to sunset, in step with that of the human lives that are being unfolded. Two of the three sections of *To the Lighthouse* take place on single days. But the day, in these novels, is never just any old day, or any new day. It is always, in one way or another, steeped in various kinds of significance, whether for its individual characters (Peter Walsh doesn’t turn up on Clarissa Dalloway’s doorstep every day of the year), or for the community (the pageant of *Between the Acts* is a way of highlighting the

question of the meaning of English history at a point when war is imminent).

20. In “Modern Fiction”, the ordinary day is not fleshed out with any details beyond its general excesses. The myriad impressions and atoms remain as they are stated, innumerable, unceasing, assaulting, even; defined by their impact and with none marked out separately from the mass of others. By the end of the paragraph, the day, the particular day, has been left far behind, and the ordinary mind is not so much one that might have found its way into an academic journal as one that comes trailing clouds of Romantic glory: “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end”. We have fallen away or returned, apparently, from the day to the lifetime, and from the quotidian to the quasi-mystical. Here, it is not a matter of working over the day’s materials, repeating and cancelling their “myriad impressions” with what “Life and the Novelist” calls, exhaustingly, “a thousand disciplines and exercises”—the body boggles.¹² It is rather a question of coming at life from another starting point altogether, one which is indifferent to the day and its details, set apart from them as “this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit”. The appeal to the experience of an ordinary mind now makes way for a very different kind of philosophy.
21. And what about those gig lamps, that “series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged”, that life, so emphatically, is not? There is in fact a curiously over-assertive tone to the sentence: who ever thought that life *was* a series of gig lamps? Especially when they are such obscure objects, and already moving away from the familiarity that the sentence seems to require even at the time that Woolf wrote the essay. What use have gig lamps apart from serving, in this extreme way, as rhetorical objects of rebuttal? A gig lamp, by the way, and just in case you don’t have a clear image of them in your ordinary mind’s eye, was a lamp attached to a gig—a gig being, or having been, a small cart pulled by a single horse, a common and not very grand mode of human transport. Like other kinds of horse-drawn carriage, the gig was slowly but definitively superseded by the differently powered motor car—a process of takeover that was going on during the period that Woolf was writing. Gig lamps were on the way out—all over London and all over every other western city those lights are dimming, to be replaced by the even more symmetrically repetitive headlamps of the car.¹³
22. In this connection it is interesting to note a change that Woolf made with “Modern Fiction” from an earlier version of the essay called “Modern

12 V. Woolf, “Life”, 401.

13 Woolf wrote about these headlights with some appreciation for their power of illuminating the landscape in a new way in a brief sketch probably written in the late 1920s called “Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car”. One of her several personae, imagining the world in five hundred years, says: “Look at the moving light in that hill; it is the headlight of a car. By day and by night Sussex in five centuries will be full of charming thoughts, quick, effective beams”; V. Woolf, *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life*, 84.

Novels”. In both, she first sets up and then rejects the possibility of discussing literary history in terms of improvement over the ages. In “Modern Novels”: “the analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making bicycles scarcely holds good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature”¹⁴. “Modern Fiction” speaks almost, but not quite identically: “the analogy between literature and the process, to choose an example, of making motor cars scarcely holds good beyond the first glance. It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature” (157). In 1919 we are invited to think, and then not to think, of a bicycle—of literature as a bicycle. In 1925, we are invited to think, then not to think, of a motor car—of literature as a motor car. The analogy is made and deleted both times but the technology is updated from one version to the next.

23. The gig lamps, which are another deleted analogy (“Life is not...”), and another piece of transportational debris, only turn up in 1925. Old-fashioned as they are, on the page at least they have overtaken the bicycle and earned their place alongside the modern automobile. The whole collection, however, bicycles, cars, and gig lamps, gets shoved into the literary landfill as evidently not fit for purpose. These things are not useful as a means of saying something constructive about literature or life. But they are extremely useful, it would seem, as a means of saying something unreconstructedly negative: what literature is not like, what life is not.

24. Is there any way, apart from the sentence they find themselves in, that the gig lamps can be wired up to some sort of connection with the semi-transparent halo—a connection that would give grounds for comparing them? Both, it might be said, are sources of light. The gig lamps, for practical purposes, light up the solid world they pass over. They make it artificially visible, they prevent us from crashing into what we otherwise could not discern in the darkness. The semi-transparent halo surrounds a subjective “us”, imbued with the existential features of “consciousness” and mortality. Woolf offers the difference between the lighting of external things and of subjective illumination: a difference that is often marked out as indicating the passage from nineteenth- to twentieth-century ways of seeing. The focus moves, it is said, from the world out there, to the inner world of the self—that new field of both artistic and scientific attention that Woolf calls, elsewhere in “Modern Fiction”, “the dark places of psychology” (162). The gig lamps, here, belong in their proper place, repudiated and caricatured as Victorian things. And the semi-transparent halo, for all its faintly *fin-de-siècle*, Paterian associations, also wafts us all the way back to Wordsworth, with the child “trailing clouds of glory”, in the famous lines from “Ode: Intimations of Immortality”, before the “prison-house” of culture closes him down. In this sense pre-Victorian, pre-prison-house, pre-conventional, the semi-transparent halo can be perceived as a return to

¹⁴ V. Woolf, “Modern Novels” (1919), 31.

possibilities of experience and expression that have been lost in the writer by an unromantic training in the dull mechanical world—a world of contraptions and objects.

25. Let me end with a nugget from a brief review Woolf wrote in 1919, the same year as “Modern Novels”, and published just six weeks after; it provides a disarmingly close comparison with the other essay and its later version:

Every writer, after the first flush of youthful experiment, settles into a manner of his own. It is inevitable; and yet, as the new scene shapes itself after the pattern of the old, as the sentence takes its accustomed curve, some little thrill of foreboding may stay the pen in the air. These easy cadences and facile arrangements are the first grey hairs, the first intimations of senility¹⁵.

26. Never mind tyrannical conventions and artistic slavery—this is mediocrity as a bad hair day in the life of the ordinary writer. But it’s as if, with that phrase about the new scene shaping itself after the pattern of the old, Woolf herself is doing exactly what she diagnoses. For the thought falls within the same general “pattern” as the passage from “Modern Fiction”. There is the same universality—“Every writer”—and the same kind of contrast being made between two different modes of writing, one more authentic than the other. There is even the Wordsworthian echo, with “intimations” bathetically not of immortality but of senility when the slide into habit is unresisted. But in this case there is no criterion of realistic representation, and the conventionality contrasted with the “flush” of experimentation is not imposed from outside, but is rather part of an “inevitable” process of ageing in which we come to shape everything to the same pattern. Including arguments about literature.

27. It is salutary, or inspiring, or comical, or all three, to think that when Woolf wrote these words she had just completed what is surely her most conventional novel, *Night and Day*, and that every one of the novels that made her enduring if not eternal was yet to be written. She was getting towards her late thirties and had probably found a few grey hairs recently; perhaps the general theory of authorial greying may be serving a double function of consolation and exhortation. The capturing of reality in representation must never succeed—for that spells convention, that spells death (or senility). Hence perhaps the somewhat perverse pronouncement in the concluding words of “Modern Fiction”:

And if we can imagine the art of fiction come alive and standing in our midst, she would undoubtedly bid us break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured. (164)

15 V. Woolf, “*Java Head*”, 47.

WORKS CITED

- BANFIELD, ANN. *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- BANFIELD, ANN. “Time Passes: Virginia Woolf, Post-Impressionism, and Cambridge Time.” *Poetics Today* 24.3 (2003).
- BAUDELAIRE, CHARLES. *Le Peintre de la vie moderne*. 1863. *Œuvres complètes*. Ed. MARCEL A. RUFF. Paris: Seuil, 1968.
- BOWLBY, RACHEL. “Untold Stories in *Mrs Dalloway*.” *Textual Practice* 25.3 (2011).
- FREUD, SIGMUND. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. 1900. *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud: vol. IV*. Trans. JAMES STRACHEY. London: Hogarth Press, 1953-74. [*Gesammelte Werke: II/III*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999.]
- MOORE, G. E. *Principia Ethica*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life. Selected Essays: 2*. Ed. RACHEL BOWLBY. London: Penguin, 1993.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. “Java Head”. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 3*. Ed. ANDREW MCNEILLIE. London: Hogarth Press, 1988.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. “Life and the Novelist”. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 4*. Ed. ANDREW MCNEILLIE. London: Hogarth Press, 1994.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. “Modern Fiction”. 1925. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 4*. Ed. ANDREW MCNEILLIE. London: Hogarth Press, 1994.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. “Modern Novels”. 1919. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: 3*. Ed. ANDREW MCNEILLIE. London: Hogarth Press, 1988.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *A Room of One’s Own*. 1929. London: Granada, 1977.