

Ethos or Mythos? The Implicit History of Woolf's Modern Sublime

EDNA ROSENTHAL
TEL AVIV UNIVERSITY

1. **T**he theme of our colloquium—Virginia Woolf among the Philosophers—attests to Woolf's status as a writer and at the same time points to uncharted areas in her work. One such relatively uncharted area is the attempt to look at Woolf's aesthetics¹ in the context of the history of criticism and, more problematically, to relate it to the Aristotelian critical tradition. Unlike Eliot, whose critical prose directly influenced academic criticism in the first half of the twentieth century, Woolf's essays were mostly seen as keys to her novelistic concerns: they were *literary* rather than *critical*. Seeing that her essayistic style is deliberately anti-theoretical and anti-academic, and that she saw herself as an outsider, excluded from the institutional pursuit of knowledge, the attempt to relate her aesthetic views to the critical canon appears counterintuitive.
2. A further difficulty has to do with the changing tides of literary criticism, its internal debates and rival theories. Since the definition of a literary movement hinges on our perception of its relationship with what preceded it, it necessarily entails a particular view of literary history. Now, literary Modernism has generally been seen as a clear *break* with Romanticism or, alternatively, as its *continuation*. This either-or division, which arose from the debates among the early modernists themselves, was further consolidated as the "debate about the Modern" by successive generations of critics. For some, Modernism was a change that occurred in the late eighteenth century (e.g., Northrop Frye; Harold Bloom), or in the early twentieth century (e.g., Marjorie Perloff); for others, it was a continuation of the Renaissance (e.g., Frank Kermode, Hugh Kenner, Jeffrey Perl). Since the disagreement on Modernism reveals a deeper disagreement on its historical roots—that is, on our perception of Romanticism and Classicism—we may situate Woolf in early-twentieth-century Modernism with the help

¹ A more detailed discussion of Woolf's aesthetics may be found in my *Aristotle and Modernism: Aesthetic Affinities of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf* on which the present essay is based.

of Sir Frank Kermode's distinction—from his seminal essay "The Modern" (1965–6)—between its two broadly defined trends: the historical-minded avant-gardes or *paleo-modernists* (Joyce, Eliot, Pound), tending towards *classicism*, as opposed to the anti-traditionalists or *neo-modernists* (William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, Gertrude Stein), tending towards Romanticism.² In this scheme, Woolf qualifies as a neo-modernist. Her essays express an aversion to inherited terms and canons of taste, and she ostensibly rejects Eliot's paleo-modernist concept of a unified Tradition, where, as we would expect, Aristotle is cast as "the perfect critic."³ Where Eliot searches, discovers, and affirms *continuities* with the past, Woolf encounters numerous *obstacles*—historical, national, linguistic and gender differences that seem to her insurmountable.

3. To show that some of these obstacles were not as insurmountable as Woolf depicts them, I propose an old-new context for demonstrating that Woolf's aesthetics converges on the Aristotelian principle of *formal affectivism*. But since Woolf very rarely refers to the history of criticism in her essays or, for that matter, to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the reconstruction of her aesthetics requires a patient detour. To establish some kind of continuity between their aesthetics, this detour branches out into a brief discussion of three affectivist theories—Longinus's (AD 1?) *On Sublimity*, Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), and Aristotle's *Poetics* (323 BC). Despite the marked difference in their historical context and methodology, all three—Longinus, Burke, and Aristotle—approach art in terms of its emotional and psychological effects. And Woolf's answer to the question, "what is the end of art?", or rather "what is my impression of the book I have just finished reading—and can I account for it?" is equally and unequivocally *affectivist*. The term "modern sublime" is used here to refer to Woolf's own version of formal affectivism and to reveal her affinities with both the classical and the Romantic traditions. But the classicist underpinnings of her conception of the modern novel go further than that. Woolf's "modern sublime" transcends the inherited—but surely problematic—opposition between classical, or Aristotelian, and Romantic, or Longinian, aesthetics. And her blending of the two traditions entails an interesting theoretical shift where *ethos*, the revelation of character, replaces Aristotle's *mythos* (plot). It is this discourse shift—understood as Woolf's tacit adaptation of the *Poetics* to the modernist novel—that enables her to secure for "the youngest and most vigorous of the arts" its rightful place in literary critical history.

2 F. Kermode, "The Modern," 46.

3 "One must be firmly distrustful of accepting Aristotle in a canonical spirit; this is to lose the whole living force of him. He was primarily a man of not only remarkable but universal intelligence.[...] in whatever sphere of interest, he looked solely and steadfastly at the object; in his short and broken treatise he provides an eternal example—not of laws [...] but of intelligence itself swiftly operating the analysis of sensation to the point of principle and definition." (T. S. Eliot, "The Perfect Critic," 10).

4. Woolf's views on art—the art of fiction—are expressed as a struggle with several overlapping histories and conventions. Her attitude to the literary canon is dismissive, almost contemptuous. But her defiance appears to be at least partly triggered by an awareness that as a young genre, the novel lacks a critical tradition. In 1925 she bluntly states the problem, in “On not Knowing Greek”:

For it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek [...] [for] between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition.⁴

5. The bold assertion—that “a tremendous breach of tradition” separates the ancients and the moderns—does not necessarily imply that it is forever unbridgeable, for she immediately admits that “Greek is the impersonal literature; it is also the literature of masterpieces” (12). Greek poetry—and presumably its theoretical defence—is set up as the original pattern.
6. That Woolf's quarrel with the past is more ambivalent than is commonly assumed gains some support when we juxtapose her image of the Greek ideal with the image of the modern genius and masterpiece, from her essay “*Robinson Crusoe*” (1919):

But the great writer [...] goes on his way [...] by the sweat of his brow he brings order from chaos; [...] In masterpieces [...] where the vision is clear and order has been achieved—he inflicts his own perspective upon us so severely that as often as not we suffer agonies. [...] Yet from anger, fear, and boredom a rare and lasting delight is sometimes born. (1.71)

7. What is the aesthetic emotion she has in mind, that “rare and lasting delight,” and how does she propose to induce it in, and to justify it to, her readers?
8. These fundamental aesthetic questions cannot easily be answered without first admitting that the novel inhabits a critical vacuum: “There is not a critic alive now,” she complains in 1927 in “The Art of Fiction,” “who will say that a novel is a work of art and that as such he will judge it” (2.55). What is needed is someone who will rescue “the poor lady whom [...] we still persist in calling the art of fiction” (2.55); someone who

grasps her firmly and defines her severely. She has had no rules drawn up for her, very little *thinking* done on her behalf. And though rules may be wrong and must be broken, they have this advantage—they confer dignity and order upon their subject; they admit her to a place in civilized society; they prove that she is worthy of consideration. (2.52)

9. To become “worthy of consideration,”—“that cannibal,” as she calls the novel in “The Narrow Bridge of Art” (1927) (2.224)—must first assume the functions previously performed by *drama*, which, as she explains in another essay, was “the old form in which poetry had dealt with life” (“*Aurora Leigh*” [1931], 1.215). Woolf clearly aligns the “youngest art” with

4 V. Woolf, “On Not Knowing Greek,” 1.

the drama and poetry of the past, from which she also draws her principles. The novel, she says in “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” will have to be renamed, reconceived:

It will be written in prose, but in prose which has many of the characteristics of poetry. It will have something of the exaltation of poetry, but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, and yet not a play. It will be read, not acted. (2.224)⁵

10. In Woolf’s new literary code the novel will fuse classical drama with Romantic poetry. And it will replace drama by emulating its effects:

We have a right to demand (since the Greeks have proved that it is perfectly possible) that what happens shall have an end in view. It shall agitate great emotions; bring into existence memorable scenes. (“Notes on an Elizabethan Play,” 1.56)

11. But can the experience of reading a novel have the same impact as watching a play—say a tragedy—in the theatre? Can it, as she puts it in “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” “draw blood from [its] readers?” (2.228). Her need to defend the novel by supplying it with the critical tradition that it lacks entails a crucial change of emphasis: seeing that “the national habit of reading has been formed by the drama,” as she notes in “On Re-reading Novels” (1922) (2.122), Woolf transposes the locus of aesthetic affect from the drama as it is acted to the drama of reading, and she does so without breaking the continuity between them.

12. Signs of this shift can be seen in her earliest responses to books; she relishes their sensuousness, “the mood in which this orgy of reading was done” and how, at times she felt an “extraordinary excitement and exaltation” (“Hours in a Library” [1916], 2.35, 36). “Agonies,” “orgy,” “excitement,” and “exaltation”—what elsewhere she describes as “delicious warmth and release of spirit” (“George Eliot” [1919], 1.200)—belong in the history of criticism to the concept of the sublime, sending us to Longinus and to Burke and, beyond them, to the family resemblance of Woolf’s aesthetics and Aristotle’s tragic affect. For although Woolf does not mention Aristotle directly, it is useful to remember that in the *Poetics* he never insisted that to have its effect a play had to be performed:

The Spectacle has, indeed, an emotional attraction of its own, but, of all the parts, it is the least artistic, and connected least with the art of poetry. For the

5 In order to save fiction, it is evident that the “poor lady” must first be subjected to a rite of passage: “break her and bully her, as well as honour and love her, for so her youth is renewed and her sovereignty assured” (“Modern Fiction,” 110). The non-aesthetic approach must be replaced with an aesthetic one (taking fiction “seriously” as they do in France and Russia [“The Art of Fiction,” 2.55]). The novelist who dares to break the conventions might discover that “the story might wobble; the plot might crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters. The novel, in short, might become a work of art” (2.55). For the Georgians, the Edwardians were no models at all: their “conventions are ruin,” she declares, “those tools are death” (“Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown,” 1.330). What is needed is a new “code of manners which writers and readers accept as a prelude to the more exciting intercourse of friendship” (1.334).

power of Tragedy, we may be sure, is felt even apart from representation and actors.⁶

13. The power of drama arises from what he calls “the art of poetry,” from the dynamic structuring of the medium as it bodies forth characters and events, and realizes, through the inner logic of their dependencies, its final cause.
14. To show that this is not merely an incidental link requires that we pause to consider two pre-Romantic affectivist theories—Longinus’s classical sublime and Burke’s psychological sublime. This move may seem unwarranted unless we remember that in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the concept of the sublime became so firmly identified with Romanticism that it utterly obliterated the continuity between Aristotle’s notion of catharsis and Longinus’s and Burke’s affectivist theories.⁷
15. Longinus, in his *Peri Hypsous, On Sublimity*⁸ shifts attention from Aristotle’s formal affectivism—the aim of tragedy is to effect the catharsis of pity and fear—to a discussion of style. This shift subordinates the codification of Roman rhetoric to emotional intensity and defines the highest function of eloquence as neither to teach nor to delight, but to transport the audience: “If you take away the sublime element, you take the soul away from the body” (474).
16. By diverting the discussion of rhetoric from rules to the unregulated and the unexpected, Longinus draws attention to the primary role of emotion in the production of language and thought, replacing, so to speak, Aristotle’s “noble action” with “noble emotion”:

For grandeur produces ecstasy rather than persuasion in the hearer; and the combination of wonder and astonishment always proves superior to the merely persuasive and pleasant. (462)

-
- 6 S. H. Butcher, *Aristotle’s Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*, 6.1450b. The point is re-emphasized by Aristotle in relation to the tragic emotions of pity and fear: “The plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place. This is the impression we should receive from hearing the story of the Oedipus” (14.1453b); and again when he compares epic with tragedy: “Tragedy like Epic poetry produces its effect even without action; it reveals its power by mere reading”; Tragedy “has vividness of impression in reading as well as in representation” (26.1462a).
 - 7 It was Boileau, as William Wimsatt and Cleanth Brooks point out, who established the modern meaning of the “sublime” as a strong emotive expression rather than a high rhetorical style. (*Literary Criticism: A Short History*, 285.) In the neoclassical period, they note, there were two trends of affectivism: the classical trend (Milton and Dryden) interpreted catharsis as a tempering of powerful emotions; the neoclassical trend emphasized the exaltation of the emotions and in its more extreme versions led “to the eclipse of purgative Aristotelianism” (291).
 - 8 A third of the original treatise was lost; the author is unknown but is today thought to have been a Greek living in Rome who had contact with Jewish culture. Longinus, “On Sublimity,” D. A. Russell, and M. Winterbottom, eds, *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations*, 460–503.

17. No contrast could be greater than the violent, rule-breaking Longinian sublime that “tears everything up like a whirlwind” (462), and the Horatian (*Ars Poetica*, 1 BC) sweetness and light. And it is this very contrast that informs Burke’s treatise on the categorical and hierarchical distinction between the sublime and the beautiful.
18. His *Philosophical Enquiry* seems a perfect synthesis of Longinus’s sublime as the product of genius, and Aristotle’s affectivist aesthetics. Burke shifts the focus from the effect of words, or the rhetoric of the sublime, to the psychology underlying affect. Much like Aristotle in *The Rhetoric* and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Burke’s psychological sublime is based on the importance of studying “the rationale of our passions. [...] It is not enough to know them in general; [...] we should pursue them through all their variety of operations, and pierce into the inmost, [...] inaccessible parts of our nature.”⁹
19. The emotions that relate to self-preservation in life, as in art—pain, danger, and above all, death—all ideas that “fill the mind with strong emotions of horror” (36)—are categorically stronger than those that relate to society and produce pleasure. Burke then characterizes the sublime as “an idea belonging to self-preservation. [...] its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress” (79). By limiting the Longinian sublime to states of existential suffering, Burke reclaims a version of Aristotelian psychology that undermines the Neoclassical interpretation of the *Poetics* and relocates the tragic mode as the highest literary form. For, as Burke says, we delight to see that which we would do anything to avoid in real life (44). Tragedy, he implies, offers no consolation; it reproduces the consciousness of death, bringing us face to face with the ultimates of human suffering.
20. Although both Longinus and Burke emphasize the affective potential of language and see it as the most powerful artistic medium,¹⁰ their conception of the sublime assumes divergent meanings. Longinus’s sublime is an elevation towards the superhuman and supernatural, a quest for the unusual; Burke’s sublime is a descent into the hidden recesses of the mind.
21. Thus for Burke poetry “cannot with strict propriety be called an art of imitation” because its “business is to affect rather by sympathy than imitation” (157). Words can often move us without producing images at all: a clear expression presents “a thing as it is”; a strong expression presents it “as it is felt” (160); as he famously puts it, “a clear idea is [...] another name for a little idea” (58)—*little* precisely because it lacks affective power. And he ascribes the non-mimetic affectivity of words to the imagination, “the representative of the senses” and sole transmitter of the passions. Great

9 E. Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 48–49.

10 Longinus: “Statues are expected to represent the human form, whereas [...] something higher than human is sought in literature” (495).

Burke: “We find by experience that eloquence and poetry are as capable, nay indeed much more capable of making deep and lovely impressions than any other arts, and even than nature itself in very many cases” (158).

thoughts and great emotions are no longer separable functions or expressions of the sublime, as they were for Longinus, but derive from a single source—the imagination.

22. Burke's *Enquiry*, in the words of Ernst Cassirer in *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, had a momentous impact on aesthetics:

Not only form in the classical sense, but distortion, has aesthetic value and a rightful place in aesthetics. [...] The sublime defies the aesthetic demand for proportionality; for transcendence of all mere proportionality constitutes its real character. [...] The sublime removes the boundaries of the finite.¹¹

23. We do not need to dwell here on how the boundlessness of the imagination was adopted by the early Romantics and soon grew into a new metaphysics where the sublime was not at all *exceptional*, as it was for Burke and Longinus, but became the normative subject of poetry, the Infinite I Am.

24. With this outline in mind, we can return to Woolf's version of formal affectivism, to her modern sublime. The words she uses in "Phases of Fiction" (1929) to describe the impression made by great works of literature recall not only the Longinian and Burkean sublime, but Aristotle's catharsis: "The novels which make us live imaginatively, with the whole of the body as well as the mind, produce in us the physical sensations of heat and cold, noise and silence"; they produce "an emotion which is both distinct and unique" (2.71).

25. But if Woolf is in some sense an Aristotelian the question is why she makes the emotional effect of the novel dependent on the writer's ability to *reveal character*, and why she uses "plot"—"the soul of tragedy"—only pejoratively. Could this be a case of a discourse shift whereby "character" somehow replaces "plot"?

26. Her rejection of plot is historically and aesthetically motivated. Throughout her version of literary history she denies *plot* any positive role in drama, while promoting *character* as the central aesthetic principle. Beginning with Greek tragedy, she affirms "nobody can fail to remember the plot of the *Antigone*, because what happens is so closely bound up with the emotions of the actors that we remember the people and the plot at one and the same time ("Notes on an Elizabethan Play," 1.56).

27. When it comes to Elizabethan drama, *plot* is bitterly attacked as the enemy of *character*: "the incessant, improbable [...] convolutions which presumably gratified the spirit of an excitable and unlettered public actually in the playhouse, but only confuse and fatigue a reader with the book

11 According to Ernst Cassirer it was Burke's treatise on the sublime rather than Boileau's commentary on Longinus that "constitutes the first important presentation" of the aesthetic problem of the sublime, and is one example of the broadening of the field of aesthetic subjectivity in the second half of the eighteenth century. (E. Cassirer, "Fundamental Problems of Aesthetics," 328–29).

before him.” In contrast to Greek tragedy, Elizabethan drama (with the exception of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson) shows no necessary connection between “the story” and “the emotions which it has aroused,” which leads her to conclude that Elizabethan drama has “no *characters*.” Where plot is paramount, “the actors themselves are obliterated and emotions which [...] deserve the most careful investigation, the most delicate analysis are clean sponged off the slate” (1.56–57).

28. The attack on “plot” strikes a new pitch when she turns to neoclassical drama, in her comments on William Congreve, for example:

Who can remember the plot when the book is shut? [...] ; a plot should put the characters on the rack and show them thus extended. But what are we to say when the plot merely teases and distorts the character? (“Congreve’s Comedies” [1937], 1.77)

29. And the final toppling of *plot* occurs, as we would expect, in Romantic criticism, where Woolf adopts Coleridge’s view of Shakespeare as the greatest Romantic *poet* who appeals not to the senses—the physical actions on the stage—but to the imagination, to what he calls, “the reason as contemplating our inward nature.”¹² Woolf similarly elevates the poetry of drama above its performative or visual effects, in her essay “The Cinema” (1926):

As everybody knows, in Shakespeare the most complex ideas form chains of images through which we mount, changing and turning, until we reach the light of day. But obviously the images of a poet are not to be cast in bronze or traced by pencil. They are compact of a thousand suggestions of which the visual is only the most obvious.” (2.271)

30. But Shakespeare, at the same time, is also Woolf’s model for creating character. Novelists, she writes in “Sir Walter Scott” (1940), should “make real thoughts and real emotions issue in real words from living lips;” they should “practise the great, the Shakespearean art, of making people reveal themselves in speech” (1.138, 143).

31. Stressing *character* throughout her essays, it seems to exceed the accepted meaning of the word: Woolf appears to equate *character* with the aesthetic *whole* or *form* of the novel, the precise impression it leaves on the mind of the reader. But, as she insists in “Phases of Fiction,” aesthetic impressions are not haphazard: “nobody reads simply by chance or without a definite scale of values” (2.56).

32. Woolf’s “definite scale of values” thus hinges on characterization. As a reader her interest and enjoyment depend on the “treatment of people” in novels (2.66). In the same essay, she uses “character” as the criterion for distinguishing six semi-chronological groups spanning the history of the novel, among which she particularly praises “The Psychologists” (James, Proust, Dostoevsky), “The Poets” (Bronte, Meredith, Hardy, Melville, Tol-

12 S. T. Coleridge, “Classical and Romantic Drama,” 176.

stoy), and the precursors of the modern novel, Jane Austen and Laurence Sterne.

33. Whereas Romantic fiction, of the Gothic variety, exhibits the greatest failure, because there is “no final consummation. [...] We remember the detail, but not the whole” (2.68), in Austen’s novels, “always the stress is laid upon character” (“Jane Austen” [1925], 1.148). Speculating on how Austen’s style would have evolved, Woolf describes her own ideal style where characterization combines *classical impersonality* and *Romantic sensibility*. Austen, she says,

would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid; not only what they are, but what life is. She would have stood farther away from her characters, and seen them more as a group, less as individuals. (1.153)

34. Woolf’s claim here is that for the modern novelist, *plot* and *character*—as categories of thought—along with *truth*, *beauty*, and *the good*, cannot simply be inherited. The novelist must rediscover, rethink and redefine them, as she herself does. And this is so because, as she says in “Modern Fiction” (1919), there is no such thing as “the proper stuff of fiction [or art]”:

If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must [...] there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy. [...] 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. (2.106)

35. Woolf’s rejection of plot as a sequence of external events is therefore less an anti-Aristotelian move—since for Aristotle plot and character, thought and diction, depend on the working out of aesthetic probability—than the outcome of her rejection of any fiction that substitutes “enumeration of detail” for “rhythmical order.” Her use of “character” as the soul of the novel thus displaces a narrow conception of “plot” and at the same time implicitly adjusts Aristotle’s formal affectivism to the novel as a work of art.¹³

36. Finally, it is *the modern* as a paradigm shift that Woolf affirms in “Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown” (1924) when she famously says that “in or about December, 1910, *human character* changed.” And she explains why a change in human character is a revaluation of everything: “All human relations have shifted. [...] And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature” (1.320, 321).

13 Woolf’s post-Romantic concept of *ethos* is in line with S. H. Butcher’s interpretation of Aristotle’s dramatic action as that which includes the “inward sense”: “The [praxis] that art seeks to reproduce is mainly an inward process, a psychical energy working outwards; deeds, incidents, events, situations, being included under it so far as these spring from an inward act of will, or elicit some activity of thought or feeling” (123).

37. *Character*, therefore, is not a simple term in Woolf's aesthetics but one that conveys the uniqueness of a writer's style, encompassing the unity of a work of imaginative prose. Her use of *character* and *art*—each bound up with the other—is formulated, in the same essay, as a semi-question: “Think how little we know about character—think how little we know about art” (1.320). Her interest lies in the prospects of the novel rather than in summing up its present state. “Prose,” she avers in “The Narrow Bridge of Art” “has taken all the dirty work on to her own shoulders” (2.223).
38. It appears, then, that Woolf moves from an ostensibly anti-classicist bias to something closer to the Eliotic position. This shift is nowhere more apparent than when she translates Eliot's Tradition, “the mind of Europe,” into words of friendly encouragement to a young poet and, by extension, to the new generation of writers, reminding them that they are not alone or “singular” but “are an immensely ancient, complex, and continuous character.”¹⁴ With unerring tact—inclusive, expansive, bridging across disjunctions, languages, histories—Woolf brings the whole edifice of the western tradition down to its proper human dimensions.
39. The claim that Woolf's substitution of ethos for mythos in some sense reclaims Aristotle's tragic mode not only in theory but also in practice can only very briefly be touched on here, as it entails a close study of the affectivist techniques she uses to create fictional characters, to render their changing states of mind, thoughts, feelings and actions. Nevertheless, if we take *Mrs. Dalloway* as our test case and examine its affectivist devices against Burke's psychological theory, we see that Woolf subverts his philosophical concepts of the sublime and beautiful according to which the *existential* is categorically and hierarchically opposed to the *social*, as death is to life and as madness to sanity. To the former, according to Burke, belong “dangers, punishments and troubles” and “perpetual solitude”; among the latter are “reliefs, gratifications and indulgences” and society in general. Clarissa Dalloway fulfils Burke's requirements for the beautiful just as Peter Walsh and Septimus Warren Smith fulfil his requirements for the sublime. Flowers figure from the opening sentence of the novel as the Burkean leitmotif of the social; and the tolling of Big Ben as the Burkean leitmotif of the existential. Although Woolf maintains this pattern throughout the novel, both in the solitary and in the public scenes, her characterization of Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus and the substantive conflicts they experience undermine Burke's hierarchically gendered opposition between the social and the existential—while maintaining it on the surface level—and disclose the tragic action on the deeper level of the narrative.
40. In the characters' “dark places of psychology,” which Woolf explores in the novel, Burke's brilliantly argued theory collapses; this is so because, by excluding danger, pain, and terror from the realm of social intercourse,

14 V. Woolf, “A Letter to a Young Poet” (1932), 2.184.

his theory denies the *existential* dimension of love, of human relationships. Burke removes desire—“the passion which belongs to generation” (39)—from the consideration of human misery and happiness. “Men,” he explains, “are at all times pretty equally disposed to the pleasures of love, because they are to be guided by reason in the time and manner of indulging them. Had any great pain arisen from the want of this satisfaction, reason, I am afraid, would find great difficulties in the performance of its office” (38). But Reason, it seems, has indeed “great difficulties in the performance of its office” when separated from desire, as becomes clear in *Mrs Dalloway* where Septimus’s madness and suicide function as the *mise-en-abyme* of the novel.

41. It is precisely what Burke brushes aside—the loss of love—that is experienced by Clarissa, Peter, and Septimus (and not only by them) as actual pain and horror. Loss of passionate being is the substance of their solitary struggles; it is the substance, too, of the growing bond that draws them together while appearing on the surface plot to be a matter of mere contingency. By connecting dramatically the stories of Clarissa and Peter’s unfulfilled love with Septimus’s madness and suicide, Woolf shows that loss of love causes genuine pain, with existential rather than merely social consequences. And she brings the three stories together in perhaps the most typical and benign of Burkean social settings—Clarissa’s party.

42. During the party the news of a young man’s death is thrust upon Clarissa. “Oh! thought Clarissa, in the middle of my party, here’s death.”¹⁵ She leaves her guests and alone in a little room her response to the young man’s suicide is marked by a ten-fold repetition of the word “death.” Clarissa plunges into her pain, “her dress flamed, her body burnt,” yet slowly emerges from her meditation as a person replenished, as if cured:

A thing there was that mattered; a thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life, let drop every day in corruption, lies, chatter. This he had preserved. Death was defiance. Death was an attempt to communicate. [...] There was an embrace in death. (202)

43. Clarissa’s initially shocked response to the stranger’s death induces a change in her state of “character”, she feels that “Somehow it was her disaster—her disgrace” (203). But by taking to heart Septimus’s death, by vicariously living through it herself, his intrusion into her world releases her from her own hidden “other”: that “thing, wreathed about with chatter, defaced, obscured in her own life.” Her shock gives way to its opposite, an elated sense of well-being: “Odd, incredible; she had never been so happy.” What are we to make of her sudden transformation? Why is she “so happy”? She remembers how she had once “walked on the terrace at Bourton” and seen the moon rise in the night sky. Was it *then* that she was “so happy”? or is it *now*, thinking of the “young man” who killed himself, that makes her “so happy?” The two events blend into each other. With the final tolling of Big Ben, as Clarissa turns away from looking at the night sky,

15 V. Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, 201.

she can return to her guests, to Peter and Sally, salvaging what has lain buried in her memories throughout the day, their bond of love and friendship. This imperceptible transformative moment is full of philosophical echoes: “It is clear that ethics cannot be expressed,” Wittgenstein writes in the concluding pages of his *Tractatus*, “Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one.)”¹⁶ This moment is perhaps a glimpse of the “luminous halo”: Clarissa hosting the stranger and those she has grown estranged from, including her own estranged past, by enfolding them into her deepest thoughts and feelings. Just as her party draws together the people and events of the entire day, her empathic response to Septimus’s death affirms that the capacity for love, in all its forms, constitutes the human and, is therefore a constituent part of what we call society. The more radical implication of this interpretation is that for Woolf, in contrast to Burke’s scheme of things, there is no non-social dimension of human existence.

44. Clarissa’s moments throughout the day relate her recent illness, her present distress, her sexless marriage and the feeling that she is losing her daughter, to their cause—her fear of death, which is shown in the novel as her fear of passion and of time itself. The incremental series of apparently unrelated moments of vision—centred on the irrational need to recover (confront, accept, overcome) a lost love—bind together the three main characters in the final scenes when Clarissa and Peter surrender to the terror and ecstasy of the recognition, in themselves and in each other, of lost love as the cause of their suffering. The final scene gathers together in a moment of pure pathos the entire day and, we may feel, their entire life. Their last silent encounter momentarily resolves the opposition between the unmarriageable orders of their separate selves and, in bringing the novel to its close, stamps their encounter with finality and permanence.
45. We should perhaps also note that from an Aristotelian point of view, the stages of Clarissa’s response to the stranger’s death are a novelistic rendition of the cathartic response to tragedy. Burke spells out what is only hinted in Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience” (36–37).
46. Woolf’s point is that fiction, because it recreates life and discloses human character, reveals what philosophy, in ordering our ideas of the world, obscures. The aim of the artist is to show forth, “to kindle and illuminate” the extraordinary, which is always latent in the ordinary mind on an ordinary day; the aim of the empirical philosopher or scientist is to subject the irrational to rational inquiry. Thus the ancient quarrel of poetry and philosophy indirectly informs the means, manner and end of Woolf’s novel and, more pointedly, reinforces her belief in the inseparability of form and content, of “art” and “character.” In terms of the present inquiry, the significance of the tragic vision with which *Mrs. Dalloway* ends is that

16 L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 183.

it issues from Woolf's uniting of the two orders—the sublime and tragic affect, romanticism and classicism—into one modernist aesthetic order, worthy of consideration.

47. The attempt to place Woolf's aesthetics in a boarder pre-Romantic context sheds light on a relatively neglected area of her achievement as a novelist-critic. It enables us to see that her defence of fiction all but equates the experience of reading a great novel, sitting alone in one's living room, with what watching a tragedy in the open-air amphitheatre would have been like in ancient Athens. Her modern sublime, where her particular notion of the revelation of character conveys aesthetic affect, blends Romantic sensibility, Longinian rhetoric and Burkean depth psychology, with classical impersonality and the Aristotelian emphasis on dramatic form. By enduring the "agonies" no less than the "rare and lasting delights" of a lifetime of creative endeavour, Woolf quietly adjusted aesthetic criteria, specifically, though never acknowledged as such—Aristotelian criteria—to the modern novel so that the "poor lady" would become—and in her novels certainly did become—"the art of fiction."

WORKS CITED

- BUTCHER, S. H. *Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art*. 1911. New York: Dover, 1951.
- BURKE, EDMUND. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 1759. Ed. ADAM PHILLIPS. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- CASSIRER, ERNST. "Fundamental Problems of Aesthetics". *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Trans. FRITZ C. A. KOELLN and JAMES P. PETTEGROVE. Boston, MA: Beacon Paperback, 1955.
- COLERIDGE, SAMUEL TAYLOR. "Classical and Romantic Drama". *Shakespearean Criticism*. Ed. THOMAS MIDDLETON RAYSOR. London: Everyman's Library, 1960.
- ELIOT, THOMAS STERN. "The Perfect Critic". *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. London: Methuen, 1920.
- KERMODE, FRANK. "The Modern." *Modern Essays*. London: Fontana, 1971.
- ROSENTHAL, EDNA. *Aristotle and Modernism: Aesthetic Affinities of T. S. Eliot, Wallace Stevens, and Virginia Woolf*. Brighton, UK: Sussex Academic Press, 2008.

- RUSSELL, DONALD ANDREW, and WINTERBOTTOM, MICHAEL, eds. *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972.
- WIMSATT, WILLIAM K. JR, and CLEANTH BROOKS, eds. *Literary Criticism: A Short History*. New York: Knopf, 1957.
- WITTGENSTEIN, LUDWIG. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. 1922. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. “Modern Fiction”. *Collected Essays: 2*. London: Hogarth Press, 1966.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. *Mrs. Dalloway*. 1925. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996.
- WOOLF, VIRGINIA. “On Not Knowing Greek”. *Collected Essays: 1*. Leonard Woolf, ed. London: Chatto & Windus, 1975.