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PART I

Velamen: I Corinthians II

Whatever the later and earlier material that must also be taken into account, and in spite of the difficulties, the aim here is a 'Pauline sexual ethic' – an ethic grounded in the Pauline texts and already partially embodied in the ongoing life of the Christian community, yet requiring to be articulated anew in a situation in which it is exposed to previously unheard-of pressures and challenges. The 'ethic' that is to be articulated does not consist primarily in a set of prescriptions for sexual conduct. Not that it omits to prescribe, or consigns the whole area to individual freedom of choice so long as this is exercised in a manner respectful of the freedom of the other. It does prescribe – yet not in a vacuum, but out of an ethos which provides the underlying rationale for its prescriptions and makes persuasive and compelling what might otherwise seem arbitrary and repressive.

This Pauline ethos is that of a community in which men and women together participate in the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the common life (*koinōnia*) of the Holy Spirit. Here, the love of God is poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us – a divine love that issues in a responsive human love towards God and the neighbour. It is on the basis of this ethos of love that it can be said that woman is not apart from man nor man from woman, in the Lord and within the Christian community. Here, the agape that binds women and men together is not that of eros. Unless eros is assigned to its proper limits, it is the corruption of love and not its fulfilment. The admittedly ambivalent symbol of the veil or head-covering is to be understood in this light, as a barrier

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intended to ward off the male erotic look that would prevent woman's voice from being heard, as, in prophecy and prayer, she utters the word of God to the congregation and the responsive word of the congregation to God (1 Cor. 11). Far from being a sign of her subordination, the veil is her authority to speak in this way. Since this divine–human dialogue is the articulation of agape, it can also be said that the veil signifies the necessary distinction between eros and agape, excluding the one so as to preserve the space of the other.

Yet the veil remains an ambivalent symbol. It makes woman invisible, and can all too easily be seen as the first step towards the silencing of women that occurs a few chapters later, at least in the final form of the Pauline text. The veil can also be seen as signifying not the exclusion of eros for the sake of agape but the exclusion of women for the sake of an all-male church leadership. Statements subordinating women to male 'headship' are, after all, found in this very passage, which can indeed be read as a series of proof-texts demonstrating the need for a 'post-Christian feminism' that separates itself from what it perceives as an irredeemably patriarchal church. Because this reading must be taken seriously, both as a reading of the text and as a reading of church and society in and through the text, we preface a reading of the Pauline text in terms of the problematic of agape, eros and gender (chapter 2) with a reading of a modern text that is itself – in part – a critical feminist reading of the Pauline text: Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas* (chapter 1). Its author advocated a 'separatist' feminism according to which women must learn to embrace and exploit the role of 'Outsider' that has been assigned to them; she lacked any formal theological training, and had no intention of arguing theologically. Yet, despite her manifest intentions, her text can still be read as a critical affirmation – and on Christian theological grounds – of the Pauline claim that man and woman belong together.

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CHAPTER ONE

Belonging together

‘Neither is woman apart from man nor man apart from woman, in the Lord’ (1 Cor. 11.11). In the Lord, woman and man are not independent of one another but interdependent. They face each other and must constantly reckon with the being of the other. They do not face away from one another; they do not find their true being by taking a path that diverges from the path of the other, crossing it only occasionally and accidentally. In the Lord, they belong together. That is so within the Christian community, in which Jesus is acknowledged as Lord, and also outside it; for, whether or not Jesus is acknowledged, it remains the case that God ‘has put all things [*panta*] in subjection under him’ (1 Cor. 15.27). The sphere in which man and woman belong together is coextensive with the sphere of this universal lordship. This ‘belonging-together’, to which all humans are called, is not a mere neutral coexistence. It is the belonging-together of agape, a pattern of living with others that this same Pauline text will later articulate and celebrate (1 Cor. 13).

Belonging-together does not exclude difference. If difference were dissolved into homogeneity, it would no longer be ‘man’ and ‘woman’ who belonged together; they would belong together not *as* man and woman but only as sharing in an undifferentiated humanity. In the Lord, humanity is not undifferentiated. But neither is the difference an absolute heterogeneity, which would make it hard to speak of a ‘humanity’ in which woman and man both share. Belonging-together acknowledges difference, but this is the difference of those who belong together, not the difference of those who are

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separated. The possibility of separation – ‘woman apart from man’, ‘man apart from woman’ – is raised only in the form of its negation. Possibilities are not negated at random, however, and the negation concedes that a self-definition that excludes the other might at least be attempted. Man might define himself as apart from woman; woman might define herself as apart from man.

What it means for man to define himself apart from woman is clear enough. Speaking only of himself, he either fails to notice her existence or construes it as the mirror-image of his own. His identity is supposed to represent a universal human norm. Her identity is submerged in his; it is taken for granted that what is true of him must also be true, although secondarily and to a lesser extent, of her. Man defines himself ‘apart from woman’ in the sense that the difference represented by ‘woman’ is subsumed into a universal male identity. This self-definition is inscribed within language itself: ‘man’ both included woman and suppressed her difference by assimilating it to a male norm. As the universally human, ‘man’ is apart from woman. Within this schema of solitary universality, woman’s difference may indeed be acknowledged as a subordinate reality – but only in order that the distinctive male self-image might be reflected back in the mirror of the other. In the mirror, the disclosure of the image is achieved only by way of a reversal, in which right is seen to be right only in the image that displays it as left, as its opposite. The image of the other may be subject to praise or blame, but in either case the appearance of otherness is an illusion: for the image of the other serves the image of the narcissistic self and has no identity of its own outside that necessary service. Even in speaking of woman as the image of the other, man continues to speak of himself.

It is this project of male self-definition apart from woman to which the term ‘patriarchy’ polemically refers. Can this term do justice to the *total* reality of the male–female relationship, throughout history? ‘Patriarchy’ might represent a *metanarrative*, adapted perhaps from the claim of Marx and Engels that ‘the history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class

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struggles'.¹ But it might also represent a *model*: a framework within which to view reality, disclosing a truth that is neither the truth of the whole nor a mere effect of the model itself; not the whole truth, but truth nevertheless. Understood as a model, 'patriarchy' would not occlude or compete with concepts such as 'class' and 'race' as means of articulating the reality of human sociopolitical life in its irreducible complexity. Within its limitations, 'patriarchy' identifies a project of male self-definition, 'apart from woman', whose effects are all too real. The critical use of this concept in historical or theological analysis is itself always subject to critical evaluation; the concept can never guarantee in advance the truth of the analysis. Conversely, the possible deficiencies of the analysis need not detract from the value of the concept.²

In reaction against masculine self-definitions 'apart from woman', woman may define herself as 'apart from man'; and this project of resistance may present certain formal resemblances to the masculine self-definitions it strives to counter. Thus, the male may now serve as the image of the other in which the self-image – now the self-image of woman – is disclosed. But the formal symmetry – man defines himself apart from woman, woman defines herself apart from man – should not be allowed to mask the underlying asymmetry. The two projects of self-definition cannot be seen as twin expressions of a perennial, perhaps not very serious conflict of two equal and opposite principles. In one project, self-assertion is the dominant element; in the other, the resistance of the victim of that self-assertion. The asymmetry of thesis and antithesis means that no cheap and easy synthesis is available. Belonging-together does not represent a *via media* between two equal and opposite extremes, 'patriarchy' and 'feminism'. The two terms

¹ 'The Communist Manifesto' (1848), in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, 221–47; 222.

² Michèle Barrett is critical of the term 'patriarchy' in current usage, arguing that to use it 'is frequently to invoke a generality of male domination without being able to specify historical limits, changes or differences' (*Women's Oppression Today: The Marxist/Feminist Encounter*, London and New York: Verso, 2nd edn 1988, 14). This problem is resolved if the concept of 'patriarchy' is understood as a model and not as an implied metanarrative.

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are incommensurable – not only because of their historical asymmetry but also because of the semantic indeterminacy of ‘feminism’. If the term ‘patriarchy’ refers to the project of male self-definition apart from woman, it is not clear that ‘feminism’ refers univocally to the project of female self-definition apart from man. ‘Feminism’ is a contested term; there are many feminisms, overlapping and diverging. ‘Feminist’ reflection on the belonging-together of woman and man is quite conceivable. The concept of belonging-together opposes not ‘feminism’ but those strands of feminism and feminist theology which either advocate or (more likely) simply presuppose a self-definition apart from man.

The Pauline text that speaks of the belonging-together of man and woman also speaks, problematically, of the veiling or covering of woman’s head. The image of the veil is taken up by one of the text’s woman readers, Virginia Woolf, in the course of a polemical plea for woman’s separate identity.³ Her own text is not simply a reading of the Pauline text; it is an account of the relation of man and woman that resists compromise and premature synthesis, and that pushes the project of self-definition apart from man in the direction of a separatist account of woman as Outsider. Woman is defined as Outsider in relation to the patriarchal institutions that administer society and that lead it inexorably towards war. She is Outsider in relation to patriarchal institutions in general, but more particularly in relation to the Church, whose all-male priesthood represents patriarchy’s innermost shrine and secret. The enormity of this

³ My primary text in this chapter is Virginia Woolf’s *Three Guineas*; page references are to the Penguin edition, edited by Michèle Barrett, where it is published together with *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Books, 1993). Barrett underlines the importance of this text for contemporary feminism, describing it in her introduction as ‘a book that has now found its time’ (ix), and contrasting its current timeliness with the hostility it encountered when it was first published; on this see Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, London: Vintage, 1997, 691–4. The impact on recent feminist literary criticism of Woolf’s work as a whole is well illustrated by Jane Marcus’s hyperbolic comment: ‘She seems hardly to have lived among her contemporaries but to speak directly to the future, to our generation’ (‘Thinking Back through our Mothers’, in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. Jane Marcus, London: Macmillan, 1981, 1–30; 4). Recent criticism has rejected the charge that Woolf failed to carry through her feminism into her novels (as argued by Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel, 1880–1920*, London: Methuen, 1979, 231).

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situation, so cunningly concealed and so hard to grasp, makes it impossible for the Outsider to co-operate with men even in the cause of justice and peace of which she approves. Man has defined himself apart from woman, and the catastrophic social consequences of his decision continue to hem us in. In defining herself apart from man, woman is fighting for life itself, and the notion of an ultimate belonging-together of man and woman is no more than a faint utopian glow on the horizon.

This text is an expression of what is now called a 'post-Christian feminism', in which separation from the Christian church is paradigmatic of separation from patriarchal institutions in general. What is to be gained by engaging it in a close reading? What will come to light is the extent to which Christian agape as the basis of the belonging-together of man and woman is acknowledged *in this text itself*, despite its manifest intentions. To bring this situation to light is to expose the gulf between the transcendental basis of the Christian community and its empirical reality; but it is also to detect symptoms of the transcendental basis within empirical reality. Only through the appearance of truth can idols and ideologies be exposed. If feminist critique claims to be grounded in truth, it is at least conceivable that this truth-claim is in the end positively related to the transcendental truth-claim that a post-Christian, secularizing culture has sought to repress. That there is this positive relationship has yet to be shown; to assume it *a priori* would be theological wishful thinking. But if this relationship does not exist, the nature and basis of the truth on which a feminist ideology-critique might take its stand remains an open question; or rather, within the relativizing ethos of postmodernity, an ineffable mystery.⁴

⁴ The issue of the relation of feminism to truth is raised by Sabina Lovibond, in dialogue with Richard Rorty: 'Should we say that there is ("ultimately") *nothing but* an evaluatively neutral *ensemble* of social constructs or "discourses" to which different groups assign different values in accordance with their own preferences? Or can these evaluations be seen as answerable to a universal or quasi-universal standard that would identify some discursive regimes, but not others, as tolerable?' ('Feminism and Pragmatism: A Reply to Richard Rorty', *New Left Review* 193 (1992), 56–74; 67).

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THROUGH THE SHADOW OF THE VEIL

As she prepared to write the work eventually published as *Three Guineas* (1938), Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary for Tuesday 16 February 1932: 'I'm quivering & itching to write my – what's it to be called? – "Men are like that?" – no that's too patently feminist: the sequel then, for which I have collected enough powder to blow up St Paul's' (*Diaries*, iv.77).⁵ As the preceding lines show, her impatience has been exacerbated by the petty annoyances of the day: there are problems with Nelly and Lottie (the servants), Miss McAfee has turned down an article, and dinner tonight with Ethel Sands means that much valuable time will be lost. But it is characteristic of the intellectual to be able to draw a clear dividing-line between ephemeral matters and the long-term project – in this case, a writing that will blow up St Paul's.

Why does she want to blow up St Paul's? This building is identified in *Three Guineas* as one of a number of central London landmarks that together symbolize the dominant masculine order – along with the Bank of England, the Mansion House, the Law Courts, Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament (133). But is that a good enough reason for wanting to blow it up? St Paul's differs from the other buildings in explicitly placing itself under the aegis of a male patron. The same is true, however, of another domed building in central London. In *Jacob's Room* (1922), it is noted that 'not so long ago the workmen had gilt the final "y" in Lord Macaulay's name, and the names stretched in unbroken file round the dome of the British Museum' (143). One of the readers (for the reference is to the British Library, within the Museum) is 'Miss Julia Hedge, the feminist', who was waiting for her books to arrive: 'Her eye

⁵ In addition to *Three Guineas* and *A Room of One's Own*, other works by Woolf cited here are: *Jacob's Room*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992; *To the Lighthouse*, London: Penguin Books, 1992; *Orlando: A Biography*, London: Penguin Books, 1963; *The Waves*, London: Grafton Books, 1977; *The Years*, London: Penguin Books, 1968; *Moments of Being*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, London: The Hogarth Press, 2nd edn 1985; and *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol. iv: 1931–1935, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, London: The Hogarth Press, 1982.

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was caught by the final letters in Lord Macaulay's name. And she read them all round the dome – the names of great men, which remind us – “Oh damn”, said Julia Hedge, “why didn't they leave room for an Eliot or Brontë?” (144–5). But Julia Hedge has no intention of blowing up the British Museum. As the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Virginia Woolf herself visits the British Museum in order to research her forthcoming paper on ‘Women and Fiction’. Entering through the swing-doors, ‘one stood under the vast dome, as if one were a thought in the huge bald forehead which is so splendidly encircled by a band of famous names’ (24). She has, as it were, strayed into a male brain, and the thoughts about women that she finds there are all the thoughts of men. However, although irritated by what she finds, and especially by Professor von X.'s monumental *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*, she never betrays any inclination to blow up the British Museum. Why, then, is St Paul's chosen instead as the target of her incendiarism?

In *The Years* (1937), Martin Pargiter, on his way to visit his stockbroker, passes St Paul's, part of the stream of ‘little men in bowler hats and round coats’, of ‘women carrying attaché cases’, of vans, lorries, and buses: ‘Now and then single figures broke off from the rest and went up the steps into the church. The doors of the Cathedral kept opening and shutting. Now and again a blast of faint organ music was blown out into the air. The pigeons waddled; the sparrows fluttered’ (183). Admiring the building from the outside, Martin suddenly recognizes his cousin Sara, who has been attending the service. He invites her to lunch in a nearby restaurant, where the following dialogue takes place:

‘I didn't know you went to services’, he said, looking at her prayer-book.

She did not answer. She kept looking round her, watching the people come in and go out. She sipped her wine . . . They ate in silence for a moment.

He wanted to make her talk.

‘And what, Sal,’ he said, touching the little book, ‘d'you make of it?’

She opened the prayer-book at random and began to read:

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‘The father incomprehensible; the son incomprehensible –’ she spoke in her ordinary voice.

‘Hush!’ he stopped her. ‘Somebody’s listening’.

In deference to him she assumed the manner of a lady lunching with a gentleman in a City restaurant. (185)

To attend a service at St Paul’s is to behave abnormally. Individuals may break off from the passing crowd to do so, but they thereby identify themselves precisely as individuals, who may justly be interrogated about their conduct. Sara’s answer is drawn from the *Quicumque vult*, which, as her prayer-book would inform her, is ‘commonly called the Creed of Saint Athanasius’ and is appointed to be sung or said at Morning Prayer on certain feast days in preference to the Apostles’ Creed. The words of this text belong only to the ecclesiastical interior of St Paul’s and are quite inappropriate on the secular exterior. To utter these words, in a restaurant, where there are many to overhear it, and in one’s ordinary voice, is to commit a solecism. Sara is therefore silenced, even though Martin had previously ‘wanted to make her talk’. More to the point, the words she quotes are no answer to the question that has been put to her. They merely confirm the abnormality of the interior and of those who worship there. What concern can Sara possibly have with the incomprehensible father and the incomprehensible son to whom the worship is addressed? A woman may reasonably enter the ‘huge bald forehead’ of the British Library and become for a while a thought in a vast male brain; for, although all the thoughts about women there are men’s thoughts, their progenitors are *only* men. They are not God. The woman reader who has infiltrated the brain can sit there drawing her caricature of Professor von X. with impunity. But what if she enters the huge bald forehead of St Paul? (An ancient source assures us that St Paul was indeed bald.)⁶ She can hardly sit there drawing caricatures of the incomprehensible father and son; for they are not human, they are divine. The all-male

⁶ In the apocryphal *Acts of Paul and Thecla* (ii.3), Paul is described as ‘a man of little stature, thin-haired upon the head, crooked in the legs, of good state of body, with eyebrows joining, and nose somewhat hooked, full of grace’ (translation from M. R. James (ed.), *The Apocryphal New Testament*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924, 273).