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978-0-521-79458-9 - The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual

Jane Goldman

Excerpt

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1 Introduction: interrupted moments

... to catch and enclose certain moments which break off from the mass, in which without bidding things come together in a combination of inexplicable significance, to arrest those thoughts which suddenly, to the thinker at least, are almost menacing with meaning. Such moments of vision are of an unaccountable nature; leave them alone and they persist for years; try to explain them and they disappear; write them down and they die beneath the pen.¹

The elusive qualities of Virginia Woolf's 'moment' have exercised critics for some time, yet her phrase 'menacing with meaning' has not survived into the common lexis of debate: rather, the Woolfian moment is considered a moment of pure being, a mystical experience beyond the everyday, beyond history, and beyond meaning. I would like to place the Woolfian moment in the context of 'the real world',² that is in the material and historical realm beyond merely the personal and subjective; to understand some of the feminist implications of Woolf's aesthetics. In the continuing debate over the relationship between Woolf's aesthetics and her politics, I suggest that some of those elements critics have identified as Woolf at her most abstract, aestheticized, and philosophically remote, may alternatively (and paradoxically) be read, and reclaimed, in relation to an historically aware, materialist and feminist Woolf. This is not to deny the former in favour of the latter, but to suggest their intimate interrelation.

From the mass of Virginia Woolf's writing I have chosen to focus on two 'moments' of significance to Woolf which might well be considered 'almost menacing with meaning': June 1927, and November/December 1910. My study falls into two parts, 'Eclipse', and 'Prismatics', each of which takes one of these dates as its point of departure. If linear chronology were to dictate, we would begin with the prismatics of the Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1910 and build up to the solar eclipse of 1927, but this would be to dispel the very qualities of Woolf's 'moment' my argument explores.

Yet what composed the present moment? If you are young, the future lies upon the present, like a piece of glass, making it tremble and quiver. If you are old, the past lies upon the present, like a thick glass, making it waver, distorting it. All the same, everybody believes that the present is something,

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seeks out different elements in this situation in order to compose the truth of it, the whole of it.³

By beginning with a focus on 1927, we encounter Woolf *in medias res*, at the heart of her writing career. In 1910 it had barely begun. The events of 1910 gain significance in the first part of my study as a ‘waver’ upon the moment of 1927, before being explored in the second part from a different perspective. Whereas Part One comprises an extensive and comparative close reading of samples of Woolf’s writing (focusing on a diary entry and an essay, with excursions into other texts), Part Two adopts a more varied approach. Beginning with a contextualizing account of the emergence and development of theories of Post-Impressionism in 1910 and 1912, it concludes by returning, in the light of these theories, to Woolf’s writing of the late 1920s and early 1930s, with readings of two novels, *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. My exploration of the moment in 1927, therefore, necessitates an excursus into the earlier moment of 1910: the impetus for the investigation of Post-Impressionism arises from Woolf’s reflections on it in the 1920s (after all it was ‘on or about’ 1924 that Woolf declared the significance of 1910). Part One’s discussion of the 1927 eclipse, accordingly, makes some preliminary connections with the events of 1910; and Part Two’s survey of Post-Impressionism prompts further consideration of aspects of the eclipse. The nature of Woolf’s moment, then, enables (and encourages) us to explore other, past and future moments in ways that obedience to linear chronology would make less accessible.

As the choice of material suggests, I am not attempting a comprehensive reading of Woolf’s oeuvre, nor a systematic reading of her novels: I will tend to investigate writings and events *between* novels. Nor are my findings necessarily to be considered a paradigm for such a reading (although my study closes with readings of two novels). Nor do I claim to establish a totalizing Woolfian philosophy. I do, however, seek to understand some of the feminist implications of Woolf’s aesthetics at the heart of her writing career.

Woolf’s much cited essay, ‘The Moment: Summer’s Night’ (c.1929), provides an appropriate point at which to interrupt the broad issues of Woolf criticism I contest. Under its rubric of one moment (albeit the duration of a ‘Summer’s Night’), the essay unfolds a series of moments and explores the moment itself as a site of many other moments, of intersecting narratives, of physical sensation, of imaginative realization, individually and collectively experienced. ‘The present moment’, Woolf tells us ‘is largely composed of visual and of sense impressions.’ (*M* 9) In response to the heat of the day,

the surface of the body is opened, as if all the pores were open and everything lay exposed, not sealed and contracted, as in cold weather. . . . Then the sense of light sinking back into darkness seems to be gently putting out with a

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damp sponge the colour in one's own eyes. . . . But this moment is also composed of a sense that the legs of the chair are sinking through the centre of the earth, passing through the rich garden earth; they sink, weighted down. Then the sky loses its colour perceptibly and a star here and there makes a point of light.

(M 9)

Hermione Lee's observation, with reference to this essay, that Woolf's moments so often involve images of illumination and reflection,⁴ is confirmed here by the 'sense of light sinking back into darkness', and the sensual references to colour and points of starlight. Differing somewhat from Lee's emphasis, my study will examine Woolf's manipulation of an imagery of light, dark and colour.

Fleeting, in 'The Moment', the moment is registered as something beyond human control, something we may witness but not affect: 'One becomes aware that we are spectators and also passive participants in a pageant. And as nothing can interfere with the order, we have nothing to do but accept, and watch.' (M 9–10) With reference to this material, Woolf's art is often characterized as impressionistic – 'a process of strenuously fixing such moments and trying to turn them into narrative'⁵ – and her much quoted literary dictum to 'look within' is also often considered to support such interpretations. The process of 'fixing' is one that 'Modern Fiction', the essay in which it appears, addresses:

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. . . . Is it not the task of the novelist to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible?

(CR 189)

There is a paradox here in the dual aim of showing both the fluid and the fragmentary nature of experience, both the flow of time and one instant. The process of writing becomes a struggle to capture the subjective flux of experience and reproduce it for the reader in a fixed moment or image. 'To render these moments of being in their entirety', it has been suggested, 'to describe them so that the reader was placed in the very center of the consciousness experiencing the moment – receiving from all sides the shower of atoms as they fell, those myriad impressions of perception and emotion – was [Woolf's] task as she saw it.'⁶

Such critical responses are imbued with the theories of Henri Bergson which have been widely and variously employed in the characterization of the Woolfian moment. While not every one would go so far as Shiv Kumar's large

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claim that 'all her literary experiments as a novelist can be explained in terms of Bergson's *la durée*', the parallel remains strong in much work on Woolf.⁷ *La durée* may be briefly defined as subjective, psychological, non-spatial, time. True time is, then, impenetrable and seamlessly continuous, only existing within, subjectively: 'Outside ourselves we should find only space, and consequently nothing but simultaneities.' Bergson speaks of 'two different selves . . . one of which is . . . the external projection of the other, its spatial and . . . social representation'; but the more 'fundamental' of which is connected to *la durée* and is therefore 'free'. It is reached 'by deep introspection'. Bergson emphasizes that only in 'rare moments' do we have access to *la durée* and to our true selves, and that only in such moments may we 'act freely'.⁸

Such a concept of freedom is at odds with theories which seek political freedom in the spatial, the historical and 'the real world'. Bergsonian readings of Woolf, then, risk discounting such elements in her work. But it is sensible to acknowledge that Bergson's 'rare moments' of introspection do often seem similar to Woolf's; and his suggestion of an inner illumination casting its 'colourless shadow' into the external world may also inform Woolf's 'luminous halo' imagery (*CR* 189).⁹ Such similarities, I suggest, may cause us to overlook more materialist aspects. To characterize all of Woolf's writing in terms of the 'continuous movement of inner life' and the 'laval flow' of 'perceptions, memories and sensations'¹⁰ is to risk its homogenization into an unbroken record of life as inner flux, and of existence primarily as passive, subjective and ahistorical. James Hafley, who finds Woolf 'a better artist than Bergson is a philosopher', in his sustained Bergsonian interpretation of her work, nevertheless, cautions: 'Woolf is not to be explained away by one word, "Bergsonism" or any other.'¹¹ Indeed, Tony Inglis in 1977 notes that for some time in Woolf studies 'pondered reading and critical accounts [have] tended to show that Woolf's novels are better read as weapons against flux than as inert surrenders to it.'¹² But these are not necessarily historical or materialist in approach; and Inglis does not mention in his optimistic survey the then emergent feminist slant in Woolf studies.

It is not my concern to establish the accuracy or otherwise of Woolf's, or of Woolf criticism's, understanding of Bergson, but rather to comment on how the invocation of Bergson has more often tended to encourage readings of Woolf's work which neglect its feminist import, for all that the gendered metaphysical dualisms¹³ of this 'feminine philosopher of the flux'¹⁴ may anticipate her fraught concept of androgyny.¹⁵ Bergson's *durée* denies 'genuine historical experience', as Walter Benjamin observes, and is 'estranged from history.'¹⁶ Bergson locates 'freedom' in subjective intuition, which although potentially inspiring as a site of utopian vision, remains cut off from the spatial, material and historical 'real world', the site in fact of feminist struggle.

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Woolf herself, furthermore, brings to bear an emphatically materialist analysis in her feminist tract, *A Room of One's Own*, the very title of which suggests a concern with the *spatial* location of the self. If her demand for 'a room of one's own' seems to cast Woolf as a literary Greta Garbo, it is not necessarily to be taken as a demand for the non-spatial introspective solitude of Bergsonian duration, which is at odds with the essay's inquiry into the material and external factors in the production of writing by women. Fiction is characterized spatially and materially: it is a web 'attached to grossly material things, like health and money and the houses we live in' (*AROO* 62–63). Art, according to Karl Kraus, 'can come only from denial. Only from anguished protest.'¹⁷ Similarly, fiction for Woolf is the 'work of suffering human beings' (*AROO* 62–63). She also declares that in a room of one's own 'interruptions there will always be' (*AROO* 117): introspective solitude, then, is broken into by 'an abrasive external world'.¹⁸ This sense of material intervention (rather than retreat into isolation), I suggest, is central to an understanding of Woolf's luminous moment.

At one point in 'The Moment' (interestingly, not one critic has examined closely), Woolf exposes a moment of illumination as also one of oppression, and as, therefore, one to be interrupted:

Then a light is struck; in it appears a sunburnt face, lean, blue-eyed, and the arrow flies as the match goes out:

"He beats her every Saturday; from boredom, I should say; not drink; there's nothing else to do."

The moment runs like quicksilver on a sloping board into the cottage parlour; there are the tea things on the table . . . and Liz comes in and John catches her a blow on the side of her head as she slopes past him, dirty, with her hair loose and one hairpin sticking out about to fall. And she moans in a chronic animal way; and the children look up and then make a whistling noise to imitate the engine which they trail across the flags; and John sits himself down with a thump at the table and carves a hunk of bread and munches because there is nothing to be done. A steam rises from his cabbage patch. Let us do something then, something to end this horrible moment, this plausible glistening moment that reflects in its smooth sides this intolerable kitchen, this squalor; this woman moaning; and the rattle of the toy on the flags, and the man munching. Let us smash it by breaking a match. There – snap.

(M 12)

In advocating the smashing of this 'horrible moment' of illumination, Woolf seems also to advocate the rupture of the oppressive social and familial relations it brings: there must be an end to 'this woman moaning', and an end in a wider sense to the subjugation of women. The passage is introduced by the striking and extinguishing of a match, perhaps suggesting that its light not

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only illuminates or reveals the scene, but also in some sense causes it. Enlightenment, then, is seen to cause, or even to be constructed out of suffering (its dark side, perhaps); and here seems dominated by male violence. Snapping the match, the pun on which suggests the ending of the marriage, may be interpreted as a refusal to see what the light reveals, but also perhaps as a veto on its very construction. The children's imitation of 'the engine which they trail across the flags' insidiously suggests the possibility (or even likelihood) of their imitating also the violent habits of their father and the bleak submission of their mother. It is this oppressive tradition (figuratively and literally) that the reader is invited to join in stopping, in terms which also dramatize the very act of reading: 'Let us smash it by breaking a match. There – snap.'

For Jean Guiguet, however, this scene is 'a finely graphic, realistic sketch, the suggestive power of which in its squalor is just as intolerable to the reader as to those in whose mind it has risen'. His reasons for finding it 'intolerable' remain unclear: Guiguet seems to suggest that its lack of aesthetic appeal causes the scene's banishment, while offering no discussion of its social and political impact. Woolf's sense of collective agency signalled in 'Let us smash . . .' is neutralized by Guiguet's emphasis on the moment's passive dissolution: 'Thus it dissolves as it was born and the moment smoothly ebbs to its original mood of muffled sounds and blurred shapes, fraught with peace and harmony.'¹⁹ Guiguet reduces the depiction of the woman's suffering to an exercise in aesthetic technique; the injunction to end it correspondingly signals his failure to acknowledge the political import of the very realism he admires. As alarmingly, Madeline Moore, ignoring John's violence towards his wife, suggests this passage as an example of 'the negative moment when one becomes aware of the obduracy of matter and material objects'.²⁰

'In every era', observes Benjamin, 'the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it.'²¹ Woolf's writing here may be viewed as just such an attempt, for it does more than record subjective impressions, or represent the Bergsonian flow of life: it seeks to intervene in life, and change it. My interpretation rests on close and detailed attention to Woolf's writing practice. The pun on 'match' in the passage above, for example, may be regarded as pivotal in locating Woolf's proposed site of change in the social, 'real world', and not just in the aesthetic vision. The injunction to 'smash the moment' is nevertheless one which speaks clearly to both realms (art and life), and in so doing connects them.

The tension between spatial or social experience and that of the life flux is subtly exploited by Jane Harrison, an underestimated influence on Woolf's thought and a significant, if elliptical, presence in *A Room of One's Own* ('a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and shabby dress – could it be the famous scholar . . . ?' (*AROO* 26)).²² In *Themis: A Study of*

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the Social Origins of Greek Religion, Bergson's *durée* is acknowledged as bringing definition to the author's understanding of Dionysos as 'the attempt to express . . . that life which is one, indivisible and yet ceaselessly changing.' Harrison understands ancient Greek religion in terms of social structure and convention, distinguishing between the 'poles' of 'Natural Order' and 'Social Order'. 'Social Order, morality, "goodness" is not in nature at the outset', she warns, and, citing Bergson, questions their location in the *durée*:

The mystic will claim that life is one indivisible movement, one, if he prefers it, ever accumulating snowball. We gladly agree. But to say that Alpha is Omega, the end is as the beginning, that life and force are the same as moral good . . . is to darken counsel. It is to deny that very change and movement which *is* life, it is to banish from a unified and sterilized universe "l'Évolution Créatrice".²³

The social and moral pole in Woolf's alleged 'Bergsonism', I am suggesting, has not received the attention shown to her celebrated allusions to the flux; and with this in mind we might interpret her 'Bergsonism' rather differently. For example, an early and hostile critic of Woolf, characterizing her technique as 'essentially static', also finds what we might identify as Bergsonian qualities in her prose, and takes exception in terms which, emphasized differently, are relevant to the development of my argument:

A single moment is isolated and forms a unit for the sensibility to work on. The difficulty lies in relating the various moments. . . . Everything receives the same slightly strained attention: the effect is not unlike that of a tempera painting, where there is exquisite delicacy of colour, but no light and shade. (The connection of this with the refusal to assent to a statement absolutely is too obvious to need any stressing.)²⁴

M.C. Bradbrook focuses on Woolf's depiction of the single moment, which according to Bergsonian readings (for which Bradbrook appears to have little sympathy) paradoxically allows us special access to *la durée*; hence she sees in Woolf's prose a pointless subjective 'intensity'. Woolf offers no plot, that is no narrative impetus and, therefore, no sense of historical movement or morality. Bradbrook likens Woolf to a fastidious, 'myopic', painter capable of fine detail but with no overall sense of design: infatuated with technique, she has no 'statement' to make. 'Woolf refuses to be pinned down', she finds, '. . . and consequently she is debarred from narrative technique, since this implies a schema of values, or even from direct presentation of powerful feelings or major situations.'²⁵ Woolf's writing so focuses on the present moment, it remains outside narrative progression, and, therefore, seems without historical awareness and without a sense of value (moral or aesthetic). We may find,

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however, history and value not 'debarred' from Woolf's moment but actually signalled in the very imagery Bradbrook finds so static.

Bradbrook's painting simile alludes to the aestheticism she finds distasteful in Woolf's work, but it also identifies an important point about Woolf's management of light, shade and colour which my study will explore more fully. She finds stylistically flattening Woolf's replacement of the traditional handling of light and shade (*chiaroscuro*) with a mosaic of colour. In this analogy Bradbrook assumes a 'schema of values', that is the combined moral and aesthetic evaluations of light and shade, traditionally inscribed in Western thought: light denotes positive or good values, shade negative or evil. She censures Woolf's use of colour as evading this traditional 'schema of values'. This compositional neglect of light and shade for myriad pinpoints of exquisite colour may not necessarily constitute 'the refusal to assent to statement' that Bradbrook finds it. On the contrary, Woolf's deployment of colour may, I contend, offer the basis of a coded articulation of historical intervention. Furthermore, when light and shade are evaluated with reference to gender and subjectivity, Woolf's departure from traditional *chiaroscuro*, as I will explore, may be seen as a positive and feminist statement.

Woolf's work is often cited to exemplify a dominant view of modernism as an impressionistic, Bergsonian approach to art, identified in narrative techniques engaged with 'the uninterrupted, indistinguishable flow of time'.²⁶ Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane, who do acknowledge Woolf's understanding that 'the modern stylistic revolution came from the historical opportunity for change in human relationships and human character, and that modern art therefore had a social and epistemological *cause*', conclude, not that Woolf's work is bound up with historical change or interested in historical intervention, but, on the contrary, that she 'nonetheless believed in the aesthetic nature of the opportunity':

it set the artist free to be more himself, let him move beyond the kingdom of necessity to the kingdom of light. Now human consciousness and especially *artistic* consciousness could become more intuitive, more poetic; art could fulfil *itself*. It was free to catch at the manifold – the atoms as they fall – and create significant harmony not in the universe but within itself (like the painting which Lily Briscoe completes at the end of *To the Lighthouse*).²⁷

The artistic freedom they identify seems close to Bergson's rare moments of subjective freedom which allow the self 'to get back into pure duration'. In their reading, Woolf's art, like that of James Joyce, comprises 'the means to transcend both history and reality'.²⁸ With the phrase 'significant harmony', moreover, Bradbury and McFarlane link this Bergsonian idea of aesthetic

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withdrawal from the world to an echo of the aesthetics of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, commonly summarized under the heading of ‘Significant Form’.

This Bergsonian connection with Bloomsbury aesthetics, which may tend to foreground Woolf’s aesthetics at the expense of her politics (and indeed to see it as a retreat from politics altogether), is not unusual in Woolf criticism, as Allen McLaurin’s work demonstrates.²⁹ Relating Woolf’s work primarily to the theories of Roger Fry, he invokes as a link the Bergsonian study by Woolf’s sister-in-law, Karin Stephen.³⁰ Interestingly, McLaurin focuses on Stephen’s discussion of colour and change in relation to Bergson’s theories to reinforce his own reading of Woolf’s psychological and impressionistic use of colour.³¹ My argument will discover in Woolf’s writing the possibility of an interventionist and feminist understanding of colour, more readily associated with aspects of Post-Impressionism than Impressionism.

There remain views of modernism which contend with those such as Bradbury’s and McFarlane’s; and Woolf’s smashing of the moment may find a more appropriate fit with notions of ‘modernist disruption or interruption’.³² Her fragmentary texts, then, may be read not merely as passively reflecting fragmentary experience, but also as actively engaging in fragmentation and intervention. Woolf’s interruption of the moment is not one which characterizes subjectivity as grounded according to exclusive sexual identity: it does not intervene on a purely masculine subjectivity, replacing it with a purely feminine one. Her inclusive plea ‘let us smash it’ is signalled, not as an invitation to women only, but as a collective impetus to alter the moment and thus alleviate women’s suffering. This ‘horrible moment’ shows not the previous exclusion of the feminine from the patriarchal domain, but its occlusion and oppression within it. Woolf dramatizes this point in *A Room of One’s Own*, where she does describe an intervention by a woman:

One goes into the room – but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room. . . . One has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one’s face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force.

(AROO 131)

For Peggy Kamuf this passage ‘creates a disturbance on both sides of the threshold of subjectivity’, as Woolf shows how the entering woman encounters femininity ‘fly[ing] in one’s face’. It is a ‘double figure of self-interruption’:

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there is both a recognition and an infringement of the place of a creative subject which is no longer or not yet a “one”. The feminine “subject” is here constituted through illegitimate intervention in the language since its “one-ness” resides already in the other’s place, its unity derives retrospectively from an infraction which flies in the face of the grammatical order of subject and predicate.³³

The intervention of a woman, then, described by a woman, requires the invention of new literary codings – which may yet derive from the spaces already marked out by patriarchy for (and as) the feminine. Out of the ruins of the smashed legitimate language of subjectivity emerges a new language of feminism, winging its way with ‘whole flights of words . . . illegitimately into existence’.

I will investigate Woolf’s handling of the basic vocabulary of such a language, that is, its central tropes of subjectivity – light, shade and colour – at two important moments: first, in her depictions of the solar eclipse of 1927, which emerges not so much as a moment in touch with the Bergsonian *durée*, but as a transitional moment of feminist challenge and change; second, in her engagement with the theories of Post-Impressionism which are examined contextually with an emphasis not on abstract aesthetics and significant form but on materialist, interventionist, feminism. I identify two interrelated spheres of colourism informing Woolf’s aesthetic: suffrage art and English Post-Impressionism. This undertaking, I should warn any latter-day Bradbrooks among prospective readers, necessitates a non-linear approach and involves some fairly intensive phases of close-reading, but does not, I hope, result in myopia. Close attention to Woolf’s language is rewarded by vistas onto Bradbrook’s requisite ‘powerful feelings’ and ‘major situations’. Exploring closely Woolf’s new language of feminism in relation to the new colourist languages of suffragism and Post-Impressionism, this study concludes with readings of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* as (different) moments in a modernist discourse of interruption.