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Sexing the epiphany in "Moments of being", Woolf's nice little story about sapphism

Annette Oxindine

You remember there is a very fine instinct
wireless telepathy nothing to it--in women--the
darlings--which fizzles up pretenses, and I know
what you mean though you don't say it...
Virginia Woolf to Violet Dickinson, 1903

- 1 Critical avoidance of the lesbian intimacy at the conclusion of Virginia Woolf's "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points'" has been noted by Avrom Fleishman in his own hesitant focus on the story's homoerotic ending. In an essay examining form in Woolf's short fiction, Fleishman reluctantly concedes that the "crass" subject of homosexuality must be addressed if his analysis of the story's circular structure is to be complete:

...the elderly piano teacher kisses her young pupil on the lips, at the precise moment of her vision of Julia's being. It seems crass to labor the point, but this intuition of homosexuality is part of the total vision of Julia's being (61)

- 2 It should come as no surprise that literary critics have been reluctant to link modernism's primary spiritual landmark--the epiphany--with lesbian sexuality. In *Epiphany in the Modern Novel*, for example, in a discussion of Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, Morris Beja ultimately dissociates Clarissa Dalloway's most intense epiphanic revelation from the lesbian moment of passion that engenders it. Initially Beja acknowledges that Clarissa Dalloway's intimacy with Sally Seton "displays an actual if latent homosexuality" (135); however, in his discussion of the passage in which Sally kisses Clarissa on the lips--"The whole world might have turned upside down!... the radiance burnt through, the revelation, the religious feeling!" --Beja points out that Clarissa's "latent homosexuality is dropped" for the remainder of the novel, and he insists that "the main interest in this very significant passage finally lies in the Proustian way in which the past experience is revived" (136).

- 3 It is my contention, however, that one cannot so easily separate the message from the method of its delivery. Furthermore, I will argue that the very nature of epiphanic revelation--both its brevity and its cryptic quality--make it a perfect vehicle for Woolf's attempts to evoke lesbian desire. Perhaps no other work of Woolf's lends itself to this task as well as "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points.'" The very title "Moments of Being" is suggestive of epiphanic vision when we consider that in her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past," Woolf equates "moments of being" with "a revelation of some order... a token of something real behind appearances" (72). That Woolf thought the lesbian content in "Moments" to be central to its theme is surely suggested by her reference to it as "a nice little story about Sapphism" (*Diary* 3: 397). Woolf's yoking together "moments of being" in her title with a phrase that sparks an erotic connection between two women suggests just how integral the homoerotic moments are to the epiphanic ones in "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points.'"
- 4 Before moving on to an analysis of the story, I will first address just such a link between lesbian desire and epiphanic vision in Woolf's diary. In a February 1926 diary entry, Woolf recounts her quest for what she calls "the thing itself," and she reveals, albeit cryptically, that her moment of vision finally comes when she sees the same moon that Vita Sackville-West sees--that is, the moon which is risen over Persia. Vita had departed for Persia a month earlier, shortly after she and Woolf began their physical love affair. Vita's absence, I suspect, may have engendered some of the hunger for meaning conveyed in the following passage:
- Yet I have some restless searcher in me. Why is there not a discovery in life? Something one can lay hands on & say "This is it?"... What is it and shall I die before I find it? Then (as I was walking through Russell Square last night) I see the mountains in the sky: the great clouds; & the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great & astonishing sense of something there, which is 'it'--It is not exactly beauty that I mean. It is that the thing itself is enough: satisfactory; achieved. (*Diary* 3: 62).
- 5 When Woolf sees what Vita sees--the moon over Persia--she has an epiphanic sense of the elusive "it" she has been seeking¹. The words Woolf chooses to describe the denouement of an epiphany (as well as their order and grammatical relationship to each other)--"enough: satisfactory; achieved" are equally descriptive of the denouement of orgasm. The implication of this syntactically extracted synesthesia is that vision (literal and figurative) and tactile sensation overlap in Woolf's account of what surely amounted to a moment of being: the desire to find something she "can lay hands on" is quenched by a purely visual discovery.
- 6 In "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No Points,'" Woolf's provocative story about a mundane phrase that leads to a vision that leads to a kiss, the visual and the tactile are brought together in a way that begs the same question an epiphany does: Is seeing believing?; or more accurately, in this case, is seeing feeling? Fanny Wilmot sees her piano teacher, Julia Craye, open her arms and kiss her, but is it really happening?
- [Fanny] saw Julia--
She saw Julia open her arms; saw her blaze; saw her kindle. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star. Julia kissed her. Julia possessed her. 'Slater's pins have no points, Miss Craye said, laughing queerly and relaxing her arms, as Fanny Wilmot pinned the flower to her breast with trembling fingers. (214)

- 7 While this story is invariably read as though the kiss actually occurs, I contend that Woolf made the ending purposefully ambiguous by stressing the verb "to see"-- "She saw Julia open her arms" in order to suggest that Fanny may be having an erotic fantasy, which would explain as well as if the women had actually kissed why her fingers are trembling. Though it could be argued that Julia's "relaxing her arms" in the paragraph that follows the kiss is evidence that Julia did indeed open her arms and kiss Fanny, the fact that Julia had been sitting "with her hands clasped in her lap holding [a] carnation upright" could also serve as a reasonable explanation for relaxing her arms. What is important, however, is the ambiguity surrounding the kiss, for it eroticizes the female gaze in such a way as to make Fanny's epiphany contingent upon lesbian vision. In this story's "moment of being", lesbian eroticism is not incidental but rather germane.²
- 8 In Fanny's visionary narrative about Julia's sexual history (or lack thereof), which takes its cue from Julia's comment about Slater's pins, the teller becomes the tale. While Fanny searches Miss Craye's floor for the "pointless" pin --a pun signifying the uselessness of the phallus--that kept in place her rose--a traditional symbol of female sexuality--she recalls many things Julia Craye "had said" and thinks with reference to a scene from Julia's childhood that "One could make that yield what one liked" (212). What Fanny's thoughts about Julia Craye "yield" are internalized narratives about her piano teacher's sexual desire, frustration, and fulfillment, wherein Fanny becomes the one thing that finally satisfies Julia, the one thing she can "possess": "Julia kissed her. Julia possessed her" (214). Suspecting Julia's lesbianism, Fanny is able to project onto her teacher all the frustration and desire she has been unable to acknowledge as her own. Fanny imagines Julia's earlier frustration with heterosexual coupling: "I can't have it, I can't possess it, [Julia] thought" (212); she also envisions Julia's autoerotic frustration with the flower she now holds in her lap: "She had her hands on it; she pressed it; but she did not possess it, enjoy it, not altogether" (211). I concur with Fleishman that an "intuition of homosexuality is part of the total vision" that Fanny experiences while apprehending Julia; however, what is more specific to that vision is Fanny's discovery of her own sexual feelings for another woman.³
- 9 That Fanny's sexuality is going to be exposed, as it were, is indicated in the first sentence by Woolf's odd choice of the preposition "out": the rose "fell out of Fanny Wilmot's dress" instead of "off of" or "from". Woolf's keen attention to names and her notoriously sly humor deem it unlikely that she missed the double entendre in "Fanny stooped... to look for the pin on the floor" (209)⁴. While symbols of sexuality are associated with Fanny from the story's beginning, Julia's sexuality becomes gradually more explicit (in Fanny's mind) the longer she considers Julia's remark "'Slater's pins have no points--don't you always find that?'" (210). The image of Julia as a "lonely" unmarried woman is transformed by Fanny's vision of Julia's "ecstasy" while holding a carnation (the root word of which means "flesh") "upright" in her lap, assuming a position of power but not phallic sexuality. As Patricia Cramer has illustrated, Woolf is part of a lesbian literary tradition that uses erect flowers to signify the strength of female sexuality.⁵ All is suddenly "transparent for a moment to the gaze of Fanny Wilmot" who sees into Julia's past and imagines her "cleaving her way ever more definitely as her will stiffened toward her solitary goal" (214). Julia becomes for Fanny a symbol of powerful self-determined sexuality.

- 10 The story comes full circle as Fanny locates her own sexuality, as it begins with an image suggesting its dislocation: Fanny's "rose" fell out of her dress. As Fanny searches the floor for the ineffectual pin, she imagines Julia Craye independently holding her own carnation "voluptuously" so that the "pressure of her fingers... set[s] it off" and "make[s] it more frilled" (211).⁶ While Fanny suspects that Julia is "conscious to her *fingertips* of youth and brilliance... but inhibited," it is Fanny's less inhibited fingers that tremble with consciousness at the story's close as she "pinned the flower to her breast" (emphasis mine 211; 214). But it is not clear whose breast or whose flower is being referred to.⁷ Fanny could be pinning her rose to her own breast or to Julia's; or she could be pinning Julia's carnation to her own breast or to Julia's breast. The ambiguity certainly suggests just how difficult it is to "pin down" the potential configurations of lesbian erotics. Even though the presence of the pin is implied in the last line, "Fanny Wilmot pinned the flower to her breast with trembling fingers", the emphasis is on the fingers doing the pinning--an act made all the more erotically potent because Julia's hands and fingers have been engaged in sensual pleasure throughout the story.
- 11 Upon receiving payment for "'Slater's Pins Have No Points'", Woolf wrote to Vita Sackville-West, "Sixty pounds just received from America for my little Sapphist story of which the Editor has not seen the point, though he's been looking for it in the Adirondacks" (*Letters* 3: 431). Woolf's editor may have had trouble finding the point in a story about a pointless phallus, for as Judith Roof has argued, lesbian narratives frustrate the "scopophilic pleasure of the male gaze" (100).⁸
- 12 However, it is the erotic gaze of one woman upon another, always frustrated and sometimes punished in heterosexist narratives, that gains visionary status in Woolf's "Moments of Being". It is when Fanny perceives Julia's "moment of ecstasy" that everything becomes "transparent for a moment to the gaze of Fanny Wilmot, as if looking through Miss Craye... She saw back and back into the past behind her" (214). The desire that dare not speak its name developed its own language through use of the other senses, but what is communicated cannot be "written in any language known to men", as Lily Briscoe also realizes in *To the Lighthouse* (51). Sapphic vision, then, shares with the epiphany the quality of not being directly translatable into language.
- 13 Less than a year after the idea for "Moments of Being" sprouted in Woolf's mind, she recorded in her diary the genesis of yet another story in which "Sapphism is to be suggested":
- Suddenly between twelve & one I conceived a whole fantasy to be called the "Jessamy Brides"--why, I wonder? I have rayed around it several scenes. Two women, poor, solitary at the top of a house... Sapphism is to be suggested... The ladies are to have Constantinople in view. Dreams of golden domes... I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons... it is possible the idea will evaporate." (*Diary* 3: 131)
- 14 That a story hinting of sapphism is thus among the possibly fading "innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which *flash* into [Woolf's] mind at all seasons" emphasizes the fact that while lesbian moments in Woolf's fiction may be transitory, they are nonetheless pervasive, as the emergence of lesbian readings of Woolf's fiction is bearing out.⁹
- 15 The curious reference to Constantinople in the passage above, written several months after Woolf finished *To the Lighthouse*, may illuminate just such a fleeting sapphic moment in that novel. In a chapter that is literally parenthetical, Woolf describes a strange, unspoken intimacy between Minta Doyle and Nancy Ramsay, who, when Minta

held her hand "saw the whole world spread out beneath her, as if it were Constantinople seen through a mist" (74). Though Nancy and Minta's intimacy rapidly fades, as does Nancy's epiphany which "sank down" and "disappeared" into the mist when Minta let go of her hand, Woolf's narrative framing of the scene privileges the transitory homoerotic alliance between the adolescent Ramsay girl whose sexuality is just awakening and "this tomboy Minta with a hole in her stocking" (57) over the heavily sanctioned heterosexual union between Paul Rayley and Minta which, we later learn, turns out to be sexually unfulfilling.

- 16 As with "Moments of Being," the homoerotic intimacy which leads Nancy to her epiphany is conveyed not through talk but through sight and touch. Nancy goes with the others because "Minta Doyle had asked it with her dumb look" (73)¹⁰. In the holograph version of this passage, Woolf emphasizes the fact that Minta's look creates a language of its own with the power to seduce Nancy: Minta's "implor[ing]" her to come makes Nancy feel "elation," though Woolf's first word choice, "ecstasy" implies a more erotic joy: "Yes, Nancy has gone... for... Minta Doyle had implored her to come, not in words; Minta was dumb; but in speechless language which roused in Nancy's heart a an [sic] extraordinary elation" (*Holograph* 97).
- 17 The touch of Minta's hand awakens something in Nancy that enables her to see "life spread beneath her" (74)--more exactly in the holograph, "her own future" (*Holograph* 122). What she "sees" more specifically is rather curious, given that she is on a Scottish island: she sees the mist covering Constantinople, and through the mist views "a pinnacle, a dome" (74). Though Woolf's exotic depiction of Constantinople is in part informed by imperialist constructions of Orientalism, her choice of Constantinople to convey something both epiphanic and homoerotic in this scene as well as her allusion to that same city when she envisions the "Jessamy Brides" may also be illuminated by Woolf's personal associations with Constantinople. Virginia Stephen visited Constantinople in 1906 as a young woman engaged in an intense romantic friendship with Violet Dickinson, who accompanied Virginia and her siblings to Greece and Constantinople. Before their departure, Woolf writes to Dickinson, "You must come. I dream of it every night" (*Letters* 1: 233). Two weeks after their return, she writes, "If you could put your hand in that nest of fur where my heart beats you would feel the thump of the steadiest organ in London--all beating for my Violet. Sometimes when I am ordering dinner, or emptying--a flower vase--a great tide runs from my toe to my crown, which is the thought of you" (1: 245).
- 18 What makes Constantinople just as fitting a choice for Woolf's conflation of telepathic vision and lesbian intimacy as the fact that she went there with one of her first loves is the fact that Vita Sackville-West, who would become her most intimate lover, also traveled to Constantinople as a young woman (in 1913 when she was twenty-one) and recorded impressions in her poetry very similar to the ones Virginia recorded in her diary. In 1906, Woolf writes,
...the most splendid thing in Constantinople... is the prospects of the roofs of the town, seen from the high ground of Pera. For in the morning the mist lies like a veil that muffles treasures across all the houses & all the mosques; then as the sun rises... a pinnacle of gold pierces the soft mesh, & you see shapes of precious stuff lumped together." (*A Passionate Apprentice* 351)
- 19 In Vita's poem "Morning in Constantinople" (written in and privately printed in *Constantinople: Eight Poems*, 1915), we find the same impression of a "veil" that Virginia Stephen had recorded in her diary as well as both the pinnacle (a minaret) and dome

that Nancy Ramsay sees rising through the mist: "A shadowy dome and soaring minaret / Visible though the base be hidden yet / Beneath the wreaths of milky shroud..." (Collected Poems 201).

- 20 These images of Constantinople appear as epiphanic flashes in an incipient romance that never unfolds, for it is interrupted, as is characteristic in Woolf's fiction, by the intrusion of a male pursuing heterosexual courtship. When Minta drops Nancy's hand and when Paul later kisses Minta--the thought of which makes Nancy "outraged" and "indignant"--the world which was spread out so gloriously beneath the two women fades away. Minta's world will become much smaller, for she and Paul will "retreat into solitude together" (78). Nancy shares Minta's sadness, though she is unable to articulate its cause, just as earlier in the scene she understands the urgency of Minta's touch, even though she does not have a name for the world of emotion that Minta's touch opened up for her.
- 21 The little sapphic stories that "flash[ed]" into Woolf's "mind at all seasons" may seem as brief as Julia Craye's imagined or real kiss on Fanny Wilmot's lips, or as brief as Sally's very real kiss on Clarissa's, but that flash did after all have the power to turn the entire world upside down. Moments of overt lesbian passion in Woolf's fiction may indeed blaze briefly, but their power to turn upside down an entire story or novel is suggested by their epiphanic nature. It is after all in its brevity that an epiphany's truth is revealed.

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NOTES

1. Inspired by the work of French feminists, Elizabeth A. Meese performs an innovative reading of Virginia and Vita "seeing" each other in *(Sem)erotics: Theorizing Lesbian Writing*.
2. There are two existing versions of the passage describing Julia and Fanny's kiss in "Moments of Being", as Susan Dick points out in her edition of *The Complete Shorter Fiction of Virginia Woolf*. In Woolf's typescript, which was reprinted by Leonard Woolf in *A Haunted House*, the passage reads, "Julia blazed. Julia kindled. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star. Julia opened her arms. Julia kissed her on the lips. Julia possessed it" (qtd. in Dick 10). Woolf's revision of the typescript, published in *Forum* in 1928, highlights the fact that Fanny sees Julia, continuing an emphasis on Fanny's gaze present in the two previous paragraphs: "She saw Julia open her arms; saw her blaze, saw her kindle. Out of the night she burnt like a dead white star. Julia kissed her. Julia possessed her" (214). In both versions of the story, the paragraph which precedes the kiss ends mid-sentence, "She saw Julia--" (214). So even if there is no stress placed on Fanny's *seeing* Julia open her arms, her seeing Julia has already been emphasized. In fact, in the paragraph which precedes the kiss, Woolf uses the verb "saw" seven times to indicate Fanny's seeing "back and back into the past behind [Julia]" (214). Prior to that, Woolf ends the paragraph about Fanny's perceiving Julia's "moment of ecstasy" with an uncharacteristic simple statement: "Fanny stared" (214).
3. In an alternative reading of Fanny's sexuality, Susan Clements effectively argues that Fanny "is hindered from seeing and telling the truth not only by the fear of its consequences but by the dearth of narrative models for laying it out" (21).
4. The choice of Fanny's last name, "Wilmot", may playfully refer to the intentionality with which Woolf chooses the risqué first name "Fanny"--suggesting that Woolf "willed" the "word" ("mot" meaning "word" in French). Janet Winston offers another possibility, reading "Wilmot" as "'Will not'"--indicative of her initial reluctance "to see her teacher's lesbianism and with it Fanny's own desire for her" (73).
5. Patricia Cramer notes that Woolf's "codes for female sexual arousal firmly place her within a lesbian literary tradition which rewrites men's conventional associations of women as fragile and vulnerable flowers by using flowers instead as images of female sexual power" (183-84).
6. For an engaging reading of the use of flower imagery to suggest female sexuality as well as an analysis of the Sapphic tradition in both Woolf's "Moments of Being: 'Slater's Pins Have No

Points" and Katherine Mansfield's short story "Carnation," see Janet Winston's essay in *Virginia Woolf: Lesbian Readings*.

7. After pointing out that Woolf's choice of the pin was not arbitrary and that it "achieve[s] symbolic status" as a phallus "by the time it is repeated at the close," Avrom Fleishman also notes the ambiguity surrounding "the continued activity of the pin"; but his focus on the activity of the phallus precludes his determining anything else about the final exchange between the women except that it is "disturbing" (62).

8. In an essay which posits that lesbian sexuality can only be represented as unrepresentability, Judith Roof explains that sexuality which is "seeable" is "a source of voyeuristic pleasure particularly associated with Freud's observation of the connection between the eye and the phallus." Roof maintains that lesbian sexuality frustrates this voyeurism: "The lesbian, instead of imparting the implicit phallic desire of the 'normal' woman, conveys a different, concerted absence which frustrates both symmetry and visibility" (101).

9. Woolf's use of the word "little" to refer to her sapphist sketches does not necessarily suggest that they are trivial; on the contrary, "little" is an adjective associated with Woolfian epiphanies. Resuming her painting after ten years and still wondering about "meaning of life," Lily Briscoe realizes that "The great revelation had never come. Instead there were *little* daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark..." (emphasis mine, *Lighthouse* 161). In her memoirs, Woolf describes her "scene making" as "a means of summing up and making a knot out of innumerable *little* threads" which are "made out of something permanent; that is proof of their 'reality'" (emphasis mine, "Sketch of the Past" 142).

10. "Dumb," incidentally, is what Woolf twice calls the letters Vita sends her en route to Persia in February 1926, the same month Woolf drafted the scene between Nancy and Minta (whose name sounds a little like Vita's). In a letter to Vita, she writes, "Here's a letter from Cairo, I mean the shores of Greece, come this morning, a dumb letter but I'm getting good at reading them" (3: 237-38); in her diary Woolf writes, "Vita is a dumb letter writer, & I miss her" (3: 58).

RÉSUMÉS

Dans "Moments of Being: Slater's Pins Have no Points", Virginia Woolf fait suivre "les instants d'existence" du titre de sa nouvelle, d'une phrase chargée de connotations d'homosexualité féminine. Cette association donne à entendre que les moments d'amour homosexuel, font partie intégrante des instant épihaniques de la nouvelle. Par sa brièveté d'un côté et sa nature sibylline de l'autre, l'épiphanie semble être le moyen privilégié chez Woolf pour véhiculer le désir homosexuel féminin. Cette nouvelle se développe autour d'une phrase ordinaire qui mène à une vision, elle-même conduisant à un baiser : la vue et le toucher y sont associés de manière à contourner le même problème que pose l'épiphanie : voir est-ce croire ? ou mieux, voir est-ce sentir ? Fanny Wilmot voit son professeur de piano, Julia Craye, ouvrir ses bras et l'embrasser, mais cet événement se passe-t-il réellement ? En étudiant des recoupements d'amour homosexuel féminin et de visions épihaniques dans d'autres textes de Woolf côte à côte avec ceux manifestes dans la nouvelle, je soutiens que le regard érotique d'une femme pour une autre acquiert un statut de vision révélatrice dans la nouvelle "Moments of Being".

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