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Beauty and damaged life in Virginia Woolf's short fiction

Charles Sumner

I

- 1 Concern for beauty is a recurrent feature of Virginia Woolf's writing, whether it is through attention to beautiful objects, or her characters' sense of beautiful experience, or an impressionistic prose style laden with painterly metaphors of color, line, and spatial relation. When discussing beauty in her work, critics focus on how these metaphors formally re-construct the complexity of aesthetic experience, or the *felt* experience of cognition. However, a merely formal approach re-enforces the conservative sensibility that Woolf uses beauty to overcome. To be sure, Woolf appreciates the sense of delight, happiness, and freedom – the “flight of the mind” – that accompanies beautiful experience. But for her, beauty is also a means for social criticism. For example, she often uses intensely lyrical language to describe forms of damaged life, such as suicidal depression and social and economic degradation, and the tension arising from this fusion of suffering and beauty lends the latter a socio-critical edge. This use of beauty sets Woolf apart from other modernists who, generally, seek to reflect social upheaval through a discordant writing style. Moreover, it allows Woolf to challenge the liberal shame about beauty, or the guilty sense of privilege accompanying its appreciation, by using it to observe and indirectly comment on the disturbing social features of her fictional worlds. I will examine why she believes this challenge is necessary and how she represents it in her short stories and sketches, including “Holborn Viaduct”, “The Man Who Loved His Kind”, and “Solid Objects.”
- 2 For Woolf, beauty must never be fetishized or sought as an end in-itself, a point she makes explicit in her essay on “Street Haunting”: “after a prolonged diet of this simple, sugary fare, of beauty pure and uncomposed, we become conscious of satiety” (Woolf 1967b: 157). This rejection of “beauty pure and uncomposed” clearly defines “Holborn Viaduct”, a literary sketch consisting of three paragraphs, each of which begins with

intensely visual – indeed painterly – scenes of beauty and ends with juxtaposition to some sort of suffering.

This is Holborn Viaduct . . . And there's a pale lawn. Antelopes, sun-dappled, withdraw. Purple, starry flowers climb and hang. All's nodding and waving. Then why, wretched little boy, do you run across the street with your armed crooked against the wind?

Still, still, through the bars of the railings there are caves of redness. The bootboy, lifting the concertina, squeezes out melody. The kitchen table, with its yellow loaf, white aprons and pots of jam, is rooted to the heart of the world. Then why does blood-smeared paper drift down the pavement?

Upstairs, three steps at a time into your drawing room – Surely, surely, with the firelight red upon the terrier's hind legs, curved pictures in the cheeks of your tea pot and – actually – green dragons on the china – you can't be going to kill yourself? (Woolf 1989: 315)

- 3 The questions that end each paragraph pose a single riddle: why is there suffering in a world filled with beauty? The pathos of this riddle is qualified by the italicized *you*, a graphic indication that the questions are not merely sympathetic; they seem almost to indict the sufferer for refusing to allow beauty the power to assuage. This temptation to indictment dramatizes desire for an aesthetic transfiguration of suffering, a dialectical turning of despair into sublimity and pain into beauty. And yet the desire remains unfulfilled, shored against the suicidal depression which remains solely what it is, separate from the “purple, starry flowers”, from the “yellow loaf, white aprons and pots of jam”, from the “pictures in the cheeks” of tea pot curves. The house near Holborn Viaduct seems warm and inviting; it is a refuge from the wind and cold and is filled with fires seen as “caves of redness”, patches of color that suggest emancipation from threatening nature. To be sure, this sense of warmth is strengthened by the enumeration of domestic objects, or aesthetic fragments which strive toward the unity of a singular emotional and visual whole. However, these objects and emotions are split asunder by the one fragment that refuses integration, namely the suicidal inhabitant. In turn, this refusal of integration prevents an aesthetic transfiguration of suffering and instead transforms this house's beautiful objects and emotions into an expressive sense of grief.

II

- 4 That the appreciation of beauty is a privilege primarily of the moneyed leisure class Woolf never denies, and it is a sign of her integrity not only as an artist but also as a social critic that she does not. But it is not simply that the lower class has limited access to material comfort and the freedom of aesthetic imagination; for the inverse is also true, namely that because of her social position Woolf can never fully understand the psychological angst and concomitant aesthetic endured by the lower classes. Moreover, no amount of money or education could buy this understanding.

The imagination is largely the child of the flesh. One could not be Mrs. Giles because one's body had never stood at the wash-tub; one's hands had never wrung and scrubbed and chopped up whatever the meat may be that makes a miner's dinner. The picture was always letting in irrelevancies. One sat in an armchair or read a book. One saw landscapes or seascapes, in Greece or perhaps in Italy, where Mrs. Giles or Mrs. Edwards must have seen slag heaps and row upon row of slate roofs in a mining village. (Woolf 1967b: 137)

- 5 This passage suggests Woolf's belief that she has no right to trespass into the realm of the lower class by employing some sort of naturalist aesthetic, and that any such employment would be a base form of "slumming", profiting literarily at the expense of an Other's suffering. Further still, any attempt to represent an overcoming of hardship caused by poverty would rob the lower class of critical insight into their servitude and suffering. In her fiction, Woolf could have addressed those questions which matter so intensely to a miner's wife, "questions of sanitation and education and wages, this demand for an extra shilling, or another year at school, for eight hours instead of nine behind a counter or in a mill" (Woolf 1967b: 136). Put differently, Woolf could have produced a proletarian or working-class literature, one that expresses the worker's actual interests and emotions. But this sort of literature does not advance any radical claim of social liberation. Instead, it represents adjustment to the established society. By contrast, Woolf's beautiful aesthetic offers the promise of a new sensibility and a new atmosphere liberated from the need to adjust to the prevailing ugly and aggressive social structure, one that relegates miners to unsanitary housing, for instance, or to inadequate education and nine hours in a mill.¹ Simply put, without an established ideal and example of aesthetic beauty, cultural and even political revolutionaries would know what they revolt against but would have no idea what they revolt for.
- 6 There can be no doubt that Woolf understood this idea and measured her own art in relation to it. Recalling her attendance at the congress of a working women's guild, she writes,
- It is much better to be a lady; ladies desire Mozart and Cézanne and Shakespeare; and not merely money and hot water laid on. Therefore to deride ladies and imitate, as some of the speakers did, their mincing speech and little knowledge of what it pleases them to call 'reality' is not merely bad manners, but it gives away the whole purpose of the Congress, for, if it is better to be a working woman, by all means let them remain so and not claim their right to undergo the contamination of wealth and comfort. (Woolf 1967b: 140)
- 7 Woolf invokes Mozart, Cézanne, and Shakespeare to posit beauty not only as an artistic but also as a social ideal. The beauty of their art sustains the life of a "lady" as much as adequate income and hot water, thereby suggesting that imaginative desire has been sublimated into physical desire and that the beauty produced by these artists provides sensual as well as intellectual gratification. In a letter to Roger Fry, for example, Woolf describes the physical sense of pleasure she gets when reading Proust: "One has to put the book down and gasp. The pleasure becomes physical – like sun and wine and grapes and perfect serenity and intense vitality combined" (Woolf 1976: 566). Speakers at the convention caricature and condemn this sublimation of imaginative into physical pleasure, and they find "reality" in the mines or in the mills, behind the counter or in the kitchen. But Woolf suggests that this sort of labor is no more "real" than aesthetic beauty, and that the working women's resentment toward upper class comfort and privilege has caused them to value servitude more than the ideal of such privilege. Consequently, the women have become complacent with their degraded condition and given "away the whole purpose of the Congress". In forfeiting this purpose, revolutionary consciousness becomes distorted. For if the attitude of these women is any indication, the revolutionary proletariat values the ideal of labor more than the gratification of sensual and spiritual ends for which labor is only a means.²
- 8 To be sure, this distortion of consciousness affects not only the proletariat but also its upper class champions. In a diary entry of July 19, 1919 Woolf writes,

It seems to me more and more clear that the only honest people are the artists, and that these social reformers and philanthropists get so out of hand and harbor so many discreditable desires under the guise of loving their kind, that in the end there's more to find fault with in them than in us. (Woolf 1977: 293)

- 9 Paradoxically, it is the philanthropist's sympathy with the proletariat that prevents him from understanding it. For if he is not to condescend to the lower classes, then his understanding of them must be based on their own distorted consciousness, the valorization of poverty and servitude which Woolf witnessed at the working women's congress. In this way, the philanthropist's noble intentions are often turned to bad ends, and the terms given for the relief of suffering can actually end up intensifying it. By contrast, Woolf believes that artistic practice helps to develop the sensibility needed to properly assess human needs and desires:

The practice of art, far from making the artist out of touch with his kind, rather increases his sensibility. It breeds in him a feeling for the passions and needs of mankind in the mass which the citizen whose duty it is to work for a particular country or for a particular party has no time and perhaps no need to cultivate. (Woolf 1967a: 231-232)

- 10 Woolf's experience with the working women's guild taught her that human beings tend to repress consciousness of their own passions and needs. In turn, this repression itself becomes an essential need, a form of masochistic gratification demanded by a social system which values labor and competition more than enjoyment and cooperation. By contrast, she asserts that artistic practice generates a sensibility which refuses this sort of masochistic value. For her, cultivation of this sensibility is worth more to the masses than a philanthropist who propitiates their resentment and hatred for it.
- 11 Here we find the determining factor in Woolf's conception of the critical and political significance of literature, and specifically of literary beauty. Writers who ply their novels with a specific political agenda, as she accuses H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy of doing, betray the aim of igniting revolutionary consciousness because they teach readers to think only in terms of prevailing social values.³ By contrast, Woolf seems to believe that literature has the greatest chance at political relevance when it strikes an overtly a-political stance. Her lyrical prose helps her to achieve this stance and to develop structures of thought and feeling which transcend the limits of established necessity. That is, her production of literary beauty gratifies sensual and spiritual needs which are disregarded by prevailing social values. Demonstrating not only that these needs exist, but that they can in fact be gratified does more for political consciousness than manifestly political literature ever could. This fact explains Woolf's contempt not only for the modern cult of ugliness and for liberal shame about the appreciation of beauty, but also for the "mocking spirit which sneers at beauty for being beautiful; which turns the looking-glass and shows us that the other side of her cheek is pitted and deformed" (Woolf 1967a: 223).
- 12 Woolf dramatizes her contempt for this mocking spirit in "The Man Who Loved His Kind." In this story, Richard Dalloway runs into a schoolmate named Prickett Ellis and invites him to his wife's party later that evening. Ellis is a lawyer who counsels poor people without access to legal representation, and during the party we gain insight into his character. Initially it seems he does not care for public admiration. For example, he has recently represented a couple named the Brunners who came to his chambers and made him the gift of a clock despite their poverty. Looking back on this scene he recalls a desire for "nobody to see his face. That was what he worked for – that was his

reward" (Woolf 1989: 196). Ellis wishes nobody to see his face because he doesn't want to vitiate the pure goodness of his actions. That is, he takes pleasure in pure philanthropy, unmixed by and even antithetical to a desire for social capital. Let the capitalists and socialites have that; Ellis is moved by higher moral impulses.

Immediately after recalling this scene with the Brunners, however, he looked at the people who were actually before his eyes as if they danced over that scene in his chambers and were exposed by it, and as it faded—the Brunners faded – there remained as if left of that scene, himself, confronting this hostile population, a perfectly plain unsophisticated man, a man of the people (he straightened himself), very badly dressed, glaring, with not an air or a grace about him, a man who was an ill hand at concealing his feelings, a plain man, an ordinary human being, pitted against the evil, the corruption, the heartlessness of society. (Woolf 1989: 196)

- 13 Juxtaposing the opulence of the Dalloways' party with the Brunners' poverty, Ellis believes that the latter exposes the corruption of the former. Moreover, he imagines the juxtaposition demonstrating that behind the social airs, the proper manners and graciousness of the partygoers, there is a latent hostility, a desire to combat him and everything he stands for. So rather than adopt their manners or style of dress, he comes "badly dressed, glaring, with not an air or a grace about him". And in contrast to the desire to conceal his face when receiving the Brunners' gift, he now shows himself "a man who was an ill hand at concealing his feelings".
- 14 For Ellis, this ill-handedness is a virtue, a sign of his authenticity or genuineness. And it is precisely this signifying quality which gives the lie to the purity of his philanthropic desires, his goodness for being "a man of the people". He comes to the party badly dressed and glaring so that the partygoers will know he doesn't belong to their set, and so that they will recognize his moral superiority and rectitude. It turns out, then, that Ellis desires social capital after all. Moreover, the fact that he must display his superiority to this elite crowd suggests that Ellis is not really a man of the people. That is, he does not consider "the people", symbolized by the Brunners, to be his equal. If he did, then he would have to engage them in a similar signifying competition; for it is only those he fears may be equal or superior to him that could inspire such competition.
- 15 After more insolent glaring, more competitive signifying, Ellis "put on his spectacles and examined the pictures." Not content to let his eyes rest here,
he read the titles on a line of books; for the most part poetry. He would have liked well enough to read some of his old favourites again – Shakespeare, Dickens – he wished he ever had time to turn into the National Gallery, but he couldn't – no, one could not. Really one could not – with the world in the state it was in. [. . .] And he looked at the arm chairs and the paper knives and the well bound books, and shook his head, knowing that he would never have the time, never he was glad to think have the heart, to afford himself such luxuries. (Woolf 1989: 196-197)
- 16 To Ellis, luxury seems heartless, especially "with the world in the state it was in." Rather than indulge in luxury, in the comfort and the beauty decked out and displayed in the Dalloways' home, he will try to change the state of the world. The problem is not with the vagueness of this notion of change; for here we see a moment of genuine negative critique prompted by just motives. That is, the plight of the Brunners and others like them move Ellis to criticize the unequal distribution of social wealth; it is wrong for the Dalloways to have so much and the Brunners so little. I will return to this point later, but for now I want to note the faulty logic with which this critical negation is undertaken. Ostensibly, Ellis will try to "change the world" by bringing luxury and

comfort to those who are presently without it, and yet he stands amidst luxury and comfort thinking how heartless it is to possess it. Thus by his own logic, Ellis will paradoxically make the world more heartless by bringing luxury to more people. If the Brunners, for instance, were to win a case due to his legal work and become the recipients of wealth and luxury, then they too would be guilty of heartless possession; but isn't this outcome exactly what Ellis is fighting for?

- 17 Still, Ellis is not the only partygoer disgruntled by the beauty and comfort of the Dalloways' home. Also present is a woman named Miss O'Keefe who "wanted an ice or something to drink".
- 18 And the reason why she asked Prickett Ellis to give it her in what he felt a haughty, unjustifiable manner, was that she had seen a woman and two children, very poor, very tired, pressing against the railings of a square, peering in, that hot afternoon. Can't they be let in? she had thought, her pity rising like a wave; her indignation boiling. No; she rebuked herself the next moment, roughly, as if she boxed her own ears. [...] The whole force of the world can't do it, she said in a fury, and that was why she said so commandingly, to the unknown man: "Give me an ice". (Woolf 1989: 197-198)
- 19 Miss O'Keefe's attitude and behavior mirror Ellis's. That is, she treats him with the same haughty superiority that he has been transmitting through his insolent, silent stares. And in this meeting a literary or art critic would certainly have a leg up on these two lovers of their kind; the critic would be trained to see, to look closely and to recognize something which they apparently cannot, namely that when one of these two characters looks at and speaks to the other, they are equally looking at and speaking to themselves. This fact is so apparent that their failure to see it suggests they lack the capacity for empathy. This lack reduces them to the level of the rest of the party guests, a similarity that is unsurprising given Miss O'Keefe's internalization of a reality principle based on class division and domination, a psychic acquisition signaled by the rough self-rebuke following her wish to let the poor woman into the private square: "No; she rebuked herself the next moment, roughly, as if she boxed her own ears". No better than the other party guests, and perhaps worse, she and Ellis are the only two who behave with the meanness for which they condemn the others.
- 20 The most immediate exercise of this meanness occurs in a conversation about beauty. Walking out into the Dalloways' garden, Miss O'Keefe remarks "How beautiful!"
Oh, it was beautiful, this little patch of grass, with the towers of Westminster massed round it black high in the air, after the drawing-room; it was silent, after that noise. After all, they had that – the tired woman, the children. (Woolf 1989: 198)
- 21 Given the value Woolf implicitly assigns to beauty as a social ideal, Miss O'Keefe's remarks seem sensible. The woman and her children that day were very poor and very tired, but they had the beauty of Westminster, the majesty of its government buildings – including Buckingham Palace – and its statues of famous military men such as Gordon, Havelock, and Nelson, to reflect on and appreciate. Indeed, if they could only reflect and appreciate Westminster's ubiquitous beauty they might be relieved of their misery. As Miss O'Keefe remarks, "nobody need pay a penny for this" (Woolf 1989: 199). Still, there is a snag, a rub in her thinking. For instance, the aforementioned statues celebrate men who guaranteed domination of the British upper class both at home and abroad. Asking the poor woman and her children to find beauty in symbols of their oppression seems at best insensitive, at worst stupid. Moreover, the government

buildings – “the towers of Westminster” – pose the same affront. These beautiful symbols of empire, of upper class domination, are designed to pacify, to encourage the underclass to take pride in its oppression, not to challenge it. Miss O’Keefe is correct in one respect, “nobody need pay a penny for this [. . .] You can have it for nothing. Beauty” (Woolf 1989: 199). But the point is moot; the poor woman and her children not only need not but cannot pay a penny for these beautiful examples of architecture and statuary because the forces which they symbolize have already robbed the woman of anything to pay with. Therefore, Miss O’Keefe is not a mouthpiece for Woolf’s views on beauty; rather, she distorts them.

- 22 To be fair, it is not only the cityscape that Miss O’Keefe commends for its beauty. She also appreciates the landscape – what little there is of it – cultivated in the Dalloways’ garden. For example, she experiences a sort of aesthetic rapture vis-à-vis “a cat or two slinking across the grass, and the wavering of leaves, and the yellow and red fruit like Chinese lanterns wobbling this way and that” (Woolf 1989: 198). In turn, this rapture arouses her pity for the party guests; when juxtaposed to what she considers the genuine beauty of nature, the party “seemed like a frantic skeleton dance music set to something very real, and full of suffering” (Woolf 1989: 198). Miss O’Keefe’s pity suggests awareness that appreciation of natural beauty is always mediated by social convention, or that the “image of nature survives because its complete negation by artifacts would necessarily involve closing one’s eyes to the possibility of a sphere beyond bourgeois work and commodity relations” (Adorno 102). Given the dialectical penetration of social convention into the image of natural beauty, the latter mourns the primacy of the former. By drawing attention to this fact, Miss O’Keefe implicitly critiques Ellis’s sense of moral superiority. For him, appreciation of natural beauty has nothing to do with mourning for those beholden to social convention or damaged by class domination. Instead, he imagines this appreciation as a means to affront or shock the dominant class:

He did like once a year to get right away from everybody and lie on his back in a field. He thought how shocked they would be – these fine folk – if they realized the amount of pleasure he got from what he was old fashioned enough to call a love of nature; trees and fields he had known ever since he was a boy. (Woolf 1989: 197)

- 23 Prickett Ellis values nature precisely because this sense of value implies an old fashioned and therefore genuine sensibility. He believes this sensibility contrasts sharply to that of the upper class party guests who are beholden to inauthentic fashions good for little else than conspicuous display. However, Miss O’Keefe’s critique discloses the fact that Ellis’s sensibility, old fashioned though it may be, is fashion nevertheless. He too is guilty of reifying and thereby rendering inauthentic his appreciation of natural beauty, an appreciation which, if valued for its own sake rather than the purpose of self-aggrandizement, holds a socially critical potential.
- 24 Piqued on the one hand by Miss O’Keefe’s misguided recommendation that the poor should take solace in the Westminster cityscape, and on the other hand by her implicitly critical understanding of his own aesthetic sensibility, Prickett Ellis
- let her have it – this pale, abrupt, arrogant woman. [. . .]
 “Beauty!” he said. He was afraid he did not understand beauty apart from human beings. [. . .]
 Beauty apart from human beings? What did he mean by that? she demanded suddenly.
 Well this: getting more and more wrought up, he told her the story of the Brunners

and the clock, not concealing his pride in it. That was beautiful, he said. (Woolf 1989: 199)

- 25 Whereas Ellis sees fault in Miss O'Keefe's reasoning about beauty, he fails to see the defects in his own ideas. He possesses the "mocking spirit which sneers at beauty for being beautiful", and this spirit leads him to valorize the Brunners' suffering by making the beauty of their gift contingent upon it. That is, he transfigures their poverty into a source or pre-condition of beauty and thereby finds personal consolation for their suffering. In doing so, he risks inducing the couple also to find false joy in their poverty, potentially diminishing their desire for leisure and freedom from material penury. Moreover, he leaves room for any outside observer to suggest that if the couple is capable of such beautiful generosity, then their suffering cannot be as bad as all that. Last and perhaps worst of all, Ellis finds their poverty beautiful only when the couple sacrifices something to him, thereby subjugating aesthetic pleasure to the principle of exchange. Whereas this subjugation is a natural result of Ellis's reformist commitment, it actually contributes to the economic and social degradation he means to combat.
- 26 It has been easy to criticize Prickett Ellis and Miss O'Keefe. After all, this story is designed to dramatize Woolf's suspicion of those philanthropists "who harbor so many discreditable desires under the guise of loving their kind" (Woolf 1977: 293). Still, the critic should be wary of venturing too close to the contempt for Prickett Ellis and Miss O'Keefe which they have themselves displayed for the Dalloways' party guests. These two characters have a point, namely that the world is full of injustice and inequity. As Dean Baldwin writes, "most of the people enjoying themselves at this get-together are the beneficiaries of that injustice. Their wealth and leisure are made possible by others' suffering" (44). Consequently, the story blocks its two most obvious avenues of readerly sympathy and dramatic resolution. On the one hand, readers cannot sympathize with Prickett Ellis and Miss O'Keefe because in setting out to be "lovers of their kind," they actually end up hating it: "Hating each other, hating the whole houseful of people who had given them this painful, this disillusioning evening, these two lovers of their kind got up, and without a word, parted forever." (Woolf 1989: 200) On the other hand, the Dalloways and their guests do not act hatefully toward one another, but they are, as Baldwin writes, the beneficiaries of others' suffering. The only way out of this impasse is to be ceaselessly critical of one's own critical motives. For example, if Prickett Ellis and Miss O'Keefe had engaged in a little critical self-reflection, then the reader would likely be able to identify with their critique of the Dalloways' party guests. Still, even this approach is strewn with difficulties, a point I will try to demonstrate by turning to the short story "Solid Objects".

III

- 27 "Solid Objects" portrays a developing friendship between two characters, John and Charles. In the opening scene, these two are walking on a "vast semicircle" of beach and engaged in a conversation which ends with John's expostulation, "Politics be damned!" (Woolf 1989: 102). Eventually they stop to rest, and Charles skips stones on the water while John burrows deep into the sand, whereupon his fingers "curled round something hard – a full drop of solid matter – and gradually dislodged a large irregular lump, and brought it to the surface". Enraptured by this new found object, he investigates it further.

- 28 When the sand coating was wiped off, a green tint appeared. It was a lump of glass, so thick as to be almost opaque; the smoothing of the sea had completely worn off any edge or shape, so that it was impossible to say whether it had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane; it was nothing but glass; it was almost a precious stone. (Woolf 1989: 103)
- 29 The sea's smooth rhythms have eroded any trace of use value which might help to identify the particular history attached to the lump of glass, and yet, the glass has no manifest exhibition value either; it "was almost a precious stone", but not quite. The formlessness which renders the lump of glass neither a tool nor a jewel in fact transforms its form into an end in-itself, and the glass becomes an object of contemplation to be appreciated as "nothing but glass". Consequently, John holds it to the light and examines its particular aesthetic qualities: it is hard, concentrated, and definite in comparison to "the vague sea and the hazy shore." (Woolf 1989: 103) Pleased with this find, he slips it into his pocket, an act unnoticed by Charles who returns to their previous political conversation. These separate actions are emblematic of their developing friendship: Charles continually urges John to seek a political career, but John disavows politics in order to give more time and attention to collecting objects like the lump of glass, objects which he can appreciate on a purely aesthetic level.
- 30 Eventually, John adds to his collection a broken piece of china "shaped, or broken accidentally, into five irregular but unmistakable points. The colouring was mainly blue, but green stripes or spots of some kind overlaid the blue, and lines of crimson gave it a richness and lustre of the most attractive kind" (Woolf 1989: 104). Further still, he finds a piece of iron "almost identical with the glass in shape, massy and globular, but so cold and heavy, so black and metallic, that it was evidently alien to the earth and had its origin in one of the dead stars or was itself the cinder of a moon" (Woolf 1989: 106). These two items, along with the original lump of glass, he displays on his mantelpiece, determined to possess more and more objects valued for their relations of form and color and for the way that these plastic qualities are intensified by the luster of glaze. Indeed, the search becomes so consuming that he retreats not only from politics, but from society altogether, opting instead for an imaginative world in which aesthetic appreciation is paramount.
- 31 Predictably, Charles fails to understand John's obsession and, disappointed that his friend has thrown away what promised to be a brilliant political career, he completely cuts ties with John. Somewhat unpredictable, however, is the virtually non-existent critical response to Charles's decision. Rather than treat it directly, critics have tacitly sanctioned it, suggesting that John's obsession with discarded and broken objects and his retreat from society are forms of pathological behavior. For example, Robert Watson writes that if "John's story involves an allegorical debate won by the contemplative over the active principle, by the esthetic over the political vision, it also hints at the disturbing consequences of such creative eccentricity" (4). More pointedly, Douglas Mao asserts that the story's "earnest mood gives it the feeling of an argument somehow premised on the metamorphosis of vague desire into singular pathology" (26).
- 32 It is not at all clear why the story, or John's actions within it, should seem to be premised on a "singular pathology". If John dislikes political life, as his outburst "Politics be damned!" suggests, then his desire for another kind of life is neither pathological nor even the least bit irrational. To suggest otherwise is to privilege a capitalist ratio which fails to see that "the end of all rationality viewed as the sum total

of all practical means would have to be something other than a means, hence a non-rational quality" (Adorno: 79). This ratio's stubborn refusal to cede its own ends generates innumerable social pathologies, among which is a critical compulsion to label John pathological. After all, his imaginative retreat into the private world of aesthetic appreciation is nothing more than action guided by the capitalist ratio which condemns the retreat to begin with: John is seeking payment, seeking to gain something, for the very difficulty of living, working, and standing for political office. Given that administrators of capitalist social structures refuse to make good on the promise of payment, that they refuse to make life worth living, John imagines the payment into existence; he literally creates it for himself through his collection of beautiful – even if broken and previously discarded – objects. He is therefore no more pathological than the ratio of capital which fuels his supposed pathology.

- 33 To be sure, critics have also emphasized the productive potential that comes with John's retreat into a private world of aesthetic contemplation. For example, Bill Brown approvingly remarks that "John makes no effort to express himself in his exhibition; rather, the lives of these things – the glass contemplative, the china vivid, fitful, surreal – overwhelm his life" (408). For Brown, John's provision of a space in which these objects can freely live and breathe teaches an important lesson in ethics: "The ethics of the story thus reside in Woolf's depiction of an experience – of experience – that activates for the fragment a life of its own" (411). The problem with this account is that it shifts the site of agency from John to the objects themselves. This shift risks losing sight of the fact that these objects represent new possibilities *for* John. That is, they offer an opportunity for John to cultivate and exercise the sort of sensibility opposed to that demanded by contemporary political practice. Losing sight of this fact shoves to the background the larger problems that force John out of the socio-political mainstream to begin with, along with the need to analyze and critique them.
- 34 Objects cannot have sovereignty; John can only create the illusion that they do. This illusion is similar to the commodity fetish, or the appearance of sovereignty enjoyed by commodities, and results from the fact that both John's collection and his attitude towards it are thoroughly mediated by the domination of that fetish. Therefore, one cannot assign a positive ethical value to John's willingness to allow his material objects, or "things", to overwhelm his life; for this overwhelming nature of things, or commodities, originally contributes to John's political despair. Consider the following passage:
- He [Charles] did not see, or if he had seen would hardly have noticed, that John after looking at the lump for a moment, as if in hesitation, slipped it inside his pocket. That impulse, too, may have been the impulse which leads a child to pick up one pebble on a path strewn with them, promising it a life of warmth and security upon the nursery mantelpiece, delighting in the sense of power and benignity which such an action confers. (Woolf 1989: 103-104)
- 35 John feels a sense of power and benignity by providing a home for the little lump of glass. The fact that the opportunity to feel these emotions compels him to pocket and preserve the glass suggests that his political career does not provide these emotions. In the political world, he is powerless, overwhelmed by "things" and the endless social mediations through which they pass. By contrast, when he recognizes an overlooked treasure on the street or on the beach or under a bush, he attempts to reassure himself of immediacy and power through the adventure of speculation. There is therefore no positive ethical value *in* the story; there is only potential for an ethical criticism of the

story. Nevertheless, we must end on a flat note; for the very need to remark this distinction undermines the ethical value of criticism by risking self-congratulation of the sort Woolf attributes to John when he “saves” his little objects.

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NOTES

1. Regarding this ugly reality, she writes “I daresay it is true, however, that I haven’t this ‘reality’ gift. I insubstantise, willfully to some extent, distrusting reality – its cheapness” (Woolf 1977: 248).

2. Consider, for instance, Adorno’s claim that “Marx wanted to turn the whole world into a giant workhouse” (Jay 57).

3. For Woolf’s critique of Wells and Galsworthy see “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” in *Collected Essays* I, 319-337.

RÉSUMÉS

La beauté apparaît de manière récurrente dans l'œuvre de Virginia Woolf, que ce soit à travers l'attention portée aux beaux objets, l'expérience de la beauté que font ses personnages ou son style impressionniste empreint de métaphores picturales comme la couleur, la ligne ou la relation spatiale. Lorsqu'ils abordent la beauté dans son œuvre, les critiques s'intéressent à la manière dont ces métaphores reconstruisent formellement la complexité de l'expérience esthétique ou l'expérience sensible de la cognition. Cependant, une analyse purement formelle renforce la vision conservatrice selon laquelle Woolf utilise la beauté pour enchanter. Il est vrai que Woolf apprécie le sentiment de plaisir, de bonheur et de liberté—"l'envol de l'esprit"—que donne l'expérience de la beauté. Mais pour elle, la beauté est également un moyen de critiquer la société. Ainsi utilise-t-elle un langage intensément lyrique pour décrire certaines formes de vie meurtrie, telles que la dépression suicidaire et la déchéance de nature économique et sociale; et la tension inattendue qui se dégage de la fusion de la souffrance et de la beauté confère à cette dernière une dimension sociale et critique. Une telle utilisation de la beauté distingue Woolf des autres modernistes qui, en général, cherchent à réfracter les bouleversements sociaux dans un style discordant. En outre, cela permet à Woolf de lancer un défi à la honte de la beauté qu'entretient la société libérale ou au sentiment d'être à la fois privilégié et coupable qui va de pair avec l'appréciation de la beauté, en utilisant celle-ci pour observer et commenter indirectement les aspects sociaux dérangeants de son monde fictif. L'analyse montrera pourquoi elle pense que ce défi est nécessaire et comment elle le représente dans certaines nouvelles et esquisses, en particulier dans "Holborn Viaduct," "The Man Who Loved His Kind" et "Solid Objects."

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