

University of East London Institutional Repository: <http://roar.uel.ac.uk>

This paper is a book chapter made available online by permission of the publisher. Please scroll down to view the document itself. Please refer to the repository record for this item and our policy information available from the repository home page for further information.

**Author(s):** Humm, Maggie

**Title:** My Own Ghost Met Me: Woolf's 1930s Photographs, Death and Freud's Acropolis

**Year of publication:** 2010

**Citation:** Humm, M. (2010) 'My Own Ghost Met Me: Woolf's 1930s Photographs, Death and Freud's Acropolis' In: Potts, G, Shahriari, L (eds.) *Virginia Woolf's Bloomsbury: Volume 1: Aesthetic Theory and Literary Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan. pp. 86-103.

**Link to published version:**

<http://www.palgrave.com/products/title.aspx?pid=278592>

## **‘My own ghost met me’: Woolf’s 1930s photographs, death and Freud’s**

### **Acropolis**

#### **Maggie Humm**

The photographs taken by the Woolfs in the early 1930s are important examples of portraiture and represent an extensive life narrative of themselves and their friends. Photographic portraits are very composed, constructed forms that suggest the photographer’s identification with the subject and also incorporate traces of their makers’ histories as well as the everyday moment. Between 1931 and 1934 the Woolfs took photographic portraits of many of their friends including Roger Fry, Lydia and Maynard Keynes, Tom and Vivienne Eliot, and Vita Sackville-West, as well as relatives. The disparate locales in the photographs include Greece, Italy and Ireland but Monk’s House, where Leonard and Virginia developed their photographs, is the preferred setting.

In the albums sitters are photographed with distinct presences and deeper meanings are suggested through the accumulation and sequencing of photographic motifs. The large number of repeated portraits reveals the Woolfs need for a constant visual discourse of friendship during the 1930s. Portraying the density of friendship by means of repetition clearly expressed their desire for a collective ‘history’ at a time of great social and cultural change. This period of photography is concurrent with a time, in Virginia’s diaries and letters, of almost constant descriptions of the contemporary deaths of many of her friends as well as reminiscences of family deaths, particularly those of her brother Thoby and her father Leslie Stephen which the contemporary reflections evoked.

My own ghost met me 2

Leonard and Virginia were involved in many social and political developments in the 1930s. The world wide Depression following the General Strike and U. S. stock market crash was met in Britain by the downfall of Ramsay MacDonald's Labour government and his formation of a National government on August 24, 1931. As Hermione Lee argues, Leonard as the co-editor of the Political Quarterly founded in that year 'was caught up, from now on, in what he called "the intelligent man's way to prevent war"' (Lee 1996, 617). The year 1931 was one of unprecedented and brutal developments both at home and abroad. Japan's invasion of Manchuria in September 1931 weakened Leonard's faith in the League of Nations. Public demands for women's emancipation diminished during the 1930s with feminist efforts subdued by the realities of economic recession and the rise of Fascism (Rowbotham 1997, 173). The 1931 Anomalies Act, although introduced by a woman minister Margaret Bondfield, made it difficult for unemployed married women to qualify for benefit, disqualified 180,000 married women for assistance and was attacked by Woolf's friends (Rowbotham 1997, 174). The year before the Act was passed, in 1930, Virginia wrote the introduction to the collected letters of the Women's Co-operative Guild as an autobiographical heuristic understanding of working class women's social and political injustices.

But the Woolfs lived in the modern world, broadcasting on the BBC (Leonard's 'The Modern State' a series of six talks he delivered in October and November 1931), going to movies, enjoying constant photography as well as visits to the 1931 Olympia Motor Exhibition and approving a car 'The Star, which indeed we could buy if we wished' probably the Little Comet Fourteen costing £354 (Woolf 1982, 50). The

My own ghost met me 3

Woolfs' income rose dramatically in the 1930s. Flush (1932) sold 50,000 copies and

by 1937 The Years was a best seller in the United States second only to Gone with the Wind and Man Ray's photograph of Virginia appeared on the cover of Time (Silver 1999, 79).

This more complex experience of modernity/modernism, as a disparate formation interweaving past and present, high and popular cultures and Virginia's defence of the 'common reader', is at odds with many of her contemporary critics. For example the architect Reginald Blomfield, hostile to Roger Fry's ideas, claimed that 'since the war, Modernism, or Modernismus, as it should be called on the German precedent, has invaded this country like an epidemic...its attack is insidious...whether it is communism or not, 'Modernismus' is a vicious movement which threatens that literature and art which is our last refuge from a world that is becoming more and more mechanized everyday' (Blomfield 1934, 52-3). The Studio art journal editorial in 1932 agreed 'Britain is looking for British pictures of British people of British landscapes' (The Studio 1932, 64).

This common fear of modernism as foreign is far removed from Bloomsbury's association with international modernism, for example Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant's attention to the work of Matisse and the French avant-garde. In Britain, Vanessa and Duncan worked with cutting edge modern industrial techniques and with Allan Walton one of the most forward looking textile producers of the 1930s, who transferred more than fifteen of use of Bell and Grant's painterly designs onto a gleaming rayon-faced cloth that intensified and reflected light (Mendes 1979).

Woolf too made link-ages between modernity and modernism. On result of that

My own ghost met me 4

attention to a more mass-mediated imaginary are her photographs but also even in her writings about painting for example Walter Sickert: A Conversation (Woolf 1934).

Sickert asked Woolf to write about a retrospective exhibition of his paintings shown in November 1933 at Agnew and Son because he felt that Woolf would best represent the literary qualities of the work. But Woolf, more interestingly, begins her essay with one of her favourite dinner party scenes in which guests discuss whether driving in London is helped or hindered by the 'new system of coloured lights', a discussion which Woolf transmogrifies into an extended analysis of colour and spectatorship (Woolf 1934, 5).

The introduction in Britain of three-coloured traffic lights in 1928/9 was followed by the Road Traffic Act of 1934 which introduced a 30 m. p. h speed limit in urban areas, driving tests, fines for jay walking and sanctuary lanes (pedestrian crossings). Just as modernism was considered to be too risky and continental by many critics in Britain so too were traffic lights, although they had been adopted in the United States in 1918, and in France in 1922. Woolf was equally attentive to other new technologies, pleased that Leonard bought, on July 23 1931, 'a superb Zeiss camera' (probably the Lloyd or Nixe rather than the more expensive Cocarette model of 1929) and that 'my Kodak can be made perfect for 5/-' (five shillings) (Woolf 1978, 361). Sickert himself was very aware of photographic techniques and, during the 1930s, transfigured newspaper photographs into formal paintings. Sickert's Edward V111 (1936) endows a popular media image of the king with advanced modernist painterly handling. The king, when Prince of Wales, was archetypally modern. He persuaded the Post Office to use up-to-date phones, loved fast cars, and supported the Royal Academy's first modernist exhibition 'British Art in Industry' by affirming that 'simplicity in line, form and decoration is, I think, what modern taste demand' (Hogben 1979, 68).

My own ghost met me 5

Beginning in 1931, Woolf also collected photographs and newspaper cuttings in her effort to document the differing social, economic, political and cultural positions of men and women in this period. The photographs and cuttings, together with quotations and letters, Woolf mounted into three scrapbooks whose pages, which included information about education, sexuality, politics, and social values, were sources for Three Guineas. Woolf's prescient 'montage' of text, published photographs and 'narrated' images of the Spanish Civil War which were not published in the book produced a complex multi-generic work of feminist modernism (Humm 2002). Woolf's use of photography is far in advance of the typical newspaper photographic reproductions of the 1930s in which photographs are subordinate to stories until the arrival of Picture Post in 1938.

The 1930s for Woolf were also a period of self-reflection, particularly about her past and about death. Woolf's diaries and letters for 1931-4 contain her detailed thoughts about the contemporary deaths of fourteen people all of whom, apart from the king of Belgium, were personally known to Woolf including her most intimate friends Lytton Strachey, Dora Carrington, and Roger Fry, her half-brother George Duckworth and Leonard's sister Clara. Virginia and Leonard talked often about death and suicide during these years. After Goldie Dickinson's death 'at night L & I talked of death the second time this year. We may be like worms crushed by a motor car' and after Dora Carrington's suicide Woolf records 'we discuss suicide; & I feel, as always, ghosts'

My own ghost met me 6

(Woolf 1982, 83).

Woolf's 'witnessing' of multiple contemporary deaths during the 1930s and her memories of family deaths emerge in her writing: 'the end of *The Waves*. I wrote the words O Death fifteen minutes ago'; and shape the Woolfs' repetitious photographs

(Woolf 1982, 10). In a variety of ways, engaging with the example of another intellectual equally caught up with issues of visual memory and the psyche in these years, can provide a valuable lens through which Woolf's writings and photographs can be studied. Reading other self-inscriptions, other performances of similar family memories, is a useful way of understanding technologies of memory particularly if these performances involve identical events.

There is one surprisingly tangential account, written in the 1930s, in which the writer's frame of reference and technology of memory are very close to Woolf's. One other writer, in particular, was creating an explanatory narrative of memories of his dead father in the context of social change and threats of war in the 1930s. Both Virginia Woolf and Sigmund Freud decided to revisit the Acropolis in the 1930s, Woolf in person and Freud in his memories and in writing. Woolf's first visit to Athens, with Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian, was in 1906 at the age of twenty-four, whereas Freud was forty-eight when he visited in 1904.

In 1936 Freud decided to celebrate the birthday of his admired friend the writer, musicologist and Nobel Prize winner Romain Rolland by writing an account for Rolland of Freud's 1904 Acropolis visit together with an explanation for why the visit had 'kept on recurring in my mind' and frequently troubled Freud during the intervening years (Freud 1960, 239). Freud's eightieth birthday was also celebrated by

My own ghost met me 7

an Address signed by nearly two hundred writers including Rolland and Virginia Woolf. In May 1932 Woolf travelled to Greece, together with Leonard and Roger and Margery Fry. Perhaps not surprisingly, at the Acropolis Woolf thought that 'my own ghost met me' and had recurring memories of the death of her brother Thoby who had died of typhoid after their 1906 visit, and memories of her father Leslie

Stephen (Woolf 1982, 90). Freud too, on returning to the Acropolis in his thoughts, also experienced memories of his brother and father (Freud 1960, 248). Freud's account of those memories is ostensibly written for Rolland, who Freud greatly admired and saw to some extent as a symbolic father, although Rolland was younger than Freud and the letter reads as a typical example of Freud's self-analysis.

Importantly for Freud's narrative, Rolland is the same age as Freud's brother, both were ten years younger than Freud.

Freud's love of Hellenic culture is evident early in his life in his desire to name his brother Alexander the Great. In Freud and the Non-European Edward Said describes Freud's knowledge of the Greco-Roman world that Freud drew on repeatedly for 'psychoanalytic images and concepts' (Said 2003, 15). Said's main focus is on Freud's representation of Moses as a non-European and how this destabilizing history of Jewish identity is a model for identity in the modern world. But Said does note that, for Freud, Athens was a 'city of the mind' representing 'Freud's lifelong dedication to intellectual achievement' (Said 2003, 38).

Freud is the central character in his story of 'a phenomenon...which I myself had experienced a generation ago, in 1904, and which I had never understood, has kept on recurring in my mind. I did not at first see why; but at last I determined to analyse the

My own ghost met me 8

incident' (Freud 1960, 239). In 1904 Freud and his brother decided to travel to Corfu by way of Trieste, but while visiting a business acquaintance of Freud's brother in Trieste, they were persuaded instead to visit Athens. While waiting for the boat office to open, Freud and his brother wandered 'about the town in a discontented and irresolute frame of mind' (Freud 1960, 240). Finally arriving at the Acropolis, Freud changed into his best shirt for the occasion. Only now, many years later, does Freud



come to understand that the experience of depression in Trieste and his surprise at seeing the Acropolis are 'intimately connected' (Freud 1960, 241). What motivates his behaviour, Freud believes, is wanting to 'keep something away from the ego' (Freud 1960, 245). What Freud realises he was keeping away from his ego in Trieste and at the Acropolis is his sense of guilt at having surpassed his father. The 'limitation and poverty of our conditions of life in my youth' meant that the joy of seeing the Acropolis was 'beyond the realms of possibility' for Freud's father (Freud 1960, 246-7). Freud and his brother experience extreme guilt in going 'further than one's father, and as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden' (Freud 1960, 247). Freud's 'guilt' is still very much present in the 1930s, as is evident in his defensive switch to the impersonal pronoun 'one'. Freud concludes that what 'interfered with our enjoyment of the journey to Athens was a feeling of filial piety' because not only was Freud's father unable to visit Athens but his lack of 'secondary education' debars him, Freud feels, from understanding the significance of the Acropolis (Freud 1960, 247-8).

The episode is replete with generational tensions and struggles with the technologies of memory, as well as with Freud's conceptualisations of psychic structures in relation

My own ghost met me 9

to memory, all tensions and struggles shared by Woolf. Woolf's actual meeting with Freud later in January 1939 was not auspicious. 'Dr. Freud gave me a narcissus...A screwed up shrunk very old man...Difficult talk' (Woolf 1984, 202). But after Freud's death, in September of that year, Woolf was 'gulping up Freud' and applying Freud's concept of 'ambivalence' to her mixed feelings about shopping (Woolf 1984, 249). And Freud's exploration of memories of his father in his Acropolis letter and other

case studies very much resemble Woolf's incorporation of memory fragments into her writings and photographs in the 1930s. Both resurrect memories by means of unreliable narrators who are relentlessly self-reflexive. Both adopt framing devices of discreditation. For example, Freud suggests that his Acropolis letter 'is the gift of an impoverished creature' who has 'seen better days' (Freud 1960, 239). Woolf, with much less justification, felt that she too was ageing 'I'm getting old myself – I shall be fifty next year; and I come to feel more and more how difficult it is to collect oneself into one Virginia' (Woolf 1978, 397).

In 1932 Woolf, like Freud, engaged with the fear of, or guilt at, surpassing the father. On February 28 Woolf was invited to deliver the Clark lectures. 'This, I suppose, is the first time a woman has been asked; & so it is a great honour – think of me, the uneducated child reading books in my room at 22 H. P. G. – now advanced to this glory' (Woolf 1982, 79). Woolf's father Sir Leslie Stephen gave the first Cambridge Clark lectures (founded in honour of William Clark Vice-Master of Trinity) in 1893, taking eighteenth century literature as his subject. Although Woolf wanted to believe that her 'father would have blushed with pleasure' that his daughter 'was to be asked to succeed him', she immediately rejected the invitation although, three days later, she

My own ghost met me 10

could 'think of nothing else; my mind is swarming with ideas for lectures' (Woolf 1982, 79-80). Woolf's declared reasons for rejecting appear to be practical. Writing to Clive Bell Woolf claimed that the 'honour is not overwhelming' and in her diary records the usual writer's panic at sudden writing requests 'how could I write 6 lectures, to be delivered in full term, without giving up a year to criticism' (Woolf 1978, 27; Woolf 1982, 79).

Two days later 'the devil' is whispering that Woolf had already 'six lectures written in

Phases of Fiction; & could furbish them up & deliver the Clark lectures, and win the esteem of my sex' (Woolf 1982, 79). Woolf's 'devil' or mental 'disturbance' resembles Freud's understanding that 'the essence of success was to have got further than one's father...and as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden' (Freud 1960, 247). Precisely because giving the lectures would be an anti patriarchal project 'winning the esteem of my sex', Woolf, like Freud, cannot envisage accepting. Woolf's fear of surpassing the father is clear in her defence mechanisms. Undertaking the lectures would, Woolf claims, make her '2 or 3 years distant from *The Waves*' (Woolf 1982, 80) The excess in Woolf's reaction betrays a defence mechanism. By the end of the thirties, when Woolf was reading Freud and writing a 'Sketch of the Past', she describes her relationship with her father in Freudian terms using Freud's term ambivalence, but in 1932, the year of Woolf's visit to the Acropolis, Woolf famously claimed unfamiliarity with the works of Freud. Just before visiting Greece, writing to an American undergraduate, Woolf stated 'I have not read Dr Freud or any psychoanalyst – indeed I think I have never read any of their books; my knowledge is merely from superficial talk' (Woolf 1979, 36). Returning from Greece, Woolf

My own ghost met

me 11

repeated her disclaimers in a further letter to the American 'I may say that I have never read Bergson and have only a very amateurish knowledge of Freud and the psychoanalysts; I have made no study of them' (Woolf 1979, 91). But one of the three books published about Woolf in that year was le roman psychologique de Virginia Woolf by Floris Delattre and members of Woolf's family circle had great expertise in Freud's works and a lively awareness of the impact of psychology on popular culture – as had Woolf.

James Strachey and Adrian Stephen studied Freud professionally in the 1920s, and Lytton Strachey's biography of Elizabeth and Essex in 1928 was informed by interpretative psychology. The Stracheys went on to translate Freud's works for the Hogarth Press. Leonard, as early as 1914, had reviewed The Psychopathology of Everyday Life for The New Weekly and read The Interpretation of Dreams (Kurzweil 1983, 248). Roger Fry was fascinated, as early as 1919, by the relationship between collecting objects and Freud's idea of anal complexes and Fry's discussions with Woolf influenced Woolf's short story 'Solid Objects' (Harvey 2004). Virginia makes a direct reference to Freudianism in her 1920s book review of J. D. Beresford's novel An Imperfect Mother and in A Room of One's Own creates an imaginary 'psychopathology of everyday life' in her portrait of Professor von X (Woolf 1965). Inevitably, by April 1932 when Virginia and Leonard together with the Frys left for Greece, Virginia would perceive her mnemonic memories of the past, which the Acropolis triggered, in a more complicated way than simply as nostalgia. In Woolf's letters from Greece, and in the accompanying diaries, there are highly mediated interactions between her memories of 1906 and the present of 1932.

My own ghost met me 12

Although in a two-line letter to Ottoline Morrell Woolf, facetiously, says of Athens 'this is where we are, not much like Gower Street', her more autobiographical descriptions reveal complex mediations in which the past is not unproblematically screened off by direct transference to present images but acts as an informing level of reality (Woolf 1979, 60). For example Woolf largely repeats in her diary an entry she made in August 1906 describing the mind's ability to create visual images 'unmasked' (Leaska 1998, 328). Woolf reverts to displacement in a classic Freudian sense by screening her own responses onto those of Roger and Margery Fry. 'Roger is a fair

shower of erudition – Not a flower escapes him. And if it did, Margery would catch it’ (Woolf 1979, 54). It is Fry who notices Woolf’s ability to disassociate. ‘Margery caught me smiling the other day at my own thoughts and said no Fry had ever done that. “No” said Roger, “we have no powers of disassociation”’ (Woolf 1979, 56).

What Woolf experiences is precisely what Freud, in his Acropolis letter, defines as his own ‘derealization’, a defence mechanism that, for Freud, was a defence against the guilt of surpassing his father (Freud 1960, 244). Woolf frequently recalls the past in other forms of displacement. Returning to Athens from Corinth ‘To Athens again...and I thought of the lights of the herring fleet at sea; everyone holding a yellow taper along the street and all the lights coming out in the windows’ (Woolf 1979, 59). Woolf’s structure of feeling here is her childhood memories of St. Ives which Woolf reincarnated in To the Lighthouse. In Greece, Woolf’s memories and associations problematise her sense of personal history. Writing to Vita, Woolf thoughtfully describes a somatic contamination by the past. ‘Yes it was so strange coming back here again. I hardly knew where I was; or when it was. There was my

My own ghost met me 13

own ghost coming down from the Acropolis, aged 23’ (Woolf 1979, 62).

In a very general way, Woolf’s Greek descriptions are antipatriarchal. Greece offered Woolf an alternative to her father, to linear masculine history ‘This is England in the time of Chaucer’ (Woolf 1982, 92). Woolf prefers Greece’s ‘an uncivilised, hot new season to be brought into our lives...sloughing the respectable skin’ (Woolf 1982, 97). Woolf enjoys recounting sexual memories in a letter to Vanessa ‘if ever I had the turn towards Sapphism it would be revived by the carts of young peasant women in lemon red & blue handkerchiefs’ (Woolf 1979, 57). Woolf realises that Greece has become as significant to her as the St. Ives childhood. ‘And I could love Greece, as an

old woman, so I think, as I once loved Cornwall, as a child' (Woolf 1982, 97). The impact of Greece on Woolf was immense. 'Since we came back, I'm screwed up into a ball; cant get into step; cant mark things down; feel awefully detached; see youth; feel old; no, thats not quite it; wonder how a year or 20 perhaps is to be endured...the inane pointlessness of this existence' (Woolf 1982, 102). Woolf's mind 'will present me, unasked, with vision, as I walk, of Aegina, of Athens – the Acropolis with the incandescent pillars...not yet complete enough for me to have detached pictures' (Woolf 1982, 100). By 'disturbing' Woolf's ability to frame the visual, Greece inserts a more traumatic moment of iterative memories and unchained events.

The period is one in which Woolf was overwhelmed by unchained *dispotifs* of death; it was as well the time of her most active album construction. Photographic frames offer self-contained spaces, refuges from the affective contemporary deaths Woolf was witnessing (Humm 2006). In March Arnold Bennett died making Woolf 'sadder than I should have supposed...an element in life – even in mine that was so remote –

My own ghost met me 14

taken away. This is what one minds' (Woolf 1982, 15-16). In April Woolf praises Beatrice Webb's 'justification of suicide. Having made the attempt myself [in 1913], from the best of motives as I thought' (Woolf 1978, 305). Returning to Tavistock Square and her diaries, Woolf decides that 'Percy [Woolf's gardener at Rodmell] could burn the lot in one bonfire. He could burn them at the edge of the field where, so we think, we shall lie buried' (Woolf 1982, 24).

When Woolf's headaches returned in May, Woolf realises that 'if it were not for the divine goodness of L. how many times I should be thinking of death' and memories of death inevitably recall Woolf's father (Woolf 1982, 27). On the September 3 each year Woolf writes the same words in each diary 'the battle of Dunbar: the battle of

Worcester...’ because she remembers ‘father saying that at St Ives on this day’ (Woolf 1982, 43). In the same month Woolf changes the location of her burial in a letter to John Lehmann, ‘in 50 years I shall be under the pond with the gold fish swimming over me’ (Woolf 1978, 390-1). Delighted by Vanessa’s reaction to The Waves that the book was ‘a lullaby capable of singing him [Thoby] to rest’ Woolf replied that she had Thoby ‘so much in my mind – I have a dumb rage still at his not being with us always’ (Woolf 1978, 390-1).

Lytton Strachey’s fatal illness in December depressed Woolf still further. ‘Talk to L. last night about death: the stupidity; what he would feel if I died’ (Woolf 1982, 55). And ‘L. & I sobbed on Christmas Eve’ (Woolf 1982, 56). Dining at the Keyneses on Christmas Day the couples talked about death and immortality. ‘L. said death was stupid like a motor accident’ but Maynard Keynes wished that ‘there should be death arranged for couples simultaneously, like himself & Lydia, me & Leonard. But he

My own ghost met me 15

always supposed he would die before Lydia, & I, I said, before Leonard. Then Lydia and Leonard will marry. They will combine all these dogs’ (Woolf 1982, 56).

It was photography that the Woolfs turned to in the last days of the year. Photography offered the Woolfs a form of oppositional memorializing. Taking photographs of friends and mounting photographs into repetitive sequences in photo albums functions as a technology of memory, performing important memory work in constituting and consolidating friendships and familial identities (Hirsch 1997). When the Keyneses came that week to Monk’s House for tea, the Woolfs took photographs that embed the Christmas Day discussion about couples and immortality. The presence of death is an informing referent in the sequencing of the photographs. Reinforcing the solidity of their friends by means of repetition is a form of narrative acting against the

instabilities of death.

If, as Roland Barthes suggests, the photographic image records absence and presence simultaneously then to double up each photograph, as the Woolfs' so frequently do, doubles the that-has-been essence of each photograph as if to defy time (Barthes 1981). By photographing the Keyneses as quasi-formal images, partially replicating sitting positions with clear lighting and two frontal gazes the Woolfs give the Keyneses a very strong presence and exaggerated significance. The photographs are like studio photographs in which the Keyneses are advertising or performing themselves. The portrait presences are full and unmistakably self-confident preserved by the Woolfs from oblivion. The photographs are agents of memory framing and linking the Keyneses and exaggerating the quality of coupledness. John Maynard Keynes and Virginia Woolf did die earlier than their respective partners (Keynes in

My own ghost met me 16

1946 and Woolf in 1941) but, of course, Lydia and Leonard did not marry.

In the first month of 1932 Woolf was again thinking about death. Writing to Ottoline Morrell, Woolf describes the characters in The Waves as 'ghosts' and remarks that 'real people have ghosts' (Woolf 1979, 6). Lytton Strachey's death that month was 'like having the globe of the future perpetually smashed...a sense of something spent.gone: that is to me so intolerable...one knows now how irremediable' (Woolf 1982, 64-5). In a letter to Lytton's sister Pippa, Woolf places Lytton's death into a chain of deaths 'thinking of Lytton and Thoby and how Lytton came to me when Thoby died' and 'the loss of Lytton gets harder and harder to bear' (Woolf 1979, 12). Lytton's death made Woolf think about her own. In February she records in her diary 'what is the point of it – life...suddenly becomes thin, indifferent. Lytton is dead



(Woolf 1982, 74). Lytton's death, at the early age of 52, shocked Woolf and she mourned and grieved for her friend. Again it is photography that reconstitutes the continuity of life for Woolf. Thanking Ottoline Morrell for sending photographs of Woolf and Lytton, Woolf declares 'I am very glad to have the photographs of Lytton –how exactly it brings him back!...I am aghast at the futility of life' (Woolf 1979, 16). In a second letter to Morrell, Woolf rhapsodises 'how tremendously vivid Lytton becomes in them – one can hear him speak' (Woolf 1979, 18). Woolf was delighted when Dora Carrington sent photographs 'I loved those little pictures, darling Carrington. How it seizes upon one, the longing for Lytton, when one sees them' (Woolf 1978, 28). Carrington's photographs are snapshots rather than the more formal portraits taken by the Woolfs. Snapshots reproduce the banality of a moment but also its irremediably experiential quality.

My own ghost met

me 17

The Woolfs carefully placed Carrington's photographs into Monk's House Album 4, out of chronological sequence, making the memory of Lytton a vivid *momento mori*. The suicide of Carrington immediately after Lytton's death, meant that for Woolf 'she kept so much of Lytton that her death makes his loss more complete' (Woolf 1978, 34). Writing to Ethel Smyth a few weeks later Woolf felt 'hemmed in and depressed and haunted by poor Carrington' (Woolf 1979, 38). Woolf's diary entry describing her last visit to Carrington, the day before Carrington shot herself, is an unusually exhaustive account full of exact descriptions of the rooms and garden and each person's clothes, gestures and behaviour. Woolf's description, like a camera, controls appearances denying death by means of precise narrative as if to frame the event.

Returning from Greece, which the Woolfs visited very shortly after the double deaths, Woolf visits Katherine Furse, whose husband had died from tuberculosis, with great trepidation ‘how I dread the moment when the door opens...I’m almost sick with fright’ (Woolf 1979, 73). In August Goldie Dickinson dies and Woolf feels ‘in the midst of some vast operation...of being capable of dying...at night L. & I talk of death’ (Woolf 1982, 120). Woolf pleads with Roger Fry ‘how I hate my friends dying! Please live to be a thousand’ (Fry died only two years later) (Woolf 1979, 87). Fainting at Rodmell, Woolf thinks ‘a little of dying suddenly’ but is able to recover because ‘I am going in to be photographed’ (Woolf 1982, 121).

The photographs that the Woolfs took of each other that day are double portraits in which each body has great presence. The photographs focus on the upper body and head giving maximum attention to the faces. Both Virginia and Leonard stare directly

My own ghost met me 18

at the camera (a powerful gaze) and also off-frame as if in intelligent contemplation. The use of space gives each sitter a strong physicality like a double biography. But when another of Leonard’s photographs of Virginia is used as the frontispiece of Winifred Holtby’s study of Woolf, instead of the photograph by Lenare that Virginia preferred, Woolf feels ‘my privacy is invaded...ugliness revealed’ and she dreams of death (Woolf 1982, 124).

The dream of death occurs because the photograph has been torn from its context – the photo album – and therefore from Woolf’s meaning process. To prise the photograph from the context of the album is a violence, the death of the image’s meaning. It is as if the transposition of the photograph into a meaning system uncongenial to Woolf (Woolf disparaged Holtby’s book) unconsciously triggers traumatic dreams. In November, finishing her essay on Leslie Stephen for The Times

Woolf immediately suffers anxiety 'I lay in bed reasoning that I could not come smash. Death I defy you &. But it was a terrific effort' (Woolf 1982, 129).

The next year 1933, John Galsworthy dies 'that stark man lies dead', and so does Lady Cecil of whom Woolf writes to Ethel 'do you die as I do and lie in the grave and then rise and see people like ghosts? And all my friends are dead' (Woolf 1979, 164). Disassociating, Woolf is 'amused to be dead – one of those ghosts that people talk of respectfully: rather a dignified position: you can't speak ill of the dead' (Woolf 1979, 178). The portraits that the Woolfs took of Ethel carry mnemonic traces. Details such as the flower, chair and positions echo Woolf's favourite photograph taken by Vanessa at St. Ives in 1892, of Virginia together with her mother and father (Humm 2002). Again the Woolfs allow Ethel to dominate the space of the photograph in a

My own ghost met me 19

stylised series of positions. The room at Monk's House is a limited and personal geography giving Ethel a solid presence reinforced by the use of clear lighting, framing and repetition as in the Woolfs' other portraits.

Creating pictures, whether these are fictional or photographic, is Woolf's constant defence against the pain of death. On their subsequent Italian holiday, Woolf changes the place of her burial yet again to 'be buried, if bones can walk' at Monte Oliveto (Woolf 1979, 185). The Italian journey was also a journey into Woolf's past as she remembers the holiday with Violet Dickinson in 1904 immediately after Leslie Stephen's death (Lee 1996, 145). Staying in Lerici, Woolf sits 'by an open window, by a balcony, by the bay in which Shelley was drowned' and immediately fictionalises the scene in a visual frame 'describe the hills, the tall pink yellow white house' (Woolf 1979, 186). Returning through France and reading that 'Lady Cynthia Mosley is dead', Woolf displaces the event visually, 'picture the scene; wonder at

death' (Woolf 1982, 160). There was always the danger that fiction would flood into life. 'I have just killed Mrs P. (Woolf was writing The Pargiters) and found that 'these little scenes embroil one, just as in life' (Woolf 1982, 173). The Pargiters was the history of Woolf's family and included memories of her childhood and life in London. Woolf originally planned to group the years in The Pargiters in sequences that would omit the years of key deaths (1906 Thoby's death) and key photographs (the 1892 photograph).

At the Rothschilds' engagement party in October 1933, Woolf experienced a dread of death. 'Candles were lit, and I chose mine, a green one, and it was the first to die which means...I shall be the first to wear a winding sheet' (Woolf 1979, 241). But it

My own ghost met me 20

was the successive deaths of friends that Woolf found more traumatic. Walking through Leicester Square Woolf read of the 'Death of noted novelist' – Stella Benson who had 'sat on the terrace with me at Rodmell...how mournful the afternoon seems...here seems to be some sort of reproach to me in her death...why not my name on the posters?' (Woolf 1982, 192). Woolf placed Benson's photograph in Monk's House Album 3 in 1932. What is at stake in all of these observations of Woolf is that photographs and fictional scenes become object-cathexes of Woolf's instinctual turn to death. As Freud argues these object-cathexes are 'self-preservative' (Freud 1960, 97).

The year 1934 began with the death of Leonard's sister Clara, and George Duckworth's death, following Woolf's completion of the sexual molestation scene in The Pargiters, was accompanied by Woolf's 'usual incongruous shades of feeling' (Woolf 1982, 211). But most traumatic death of all was the unexpected death of Roger Fry in September making 'the substance go out of everything' (Woolf 1982,

242). Fry's death immediately reminds Woolf of her mother's death. 'I remember turning aside at mother's bed...she's pretending, I said: aged 13' (Woolf 1982, 242). At Fry's funeral in Golder's Green Crematorium Woolf 'laid my hand on' Desmond MacCarthy's shoulder '& said don't die yet...nor you either he said' (Woolf 1982, 243). Fry's funeral brought 'a fear of death' and Woolf imagined 'do you find that is one of the effects of a shock – that pictures come up and up and up, without bidding or much control? I could almost see Roger' (Woolf 1979, 334). Visualisations gave Woolf 'the exalted sense of being above time & death' (Woolf 1982, 248). Like her letters from the Acropolis, Woolf's letters about Fry's death replicate the emotional

My own ghost met me 21

tone she adopted when writing about her father's death in 1904 (Leaska 1998, 359).

Ann and Judith Stephen came to stay with the Woolfs in Rodmell that month and Woolf can immediately 'see this through Roger's eyes' (Woolf 1982, 244).

Photographing the Stephen sisters, the Woolfs make use of the same portraiture dynamic. Again there is an extreme close-up gaze, clear lighting and each sitter has a very strong presence. The photographs witness the stability of each sitter. They are highly intentional, carefully framed portraits in which the girls have an omniscient authority, engaging directly with the camera. The Woolfs displace the gap between themselves and sitters by a marked lack of foreground space. There is no caesura between photographer and subject. The photographs create a sense of agency and corporeality in the context of Fry's recent death. Woolf's last diary entry for 1934 is a visual scene of death. 'One's own death – think of lying there alone, looking at it...And Roger dead' (Woolf 1982, 267).

It is relevant that Woolf's great aunt the Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, like Woolf, suffered from mood swings typified by bipolar personality

traits. In a fascinating account of Cameron's photographs and 'eccentricity', Kirsten Hoving argues that Cameron's photographs of women (but not of men) are of depressive women as if Cameron were constructing a 'kind of pre-Freudian typological approach to reflect despair' as a kind of vehicle for expressing her own states of mind (Hoving 2003, 53). But although Cameron shared Woolf's sometimes manic behaviours for example, for Cameron letter-writing may also have been a form of manic activity with letters compounded, like Woolf's, by numerous ampersands, Woolf's women are not depressive female images. According to Hoving, Cameron

My own ghost met me 22

photographs women sitters without perspective or three-dimensional space as if the external world is dark and blank. The Woolfs' photographs, on the other hand, place women sitters close to the camera in strong poses and full light including sharp details of background objects.

The affective relations between the Woolfs' photographs, visual memories and multiple experiences of death (whether real or imagined) in the early 1930s are an important feature of Virginia Woolf's life and work. The Woolfs use photographs as a route into these non depictable relations, creating images of friends almost as a mnemonic device, a scaffolding against the void. Family photographs are semiotic and personal objects in that they contain signifiers representing absent and present emotions and personal in that subjects share a conversational past. At a general level, the Woolfs' photographs engage in a process of *deixis* that psychologists, active in photo-analysis, describe as a 'conversational remembering with photographs' to increase self awareness (Edwards and Middleton 1988, 9). For example, photo-analysts who analyse conversations between mothers and children triggered by photographs, find mediated memories. Mothers reconstructed the past in photographic

*deixis* in order to explain the past to themselves and to their children. Photographs can act as mediators of access to their past and also as a protective scaffolding for the creation of a new present. These visual reminiscences free neurotics from depression. The Woolfs' photographs are ambient props against the social and personal instabilities of the thirties. Woolf progressively displaces her instinctual fears of death and fears of the symbolic father by what Freud termed the 'aesthetic ideal', the continual creation of visual scenes (Freud 1960, 214). The early 1930s were years of

My own ghost met me 23

instability and death but 1934 ended with a positive view. 'My Lodge is demolished; the new house in process of building in the orchard. There will be open doors in front; & a view right over to Caburn' and Woolf looked forward to 'a show of Man Ray photographs in Bedford Sq...Man Ray says will I come & be photographed – on Tuesday 3.30' for what has become the iconic Woolf photograph (Woolf 1982, 263-4).

All photographs described are in Humm 2006, below

### **References**

Barthes, Roland. Camera Lucida. trans. R. Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

Blomfield, R. Modernism. London: Macmillan, 1934.

Edwards, Derek and Middleton, David. "Conversational Remembering and Family Relationships: How Children Learn to Remember." Journal of Social and Personal Relationships.5 (1988): 3-25.

Freud, Sigmund. New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis and Other Works; The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Freud Vol. XX11.

Trans. J. Strachey with A. Freud. London: Hogarth Press, 1960.

Harvey, Benjamin. "Charles and John, or, On Letting Go and Holding On." Virginia

Woolf Bulletin. 17 (September 2004) 17-26.

Hirsch, Marianne. Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory.

Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997.

Hogben, Carol. "Design Introduction." The Thirties. Eds. J. Hawkins and M. Hollis.

London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979, 63-78.

Hoving, Kirsten A. "'Flashing Thro' the Gloom': Julia Margaret Cameron's

My own ghost met me 24

'Eccentricity'." History of Photography. 27: 1 (Spring 2003) 45-59.

Humm, Maggie. Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa

Bell, Photography and Cinema. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002.

----- . Snapshots of Bloomsbury: the Private Lives of Virginia Woolf and

Vanessa Bell. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, London: Tate, 2006.

Kurzweil, Edith and Phillips, William (Eds.). Literature and Psychoanalysis. New

York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Leaska, Mitchell. Granite and Rainbow: The Hidden Life of Virginia Woolf. London:

Picador, 1998.

Lee, Hermione. Virginia Woolf. London: Chatto and Windus, 1996.

Mendes, Val. "Carpets and Furnishing Textiles." The Thirties. Eds. J. Hawkins and

M. Hollis. London: Arts Council of Great Britain (1979): 87-92.

Rowbotham, Sheila. A Century of Women. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997.

Said, Edward. Freud and the Non-European. London: Verso, 2003.

Silver, Brenda R. Virginia Woolf Icon. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Spalding, Frances. Vanessa Bell. London: Macmillan, 1983.

The Studio. Vol. 103 (January-June 1932): 63-4.

Woolf, Virginia. Walter Sickert: A Conversation. London: Hogarth Press, 1934.



----- . Contemporary Writers. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich,  
1965.

----- . The Letters of Virginia Woolf Vol. 1 1888-1912. Eds. N. Nicolson  
and J. Trautmann. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975.

----- . The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. 4 1931-35. Ed. A. Olivier Bell.

My own ghost met me 25

San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1982

----- . The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. 5. 1936-41. Ed. A. Olivier Bell  
San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

----- . The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume IV 1929-31. Eds. N. Nicolson  
and J. Trautmann. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978.

----- . The Letters of Virginia Woolf Volume V 1932-5. Eds. N. Nicolson  
and J. Trautmann. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979.