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Beauty and Woolf

Writing to her lover Vita Sackville-West in 1925, Virginia Woolf facetiously refused to define beauty other than by associating beauty with prose, ‘I write prose; you poetry. Now poetry being the simpler, cruder, more elementary of the two...can’t carry beauty as prose can. Very little goes to its head. You will say, define beauty – But no: I am going to sleep’ (Woolf, 1994: 200) (1). But discussions about beauty had kept Virginia and her sister Vanessa in a ‘twitter of excitement’, when young women, at their Thursday evening soirees in Gordon Square (Woolf, 1976:167). ‘Vanessa... incautiously used the word “beauty”. At that, one of the young men would lift his head slowly and say, “it depends what you mean by beauty.” At once all our ears were pricked. It was as if the bull had at last been turned into the ring’ (Woolf, 1976:167).

Woolf’s writings contain differing but specific ideas about gender and beauty, including distinctions between natural and creative beauty, the ethics of beauty, the relationship of writing and beauty, the beauty of places, as well as accounts of women judged by Woolf to be beautiful and a misapprehension that she herself lacked beauty. Woolf’s overriding opinion throughout her life was that ‘beauty is not the note of our great men’ (Woolf, 1976B: 579). What interests me in Woolf’s understandings of beauty is how often Woolf triangulates mothers, beauty and the body, particularly in her autobiographies and the novels *To the Lighthouse* and *The Voyage Out*. This strategy could be read as a partial feminist reproof to a conventional binary in which beauty is the passive feminine to be contemplated by a male observer, as some of Woolf’s contemporaries suggested (Woolf, 1927 and 1968).

Unlike Woolf, I shall argue, contemporary feminist theory has inadequately addressed the notion of a non specular beauty as an alternative to that tradition. Feminist theory has focussed, in the main and for too long, on theories of the body in

a legitimate reaction to a masculine coupling of beauty with a female or idealized maternal body and the sublime with male creativity. Although a resisting approach to aesthetic objectification is always necessary, there have been few productive feminist accounts of female or maternal beauty. Woolf's writings about beauty, mothers and the body, if read through the lens of post-Lacanian theory – particularly the work of Luce Irigaray and Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, offer a moving and positive feminist account of women and beauty. Rather than representing the beauty of mothers only visually for other characters and the reader, Woolf gives the maternal body somatic depth and visceral beauty.

In addressing the issue of beauty and gender in relation to the body, one is immediately struck by how, in the past decades, there has been little positive feminist attention to beauty, nor the development of appropriate critical methodologies for analysing representations of beauty (2). Instead feminists have devoted much of their attention to the body (3). Lynne Pearce accurately notes that this overwhelming attention to the body coincides with the 'rise of post-structuralism' (Pearce 2004, 126). A more long-term view might add that feminists are determined to separate beauty from the body and underplay the utility of a feminist concept of beauty perhaps for the very good reason that masculine philosophies and art histories have for so long negatively conflated 'woman' and 'beauty' in a gendered binary in which an active masculine sublime is opposed to a passive feminine beauty (Battersby, 1989).

French feminist philosophers have deconstructed these gendered binaries structuring Western philosophies and the traditional coupling of superior, active epithets with masculinity and inferior passive epithets with femininity (Cixous, 1975). In such binaries all paradigms of women's 'beauty' can be only analogical proof of

man's interpretative skills. For example, depictions of beauty, from Wordsworth to Freud, associate creativity and culture with a masculine domain and the female body with matter. Certainly many masculine philosophies exemplify Cixous's critique. From Edmund Burke's opposition of the smallness and purity of beauty to the wild sublime, Immanuel Kant's blending of beauty and sentiment and G. W. F. Hegel's merging of beauty, truth and goodness, Western conceptualisations of beauty are dominantly gendered, not least by Umberto Eco himself in his recent collection of their work (Eco, 2004). Cixous and other feminists have made devastating critiques of this Western misogyny and its notion of a masculine contemplation of a dependent feminised beauty (Jardine, 1985).

But an alternative feminist theory of beauty has not emerged. From Laura Mulvey's germinal essay, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' onwards, deconstructions of the 'beauties' of visual pleasure (because such pleasures involve a masculine objectifying gaze) have meant that questions about the relations between women's beauty, the body and pleasure, and writers' and artists' take on these, become almost impossible questions (Mulvey, 1975). The feminine cannot be beautiful but is either a 'masquerade' or a 'performance' and beauty is in most cases certainly suspect because 'beautiful women' are socially constructed emblems of patriarchal society (Modeleski, 1991, Butler, 1990). In *Undoing Gender* Judith Butler explains that because it is 'through the body that gender and sexuality become expressed' and 'inscribed by cultural norms' that 'the most important task is to think through the debates on the body' (Butler 2004, 20 and 202). While new technologies of the body, whether surgical, medicinal, or physiological may create, as Butler hopes, 'new forms of gender', this decoupling of beauty and women's bodies focuses

too much attention to the body at the expense of attempts to define beauty's affect and provenance.

A glance at one decade of feminist theory endorses the salience of this generalisation. In 1994 a major collection of *New Feminist Criticism* indexes beauty only twice under 'as a commodity' and 'old (er) women', whereas the body has over forty references and is granted agency 'as a battleground' and 'performative' (Frueh, Langer, Raven, 1994). A decade later in 2003 *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader* similarly still contains only one reference to beauty and over one hundred page references to the body (Jones, 2003). There are probably many reasons for this occlusion but together with Butler's argument, another major cause might be the predominance of psychoanalytic theory within feminist thinking and analyses since the 1970s. Psychoanalysis theorizes identity in relation to sexuality and necessarily therefore focuses on the body.

Feminist cultural critics analysing constructions of femininity and consumption provide a partial corrective to this neglect. Arguments for the possibility of a female flaneuse enjoying the scopic pleasures of gazing at beautiful products and beautiful women in modernity, whether in department stores or cinemas, productively describe women's spaces in urban modernities (Friedberg, 1993, Parsons, 2000). But such analyses are far from celebratory nor adequately address an aesthetics of modernity that could involve tropes of beauty. Nor is the work of manufacturing women's beauty through the acquisition of material products particularly progressive.

Feminist unease with debates about beauty curtails searches for the rules of beauty's production, consideration of its affects and how we might apprehend and analyse these in texts. What is occluded in the sophisticated scholarship on the body is a working concept of female beauty and the body not in terms of what can or cannot be

symbolized - that is, represented in performances, sexualities and constructions - but as an aesthetic inscription of embodiment *in* the feminine.

Luce Irigaray's theories of beauty

The question remains: How might feminists engage with ideas about beauty and women's bodies and the maternal more productively rather than deconstructing, however brilliantly, masculine fetishizations of beauty? Luce Irigaray's essay 'How Can We Create Our Beauty?' is a helpful starting point (Irigaray, 1993). As a psychoanalyst herself, Irigaray focuses on sexual identities but does not allow sexual difference a grounding purpose. She does, however, wish to 'help women exteriorize in their works of art the beauty, and the forms of beauty, of which they are capable' (Irigaray, 1993: 107). Irigaray's writings on women's bodies have received a great deal of attention and much debate over recent years. Rosi Braidotti's sophisticated analysis in *Patterns of Discourse* notes the ambiguity of Irigaray's position at 'the very heart of masculine logic' and the possible dangers of Irigaray's tactic of mimesis, but Braidotti concludes that Irigaray's defence of 'mother-daughter love' and this 'new metaphorical system' is a 'significant step' (Braidotti, 1991: 262-3). In other words, rather than being 'utopian', as Toril Moi mistakenly asserts, Irigaray's exploration of mother-daughter love can provide an ontological way of establishing an aesthetic of corporeal existence (Moi, 1987: 6).

In this brief essay on beauty Irigaray argues that women's bodies can have a 'morpho-logic'. 'We can and must accomplish it as a woman's and a mother's contribution to not only the natural but also the spiritual life of the world' evident in 'the beauty of our works' [unspecified] as 'medium' (Irigaray, 1993: 111). Irigaray calls for beautiful representations that will refuse to separate 'mothers from daughters' in 'color' that 'expresses our sexuate nature' and 'spiritual values'

(Irigaray, 1993: 109 and 111). Irigaray's rather condensed argument here appears almost metaphysical. Irigaray does argue that the two sexes can be represented by different colours. This claim follows her earlier figuration of red blood linked to matrilineal descent and white blood as patrilineal in *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Irigaray 1974: 214). In some ways Irigaray's claim matches a similar approach to colour by Vanessa Bell the artist and Woolf's sister. Bell certainly utilised specific colours in a gendered way, for example, associating blue with the maternal as in Renaissance paintings. Writing retrospectively to Roger Fry about colour and modernism, Bell claimed, 'it seems to me there was a great deal of excitement about colour then – 7 or 10 years ago...I suppose it was the result of trying first to change everything into colour' (Bell 1993: 272). In 'On the Maternal Order' Irigaray goes on to specifically attack any 'blindness to the processes of pregnancy' and suggests that the mother-child symbiosis is a 'gift of generosity, abundance and plenitude' (Irigaray, 1993B: 42-3).

Woolf's ideas of beauty

Virginia Woolf's discussions of beauty and her encapsulation of these ideas within tropes of mothering and the body offer an interesting example of some of Irigaray's themes. Certainly Woolf, too, felt beauty as colour. 'As a writer, I feel the beauty, which is almost entirely colour, very subtle, very changeable, running over my pen' (Woolf, 1980: 243-4). And Woolf's understandings of her own symbiotic relationship with her dead mother Julia Stephen are located in what we might term the semiotic in Kristeva's terminology (Kristeva 1980). 'How did I first become conscious of what was always there – her astonishing beauty? Perhaps I never became conscious of it' (Woolf, 1976C: 82). After Julia's early death at forty-nine when Woolf was thirteen, Woolf felt that 'she has always haunted me, partly, I suppose, her beauty' (Woolf,

1994:383). Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* and *The Voyage Out* are imbued with a beautiful, melancholic lost mother and both novels figure an epistemology of the bodily intertextualities of mothers and daughters, as if Woolf is working through the traces of the mother as borderlinked other. (4)

Woolf also felt that her Sussex and London homes carried particular and somatic connotations of beauty. Woolf's descriptions of Rodmell's landscape and London streets illuminate but also create beauty as a living study. 'Rodmell...how the beauty brimmed over me & steeped my nerves till they quivered, as I have seen a water plant quiver' (Woolf, 1981: 301). In the countryside 'beauty abounding & superabounding so that one almost resents it, not being able of catching it all' (Woolf, 1981: 311). In London 'the Bloomsbury Squares always intoxicate me with their beauty' (Woolf, 1994: 91). And the loved place of her childhood home in St. Ives, Cornwall still intoxicates Woolf as an adult: 'as for the beauty of this place, it surpasses every other season' (Woolf, 1975: 415). The perception of beauty that Woolf experiences when returning to Greece in the Thirties is engendered precisely because Greece triggers memories of St. Ives as well as of Sapphism. Greece has 'agile, athletic beauty...and I could love Greece, as an old woman, so I think, as I once loved Cornwall' (Woolf, 1983: 97). 'If ever I had a turn towards Sapphism it would be revived by the carts of young peasant women' (Woolf, 1994B: 57). If Woolf's descriptions of natural beauty appear to utilise a Romantic vocabulary, this does not constrain Woolf's more complex exploration of beauty in modernity.

In cinema, that quintessentially modern form, on which Woolf wrote the first British avant-garde essay, we 'open the whole of our mind wide to beauty' (Woolf, 1994C: 349). Like her sister Vanessa Bell's paintings, Woolf's characterisation of the beautiful novel of the future, in 'The Narrow Bridge of Art', is resolutely modernist.

‘It will give, as poetry does, the outline rather than the detail’ (Woolf, 1958: 18).

Rhoda in *The Waves* might also be describing Bell’s paintings ‘I find faces rid of features, robed in beauty’ (Woolf, 1959: 107).

Because it lacks a specific project, Woolf’s ethics of beauty - ‘beauty is only two fingers breadth from goodness’ - again might be misread as a Hegelian vision of spiritualized nature but Woolf’s ethics is crucially embodied. Woolf also never divorces beauty from materiality and class, joking, for example, that ‘five hundred a year is considerably more valuable than beauty or rank’, but is also pleased that ‘new chairs. And comfort everywhere’ means ‘some beginnings of beauty’ at Rodmell (Woolf, 1979: 34 and 1982: 311). In ‘The Mark on the Wall’ Woolf, as a true modernist, opposes ‘our respect for beauty’ to ‘superstitions’ from the past (Woolf, 1989B: 87). And, ‘in the modern mind beauty is accompanied not by its shadow but by its opposite’ (Woolf 1958B: 16). Woolf’s perception that ‘beauty is part ugliness’ is what makes her a modern writer, even if she shares Walter Pater’s notion that such perceptions are likely to be epiphanic visions.

Beauty is the most common epithet Woolf applies to those writers she most admires. In the first volume of Woolf’s collected essays it is ‘the beauty, the complexity of her scenes’ that illuminates Jane Austen; Woolf thinks that the ‘beauty’ of George Eliot is in Eliot’s first publications; while Thomas Hardy has passages of ‘outstanding beauty and force...in every book he wrote’ (Woolf, 1967:150, 200, 258). But in her own writing Woolf felt that if she tried to ‘get a little more beauty into this one’ [*Night and Day*] she risked spoiling the ‘originality’ (Woolf, 1976B: 398). Later Woolf happily ‘burst out in ecstasy at your [Ethel Smyth] defence of me as a very ugly writer...How could I write beautifully when I am always trying to say something

that has not been said...So I relinquish beauty, and leave it as a legacy to the next generation' (Woolf, 1994D: 151).

In *Three Guineas* Woolf advances her most feminist expression of beauty. The women-only Outsiders Society dispenses with masculine 'pageantry not from any puritanical dislike of beauty' but 'to increase private beauty; the beauty of spring, summer, autumn' and 'every barrow in Oxford Street' (Woolf, 1938: 207). And the most beautiful women are, to Woolf, her half-sister Stella Duckworth, her sister Vanessa and her mother Julia Stephen. Stella Duckworth, Woolf's surrogate 'mother' after the death of Julia, 'developed her own beauty' and with Julia 'their beauty was the expression of them' (Woolf, 1976D: 42). After Stella's sudden early death in pregnancy, Vanessa took on Stella's role as a 'mother' to Woolf and 'had much of the beauty' [of Stella] and 'was also, on her secretive side, sensitive to all beauty of colour and form' (Woolf, 1976D: 53-4). In Woolf's first collection of letters she extols Vanessa's beauty, Vanessa's name 'contains all the beauty of the sky' (Woolf, 1975: 282). Vanessa's beauty is always corporeal to Woolf. 'She looks best undressed. We talk a great deal about beauty and Art' (Woolf, 1975: 291). Woolf is emotionally forthcoming when writing directly to Vanessa: 'How I adore you! How astonishingly beautiful you are! No one will ever take the winds of March with beauty [a reference to *The Winter's Tale*] as you do' (Woolf, 1980:166). Woolf repeats the phrase to Vanessa's daughter Angelica: 'Thank God you haven't an elder sister to take the winds of March with beauty, as I had, and so force you to be a modest violet' (Woolf, 1980: 178). From her birth, Angelica was also, to Woolf, 'a whirlwind of beauty' (Woolf 1994D: 309).

About her own appearance Woolf is often self-derogatory. As Anne Olivier Bell, the wife of Woolf's nephew Quentin Bell and editor of Woolf's diaries, suggested

when unveiling Woolf's statue in Tavistock Square in 2004: 'I was at first reluctant to collude in the public exposure of her image, knowing how she disliked being stared at' (Bell, 2004: 4). Forced by her husband Leonard Woolf to eat more food, because Leonard thought that a weight increase would obviate Woolf's depressions, at nine and a half stone Woolf felt that she had parted 'with youth and beauty' (Woolf, 1976B: 592). By 1925, 'for my own part, a little beauty is what I crave; anybody can be good; wits I have myself' (Woolf, 1994: 167). The next year in 1926, Woolf felt that 'my own lack of beauty depresses me' and after being 'bingled' (shingled) by the hairdresser Mr Cizec, she was certain that 'I am short haired for life. Having no longer, I think, any claims to beauty' (Woolf, 1982: 64 and 127).

The maternal and *To the Lighthouse*

Woolf thought her mother to be 'not only the most beautiful of women as her portraits [by Burne-Jones and other artists] will tell you, but also one of the most distinct', and that Julia created unthinkingly 'a certain silence round her by her very beauty' (Woolf, 1976D: 32). Woolf characterises Julia's beauty as explicitly maternal. Julia's maternal image is foregrounded in Woolf's autobiographical writing, 'A Sketch of the Past', with the mother as semiotic origin in a matrix of sounds, smells and colours of pure jouissance in the often quoted opening passage. 'Red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother's dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus and I was on her lap. I therefore saw the flowers she was wearing very close...It is of hearing the waves breaking...it is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and...feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive' (Woolf, 1976C: 64-5). The description exactly matches a photograph of Julia with Virginia on her lap aged three that is Plate 36F in Woolf's father's photo album (Humm, 2006).

Woolf has to re-create her mother's beauty again and again in writing about the body because, as Irigaray argues, 'the materiality of the relationship [of the daughter] to this maternal body having disappeared, language remains an inexhaustible "womb" for the use that's made of her' (Irigaray, 1993B: 43). This tense relationship between a body of writing and her mother's nurturing, maternal and beautiful body, is frequently negotiated by Woolf through the symbolization of a maternal presence; for example, both in the figure of Helen in *The Voyage Out* as well as in the gender fluidities of *Orlando* (Woolf, 1928). The major metaleptic figure in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is the figuration of Woolf's memories of her mother, Julia Stephen, as Mrs. Ramsay and Woolf adopts an intense mode of sensual symbolization to capture the maternal presence and absence. In this novel Woolf's need to depict the maternal body as beautiful shapes her choice of scenes, particularly the famous dinner of *Boeuf en Daube*, as well as the texture and conclusion of the novel, when Lily completes her beautiful modernist painting of Mrs. Ramsay.

The beauty of Mrs. Ramsay powerfully affects every character in the novel. Her guest Mr. Bankes sees Mrs. Ramsay's beauty as being like a Madonna: 'mother and child...in this case the mother was famous for her beauty' (Woolf, 1927: 85). The narrator endorses this perception: 'she bore about with her, she could not help knowing it, the torch of her beauty' (Woolf, 1927: 68). Lily pictures Mrs. Ramsay always 'sitting up there with all her beauty opened again in her' (Woolf, 1927: 157). Mr. Ramsay agrees 'she was astonishingly beautiful. Her beauty seemed to him, if that were possible, to increase' (Woolf, 1927: 187). Woolf's deictic construction of the mother and the primal loss of the mother in *To the Lighthouse* ends on a hallucinatory moment of Lily's unity with Mrs. Ramsay in art, 'with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second...I have had my vision' (Woolf, 1927:

320). Sight becomes vision when Lily's mourning for the lost mother becomes a new creation. It is as if Woolf aims to extend sensation beyond what the visual sense seems literally to behold. As Claire Colebrook acutely notes, 'we can now read the style of the entire novel in terms of a refusal of the position of subject and object' (Colebrook 2004: 303).

In the famous, and very long, *Boeuf en Daube* scene in *To the Lighthouse*, where Mrs. Ramsay harmoniously brings together all the characters around a dinner of what was Woolf's friend Roger Fry's favourite dish, Woolf represents her as a maternal archetype. 'The whole of the effort of merging and flowing and creating rested on her [against]... the sterility of men' (Woolf, 1927: 146). The body of the stew is a referent for Mrs. Ramsay's maternal body. 'A soft mass...with its shiny walls...a French recipe of my grandmother's said Mrs. Ramsay' (Woolf, 1927: 156). The beauty and sensuality of the moment is in 'female time', as the womb like quality of the stew pot is matched in its maternal quality by Mrs. Ramsay's intuitive ability to decode the emotional affects of each character's body language. This 'maternal quality' has been characterised by Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger as the 'matrixial' (Ettinger 1995).

Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger

The contemporary post-Lacanian psychoanalyst (5) and artist Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger similarly focuses on aesthetic reconstructions of intra-uterine maternal affects in what she terms the 'matrixial gaze' the title of her major work (Ettinger, 1995). Ettinger's theoretical project is to develop ways of understanding a feminine subjectivity and space within the symbolic, by re-creating the pre-birth psychic structuring we all experience. In her contribution to *Inside the Visible*, the 1990s most significant exhibition of women's art, Ettinger argues that 'The with-in-visible

matrixial screen is a web into which subjectivity is woven in different ways in art – by trauma, by phantasy, by desire. It is in between us, it is a veil spread between joint traumas, fractions of phantasy from out into the inside and aspects of painting in-to the outside. On the screen's interlaced threshold, a feminine gaze diffracts' (Ettinger, 1994: 109). Elsewhere, Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger lays bare the psychic mediations which lie between the maternal Imaginary and external objects, and which are visible in beautiful artistic representations (Humm, 2002). 'The emotional and mental conductivity of an artwork may reflect on far away matrixial unconscious events' (Ettinger, 1994B: 59). The intrauterine event-encounter, in other words, can be re-traced in art and writing.

What post-Lacanian feminism offers is a more positive way of understanding both the imaginary and the maternal - for example, in the notion of a trans-subjective figuration. Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger's theorisation of the imaginary recreates a lost maternal object and lost matrixial relationship in painterly, poetic and photographic images. This does seem to offer a way of conceptualising beauty and the maternal that makes available a female Imaginary in the symbolic and avoids the false division between beauty and the body in much feminist writing.

Griselda Pollock argues that the maternal haunts our aesthetic subjectivities, not as in the manner of Lacan's mastering gaze, but as 'a borderline awareness' (Pollock, 1994: 78). As Griselda Pollock suggests, in her many rich accounts of Ettinger's work, 'strategies of representation in the visual arts, from painting to photography and film, have been institutionalised to lure our gaze and suture our desire to that which the culture wishes to fix us'. Pollock argues that 'Ettinger's method permits a glimpse of another kind of vanishing point a matrixial gaze' which is distinct from the usual 'confrontation between practice and popular cultures' (Pollock 1994, 78). The

characteristics of such a method resemble Woolf's modernist experiments: a use of fragmentary images, a refusal sometimes of nominative sentences, for example, a fluidity of narrator, a confusion of characters with objects, interruptions of linearity, traces of the Imaginary and intricately worked surfaces.

In the Lacanian symbolic 'woman' is identified only as the unknown, the *objet a* of archaic sensuality lost, as it were, when we enter the symbolic, but in Ettinger's art, Pollock argues, the *objet a* 'may in art achieve a borderline visibility' (Pollock, 1994: 79). In this way the matrixial is not placed in opposition to, or anterior to, the phallic but opens up the symbolic field to a feminine dimension, to an idea of beauty that is not the Western masculine objectified and passive contemplation of feminine beauty. Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger argues that, in opposition, art can 'create differences in the transmission' and posit new symbols in traces of subjectivity, descriptions which 'indicate and elaborate traces of an-other Real' (Ettinger, 1992: 196). As Pollock argues, 'this theorisation has many facets and radically realigns the way we think about the process of making and seeing painting [beauty], at the same time it offers a radical contribution to the theorisation of femininity, not as the other of masculinity' (Pollock, 1995: 131).

Woolf also delighted in frequently describing the textual birth of her novels and non-fiction in terms of matrixial creativity. Writing *Three Guineas* in March 1937 was, for Woolf, a hypotyposis of childbirth. 'The mildest childbirth I ever had...no book ever slid from me so secretly & smoothly' (Woolf, 1984: 148-9). As Ettinger suggests, maternal affects and sensations can be elevated into significations of great theoretical and beautiful significance. What is particularly helpful for studies of Woolf is that reading Woolf through a post-Lacanian lens allows for a richer understanding of how her depictions of female bodies are intertwined with a

redemptive vision of beauty and the maternal. Such a reading refuses the many negative critiques of Woolf that focus only on the body rather than on this more complex nexus.

Woolf's representations of the body and her understandings of her own body have often been a negative focus of Bloomsbury, feminist and modernist criticism. Initially, Woolf was described by biographer nephew Quentin Bell, her friend the novelist E. M. Forster and her husband Leonard Woolf, as 'outside' her body, as ethereal and unworldly (Bell, 1996). In these readings Woolf's body is a sign of alterity, couched in tropes of neglect and absence. Subsequent discussions of Woolf as an anorexic, as dis-eased in her body and as possibly abused by her half brothers Gerald and George Duckworth, have yielded significant insights into Woolf's writings and symbolizations (De Salvo, 1989; Glenny, 1999). There are now agreed assumptions among some feminist critics about the ways in which Woolf's apparent struggles with her weight, eating and dressing, possibly initiated by her psychosomatic refusal of her brothers' abuse, animate Woolf's discursive representations as well as her life narrative. But it is important to note that disordered eating is not an eating disorder. This critical consensus locks Woolf too firmly *into* a body. Woolf is praised as if she is a proto-feminist for either refusing cultural constructions of the feminine body or for revealing a so-called somatic victimhood. In these readings the body represents dissolution. For example, Ros Peers argues of *The Voyage Out* that Rachel 'has no sense of boundaries' and displays the classic characteristics of anorexia: 'she has no coherent sense of herself' (Peers, 2001: 14).

The Voyage Out

In *The Voyage Out*, just as in *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf realises what Teresa Brennan calls, in a summative account of affect, the beautiful 'living logic of the

mother's flesh' as a 'shield against the negative affects' (Brennan, 2004: 135). Woolf makes the beautiful maternal figure imaginatively present and absent, both alive and dead in her novel, and her characterisation of the beautiful morphology of the maternal body, in her letters, diaries and novels, is intense. In *The Voyage Out* the absence of a mother and Rachel Vinrace's need to register the older Helen as a maternal figure is very marked. Helen is perceived as an intensely beautiful maternal figure, not only by Rachel but also by other characters. 'Her beauty, now that she was flushed and animated, was more expansive than usual, and both the ladies felt the same desire to touch her' (Woolf, 1968: 159). Helen also possesses a beautiful voice. 'The broken sentences had an extraordinary beauty and detachment in Hewet's ears' (Woolf, 1968: 187). Again, 'the extraordinary and mournful beauty of her attitude struck Terence' (Woolf, 1968: 351). But it is the semiotic beauty of Helen and Rachel's relationship that dominates the novel. It is Helen who cares for Rachel in Rachel's severe illness and subsequent death. 'Helen was here and Helen was there all day long' (Woolf, 1968: 334). Clive Bell, Woolf's brother-in-law, thought that Woolf had 'invented some new, undream't of form' (Bell, 1996: 210).

In contemporary critical vocabulary, that 'new form' might represent Rachel's submission to the power of the mother and her experience of jouissance: 'Helen's form stooping to raise her in bed appears of gigantic size...her body became a drift of melting snow, above which her knees rose in huge peaked mountains of bare bone' (Woolf, 1968: 334). In this 'psychotic' speech, full of metaphor and metonymy, Rachel is un-assimilable to standard medical treatment. It is as if Helen haunts Rachel in hallucinations. Vanessa Curtis argues that Rachel's character has attributes of Woolf's half-sister Stella Duckworth (for example, both die at three o'clock) that suggest further familial resonances (Curtis, 2001). But it is also of crucial significance

for understanding Woolf's characterisation of the maternal figure that the empathy between mother and other was the speciality of Woolf's mother Julia Stephen. Critics have explored the possible impact of Woolf's mother's *lack* of physical contact with her daughter, having to care, as Julia did, for eight children, her own mother and husband, and other relatives as well as the well-being of large numbers of local people in St. Ives the Stephen's holiday home (DeSalvo, 1989). This much commented on representation of Julia as the *absent* mother explains Woolf's turn to hyotyposis and other metaphorical devices in her fiction. What has been occluded is an examination of Julia's own writing, writing which Woolf knew well. Julia Stephen's *Notes from Sick Rooms*, privately printed in 1883, the year after Woolf's birth, presages not only the physical descriptions in *The Voyage Out* but also Woolf's techniques of empathetic narrators and sometimes exaggerated sensibilities (Stephen 1980). Indeed Woolf's first biographer Winifred Holtby noted the similarities of 'peculiar humour, consisting of a mixture of irony and extravagance' in both Stephen's pamphlet and Woolf's writing (Holtby, 1978: 13).

Julia Stephen was not a public writer, publishing only *Notes from Sick Rooms*, an essay for her husband's *Dictionary of National Biography* about her great aunt Julia Margaret Cameron the famous Victorian photographer, and a few other essays, as well as signing Mrs. Humphrey Ward's notorious *Appeal Against Female Suffrage*, published in *The Nineteenth Century* in 1889. Ward's lengthy attack on feminism, and Julia's support of it, is usually cited as an example of Julia's Victorian ideology with which Woolf had to battle. But what is true of the *Appeal* and fascinating about *Notes from Sick Rooms* is the characterisation of the maternal in both. The special knowledge of women and the 'habitual affective disposition and quickness to feel' is

one of the 'peculiar excellencies of women' particularly in 'the caring of the sick', which gives women 'larger and more extended powers' (Ward, 2004: 2).

Equally in *Notes from Sick Rooms* Stephen validates women's special knowledge of nursing as a beautiful, affective experience. The sick room is a room of women's own since both patient and nurse are female and the good nurse will, Stephen suggests, have an almost empathetic, affective relation with the patient as if being able to feel and visualize from her perspective, exactly like the descriptions of Helen and Rachel in *The Voyage Out*. 'In doing the invalid's hair, the nurse...shall hold the hair near the roots with one hand...lightly touch' and be aware that 'few things are more aggravating' for the patient than to 'have a long hair brought slowly over the face each time the brush comes around' (Stephen, 1980: 7). This dyadic union of female patient and mothering nurse is marked by the way in which the nurse carries the other's negative affects, allowing affects, as Brennan suggests, 'to pass from the state of sensory registration to a state of cognitive or intelligent reflection' (Brennan, 2004: 120). A nurse's hand must always have 'the palm hollowed inwards a little' to curve to the patient's 'hand and cheek' (Stephen, 1980: 10).

In *The Voyage Out*, Helen's similar introjected identifications enable Helen to instantly understand Rachel's distress. 'When Helen came in an hour or two later, suddenly stopped her cheerful words, looked startled for a second and then unnaturally calm, the fact that she [Rachel] was ill was put beyond a doubt' (Woolf, 1968: 333). There are great similarities between Julia's descriptions of the mothering nurse and Woolf's continual turn to maternal presences in Woolf's use of metaleptic metaphors. Woolf's knowledge was a matrilineal inheritance. Julia's own mother Maria Jackson, Woolf's grandmother, was the wife of a physician and in their letters Maria and Julia deploy very accurate medical terminology (Adolph 2004). In 1883

Maria wrote to Julia about a servant on leave ‘that her sister is going into Hosp[ita]l to undergo an operation that the tumour is in the womb so that I suppose it is ovarian’ (Adolph, 2004: 12). Grandmother, mother and daughter share an investment in discursive representations of the beautiful, nurturing, maternal body.

Conclusion

Virginia Woolf’s evocation of the maternal body, and the association Woolf makes between beauty and the maternal, offer one literary model of conceptualising beauty without incurring objectifications. The implication here drawn from Woolf’s writings is that beauty is not necessarily ‘owned’ by the symbolic nor that representations are only possible through the symbolic, but that these representations can occur in a more fluid way. The ongoing affect of Woolf’s maternal images emerge, not as fixed tableaux, but as a shared *jouissance*. Woolf’s focus on the beauty of the maternal attests to the possibility of a matrixial modernism in modernity.

Some feminists see modernism as involving a spurning of beauty. Wendy Steiner, in *Venus in Exile*, argues that modernism aimed to destroy beauty and that ‘the perennial rewards of aesthetic experience – pleasure, insight, empathy – were largely withheld, and its generous aim, beauty, was abandoned’ (Steiner 2000: xv). Steiner goes on to claim that modernism equated truth with ugliness and replaced ‘the beauty of woman with the beauty of form’ (Steiner 2000: 44). *Venus in Exile* takes a resisting reader approach to modernism in a trajectory through to postmodernism, including an unconnected chapter about the 1997 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction of which Steiner was one of the judges. Yet Steiner omits consideration of key modernist events including the Armory Show and the two Post-Impressionist exhibitions or Bloomsbury modernism, nor does she define an aesthetic of beauty except to cite the paintings of Pierre Bonnard.

In a more scholarly book, *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness*, Lesley Higgins shares Steiner's revisionist approach. Higgins constructs a reductive notion of modernism in order to attack the modernist canon of Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis and T. S. Eliot among other writers. Although *The Modernist Cult of Ugliness* contains fascinating research on public debates about beauty for example, the Whistler/Ruskin trial, Higgins' version of modernism is as narrow as Steiner's. Also ignoring art exhibitions, Higgins argues a well-worn theme that the 'emancipation of male modernists was made possible, initially, by textual and sometimes personal discriminatory practices' (Higgins 2002: 3). Certainly Pound advocated 'ugliness' in his 1913 essay 'the Serious Artist' but exploring, yet again, Pound or Eliot's 'gendered identity crises' does not advance the generous broadening of the parameters of modernism by Rita Felski and critics of new modernism (Pound 1954; Higgins 2002: 108; Felski 1995).

Equating modernism's violent transgression of previous cultural norms with ugliness is problematic – for example, it ignores modernism's attention to classic Greek culture. Virginia Woolf's modernism complicates this version of a masculinized aesthetic (Goldman 2004). In her writing Woolf creates a specifically feminine yet sometimes violent ethics of beauty, lodged in the maternal, and free from specularisation and objectifications. Woolf's depiction of the affects of beauty and the maternal, like Vanessa Bell's depiction of the beautiful maternal phantasmagoric space of *Studdland Beach*, connects a modernist aesthetic with new ways of life, for example, validating a domestic ethics. But Woolf's maternal modernism never denies the values of progressive enlightenment. As Mrs. Thornbury (one of Woolf's typically wise old mothers) hopes, at the conclusion of *The Voyage Out*, she will not die

without seeing ‘the changes, the improvements, the inventions – and beauty’ of the future (373).

I am grateful to the editors for their acute comments on an earlier version of this essay.

Notes

1. Of course, Woolf was aware of modernist poetry's cultural prestige. On the publication of *The Oxford Book of Modern Verse* edited by W. B. Yeats, Woolf noted in her diary 'Yeats' anthology out. Am I jealous? No: but depressed to feel I'm not a poet' (Woolf, 1984: 35).

2. For example, apart from Rosemary Betterton's sophisticated work on maternal embodiments and beauty (Betterton, 1996 and 2004), many feminists, like Germaine Greer, argue that aesthetic concepts of women's beauty are inflected by the masculinity of aesthetic philosophy (Greer 2000). Other work in this field largely focuses on the economy of beauty (Willett, 2000); on racialized beauty (Gilman 1998, Rosenthal 2004); on beauty and social constructions (Brand 2000, Psomiades 1997); on the twentieth century's troubled relationship with beauty (Steiner 2000) and body building and eroticism (Freuh 2001). Although the British Association of Art Historians did address beauty in the Renaissance at its 1996 conference (Ames-Lewis and Rogers, 1998), since then beauty has figured only as one of twenty-three panels at the 2000 conference 'Body and Soul' and here only in terms of representations of physical cultures.

3. The major feminist critiques of the body include Gallop (1988) Bordo (1993) Tasker (1993) Braidotti (1994) Grosz (1994) Gatens (1996) Shildrick (1997) Prosser (1998) Weiss (1999) and Ahmed and Stacey (2000). Both Scarry (1985) and Prosser (1998) offer crucial, systematic critiques of the body. A special issue of *Differences*. 15:3 Fall 2004 was 'The Question of Embodiment'.

4. Woolf's writings about beauty do not contain one single message. For example, some of Woolf's comments about beauty elsewhere in her work could be read as somewhat Kantian because Woolf appears to share Kant's belief, in his *Critique of*

Judgement that 'natural beauty is a *beautiful* thing; artistic beauty is a *beautiful representation* of a thing' (Kant, 2004:133), as well as sharing the Romantics' perceptions of beauty in their blending of passion and sentiment. In her short story 'The Introduction', Woolf does suggest that pure beauty exists 'without any care whatever what human beings thought' (Woolf, 1989: 186).

5. Post-Lacanian feminism is an umbrella term applied to the work of a number of contemporary psychoanalytic thinkers including the French feminist Luce Irigaray as well as Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger. The premise of post-Lacanian feminism is that Lacan creates in his writing an impossible binary between phallic language and that maternal body, and that feminism needs to go beyond (post) Lacan (Campbell, 2000). As Jan Campbell suggests in *Arguing with the Phallus*, 'the symbolisation of the daughter's imaginary in terms of the mother remains an impossibility' for Lacan, whose concept of an imaginary is based 'entirely on a masculine and phallic morphology' (Campbell, 2000: 110).

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