

Virginia Woolf, the Baby and the Bathwater

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Burning One's Own Smoke

Virginia Woolf pledged herself early in her writing career to a kind of fiction that would measure the movements and responses of minds, rather than bodies, of subjective rather than objective truth. In this fiction, history is filtered through the inner lives of characters, the First World War being famously reduced to a parenthesis in *To the Lighthouse*. *The Waves* represents the summit of this achievement. Even though *The Years* is the most historical and outward-facing of Woolf's later writings, which plants its foot firmly in datable public events like the deaths of the Irish political leader Charles Stuart Parnell and of Edward VII and the First World War, the calendar in use is still clearly that of the heart rather than the calendar of public history. What matters, in the 1891 section, for instance, is not so much the death of Parnell in itself, so much as the convergences which it allows in the lives of those upon whom that death impinges. If *The Years* is a dynastic novel, or family saga, it is one filtered through the intimate and fugitive thoughts, feelings and perceptions of a group of characters, rather than a series of outward occurrences or actions. Like so much of Woolf's fiction, it is a novel of perceptions rather than actions, feelings rather than decisions, conditions rather than consequences.

Woolf began writing this novel in the Autumn of 1932. She had conceived it as part of 'a sudden influx of ideas' while she was in her bath, considering what she might say in a speech to the London and National Society for Women's Service that she was due to give a few days later. As she soaked, she conceived 'an entire new book - a sequel to a Room of Ones Own - about the sexual life of women: to be called Professions for Women perhaps' (Woolf 1982, 6-7). Woolf was due to speak about the urgent need for women to be able to follow different kinds of profession, but it is not all that easy to understand how a title such as the one she projects could name a book about 'the sexual life of women'. Nevertheless, Woolf noted later in the margin of her diary 'This is Here & Now' I think', *Here and Now* being one of the dozen or so titles she tried out for the novel that was eventually published as *The Years*. To begin with, and appropriately for such a bathroom work, it flowed as from a tap. The press and gush of its writing seem initially to have had something to do with the surprising discovery of the potential of writing about exterior rather than interior things. Just before Christmas in 1932, Woolf wrote in her diary

I shall write a poets book next. This one, however, releases such a torrent of fact as I did not know I had in me...Of course this is external - but theres a good deal of gold - more than I'd thought - in externality. (Woolf 1982, 133)

Woolf's ambitious and, in the end, unrealisable scheme was to write a 'poet's book' about art, mind and feeling and an 'external' book about history and politics simultaneously, by alternating passages describing the fictional history of the Pargiter family over several generations with passages of political analysis. It was, Woolf suggested to herself four months later, and with 50,000 words already written, to be 'facts, as well as the vision...The Waves going on simultaneously with Night & Day' (Woolf 1982, 151-2). Like so many other Woolf novels, *The Years* seems to be asking itself the question: what kind of thing is a novel? What kind of thing might it be? Woolf urged herself to be 'bold and adventurous' in her writing of it. In her search for 'immense breadth & immense intensity', she promised herself a bulging and unabashedly various book:

It should include satire, comedy, poetry, narrative, & what form is to hold them all together? Should I bring in a play, letters, poems? I think I begin to grasp the whole. And its to end with the press of daily normal life continuing. And there are to be millions of ideas but no preaching - history, politics, feminism, art, literature - in short a summing up of all I know, feel, laugh at, despise, like, admire, hate & so on. (Woolf 1982, 152)

In the end, Woolf would only be able to see this project through by dividing this summa up into a novel and a political work: *The Years* and the polemical denunciation of militarist patriarchy, *Three Guineas*, which followed it. It is as though it were necessary to sluice away a large proportion of the anger and disgust which its material provoked before her novel could be satisfactorily completed. If the draining of this anger and disgust was a way of preserving her novel from it, it was also a way of preserving them intact - keeping both the baby and the bathwater. Once she had finished *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, Woolf was able to represent them to herself as in some sense the one work that she had conceived in her Archimedean bath: but in fact they were neither wholly divisible, nor wholly entire; neither simply one, nor discernibly two.

There is a sense in which *The Years* is not an inner or subjective novel at all, or is so only in the sense that *Ulysses* - that most materialistic novel of consciousness, which is so crammed with actuality - is also a subjective novel. For the willingness to relax or vary the inward focus allows Woolf here to concentrate her attention on a large range of worldly objects. The novel is suffused by the intimate life of what Gaston Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* calls 'subject-objects'; objects which are set off from human life and consciousness, and yet in their very separateness enter into and are compacted with consciousness. The book appears to be a dynastic novel, of a traditional type, a novel of an unfolding of a family through several generations, and bearing comparison with Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*. Realising the shape that the novel was taking, Woolf moved away from the title *The Pargiters*, which the book bore in her diaries for a long time, to distinguish it from the family saga novels of Hugh Walpole and John Galsworthy. As in Lawrence's writing, what seems to matter most of all are not the characters and their interrelations, nor questions of pedigree and provenance, but rather the often enigmatical objects and substances that connect the characters and constitute their shared lives. Throughout *The Years*, Woolf gives us passages of what might be called 'elemental reverie', moments and passages in which the characters' thoughts and perceptions are arrested by, cling around, breed with objects and substances, which cut into the

forward movement of the narrative, folding it over on itself. The very painterliness of the novel, full as its descriptions are of effects of light and shade, line, form and, especially, colour, has the effect of making visibility a tangible thing, making it seem always like the manipulation and movements of elementary substances. Picturing, in this novel is always in communication with the tactile handling of objects and forms.

In its way, Woolf's writing in *The Years* is as saturated with objects as that of the materialist writers to whom she so famously objected early in her career. Much of the subsequent difficulty she experienced with the book would come from the fact that she had forced herself to enter so far in the writing of it into the world and manner of what she thought of as male fiction, dominated as she thought it was either by dead objects, properties and commodities, or as in the case of what she called 'the Aldous novel' or propaganda novel - of which in February 1935 she confessed she had a 'horror' (Woolf 1982, 281) - clogged by 'sticky' ideas. In *The Waves*, mind had suffused and transfigured the material world that was its element, making that material over into itself. But, in *The Years*, the defining subject-objects refuse to be transformed into this kind of shimmering intimacy: coins, kettles, bags, mirrors, chairs, cars, telephones, newspapers, food, and showerbaths remain themselves, obstinately unmutated. It is this determination not to permit the sublimation of objects into subjective processes that seems to have given Woolf such difficulty for the period of almost five years that she expended on the novel.

Having begun in 1933 to wonder about what she could do to stop the novel ballooning out into baggy shapelessness, Woolf also came to feel increasingly the strain of trying to alternate and integrate in it different kinds of life, the upper and the lower, in both a social and a spiritual sense (basements and staircases feature prominently, perhaps partly registering the influence of the images of purgatorial climbing and descent in Dante's *Purgatorio* which Woolf was reading at the time), the inner and the outer, the artistic and the economic. The middle years of the 1930s were anxious ones for the Woolfs, who were drawn more and more into the struggle of liberal left intellectuals to find a way of resisting the rise of fascism while maintaining their long-standing commitment to anti-militarism. It may have been Woolf's sense that the rising tide of violence and ugliness in Europe was not simply to be made over into or redeemed by fiction, or not without violent travesty, that made it so difficult for her either to abandon or complete *The Years*. The difficult and alien political commitments which kept her from the book ended up as an alienness within it that has been detected by many readers. Sometimes, as in this comment from October 1935 following her attendance with Leonard at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton, her pained complaints about the political responsibilities that hold her back from the writing of *The Years* offer involuntarily apt commentary on the internal dividedness of the novel itself: 'I am so thrown out my stride that I cant hitch on to The Years again. Why? The immersion in all that energy & all that striving for something that is quite oblivious of me; making me feel that I am oblivious of it' (Woolf 1982, 345).

The story of the writing of the novel, like Eleanor's own story, is that of a quest for its own shape, a bodily tegument which would both emerge spontaneously from within it, and yet also naturally enclose and sustain it. In earlier novels, Woolf had looked to the rhythm of the wave to hold disparate things together without cramping or violence. In *The Years*, she seems to attempt to do the same thing with the image of the flame. Gaston Bachelard refers in his *Psychoanalysis of Fire* to what he calls the

experience of 'igneous time', by which he means the sensation of time expiring in step with the consumption of a candle, as opposed to the modern experience of time as a regular, unceasing flow. Woolf tries out a different kind of igneous time in this novel, in what we could call the rhythm of inflammability. Throughout the novel, time is focussed through attempts to light fires. The obscurity and obstructedness of the girls' lives in the Pargiter house in 1880 is signalled by the kettle that stubbornly refuses to boil, despite all the efforts to widen the flame beneath it. Travelling through the city in 1891, the year of the death of the Irish Parliamentary leader Charles Stewart Parnell, Eleanor Pargiter reads a letter from her brother Martin in India, describing a perilous adventure, in which, lost in the jungle with only two matches, he succeeds against the odds in lighting the fire that saves his life. Such heroic blazings are not so easily available at home. The smoke from Eugénie Pargiter's bonfire sits oppressively on this whole chapter, which concludes with the baffled patriarch Abel Pargiter reflecting 'One must burn one's own smoke'. Fire is a symbol - sometimes rather too emphatically announced - of the possibility of bursting beyond restrictions, of life expanding beyond social forms.

A flame danced on top of the coal, a nimble and irrelevant flame. It was the sort of flame they used to make when they were children, by throwing salt on the fire. She struck again and a shower of gold-eyed sparks went volleying up the chimney.

The flaring up of fire seems late in the novel to be the promise of being able to 'live adventurously and wholly, not like cripples in a cave'. As she watches her cousin Maggie striking the wood burning on the fire, sending a shower of sparks flying up the chimney, Sara thinks 'We shall be free, we shall be free'.

So the novel joins its rhythm to that of a catching fire and a going out, a flaring and an expiration. It is these which constitute the substance of the years. The title refers, not to the slow and regular calendrical sequence of years, but to the particular years which are picked out by or flare up into the novel; 1880, 1891, 1908, 1910, 1911, 1913, 1914, 1917, 1936. The pattern of intervals between these years goes 11, 17, 2, 1, 2, 1, 3 19; there is a long stretching followed by bunching, followed again by stretching, forming a kind of pulse, or perhaps the wave-form into which so much seemed to fall for Woolf. And yet the fire image, and the attempt to instance a kind of novelistic fire-time to match the wave-form of *To The Lighthouse* and *The Waves* itself never achieves full inclusiveness. Rather, it is one of a series of rhythmical potentials, each of which seems to solicit the novel as a whole, attempting to draw the novel into its rhythm. Unlike Woolf's other work, and in the teeth of its own aspiration to generate from within an inclusive shape of some kind, *The Years* never generates an absolute or definitive image for itself.

Flies and Fleas

Forming this self-image was like forming a body for the novel. In October 1935, Woolf wrote in her diary of the need to form a kind of corporeal volume out of the different layers and surfaces of her novel.

I have discovered that there must be contrast: one strata, [sic] or layer cant be developed intensively, as I did I expect in *The Waves*, without harm to the others. Thus a kind of form is, I hope, imposing itself,

corresponding to the dimensions of the human being: one should be able to feel a wall made out of all the influences; & this should in the last chapter close round them at the party so that you feel that while they go on individually it has completed itself' (Woolf 1982, 347)

Nine months later, in the summer of 1936, she was still struggling to find some way to 'envelop the whole in a medium' (Woolf 1885, V, 25). She transfers some of this need for a containing shape to the character of Eleanor, who, in the Present Day portion of the novel, wonders if we do not aim to 'give pain, give pleasure an outer body, and by increasing the surface diminish them'. The emphasis on the need for the novel to grow a kind of outside or skin is palpable in it. In fact, as was usual with Woolf, its writing produced some rather alarming bodily symptoms and stimulated reflections on the relations between the brain and the body. In January 1933, these reflections led Woolf to think directly of a skin condition being suffered by her husband Leonard.

Meanwhile L.'s hired stock has given him some form of itch. He picks what he thinks black insects off his neck - I can imagine nothing more terrible than to have insects under ones skin - I should see them parading in squads.

Two days later, back in London, they took medical advice from the dermatologist Henry MacCormack:

we began London briskly with Leonard's lice - his incurable and disgusting skin disease. We went to a Wimpole Street specialist...finally the dr. said L. had never been bitten at all. And so, as the day wore on, the incurable disease was cured. (Woolf 1982, 143-4)

Woolf did not find it easy to sympathise with disease and bodily suffering - she couldn't help finding Duncan Grant's piles comic and ignominious (Woolf 1982, 228-9). Her horror at Leonard's condition is a recoil from something she calls 'incurable and disgusting', and seems to associate with maleness, animality and militarism. And yet, her very horror mimics the condition. It is her skin that crawls, at the thought of Leonard's crawling skin, or even the thought of his belief in his crawling skin. This will only seem ungenerous or neurotic if we forget that partners in a marriage must acquaint themselves with and learn to tolerate repulsion as well as with desire for the bodies of their intimate familiars. Here, Woolf's repulsion seems to bring about an intensified incorporation of the disease: where Leonard picks off what he thinks are black insects, Virginia imagines them 'parading' under her skin. Horror, the condition in which the skin bristles, arms and armours itself against a threat, is here an aggressive rejection of aggressiveness. Her novel's refusal to settle into or grow a satisfactory tegument shares this structure, in which recoil and disgust at the body is paradoxically indistinguishable from a sharing of bodies and body space. This entomological fix returns in some of the ways in which Woolf writes about the difficulty of preserving a space in which to write her novel in the face of continuing social irritations: 'I am using my faculties again. & all the flies and fleas are forgotten', she wrote in November 1934 (Woolf 1982, 261).

More than other of her novels, *The Years* circles round the problem of ugliness. Horror breeds in this book, a horror at dinginess, deformity and contamination. The

lives of the Pargiters are driven by a kind of élanelan, in their desire for life, love and beauty, but also tainted by concealment and oppression. The opening section of the novel focuses on the narrowness and ugliness of their tongue-tied, locked-in, indecisive lives. It has a stifled atmosphere oddly reminiscent of the early stories in Joyce's *Dubliners*: the dying mother recalling the dying priest in 'The Sisters', Rose's early evening adventure to Lamleys store resembling the young boy's trip to the disappointing bazaar in 'Araby', her encounter resembling the 'queer old josser' met with in 'An Encounter'. There is a certain similarity of manner between the two books, too. Like Joyce, Woolf seems to have tried to develop a bitten-back, pinched style to render the unsatisfactoriness of the lives she is rendering, a style that maintains distance, immunity, distinctness. But there are moments when the disgust that erupts in her reaction to Leonard's seemingly psychosomatic skin condition comes - literally - to the surface in her novel. On her way to Lamley's in the thickening dusk, Rose sees a man loom out towards her in the flickering light of a gas-lamp.

'The enemy!' Rose cried to herself. 'The enemy! Bang!' she cried, pulling the trigger of her pistol and looking him full in the face as she passed him. It was a horrid face: white, peeled, pock-marked; he leered at her. He put out his arm as if to stop her. He almost caught her.

As Rose returns, the man is even more threatening: 'he sucked his lips in and out. He made a mewling noise. But he did not stretch his hands out at her; they were unbuttoning his clothes.'

The pock-marks suggest disease, and, conventionally, syphilis in particular. Readers of the novel have seen the masturbating man as the eruption into shocking visibility of all the implied corruption of the world of the Pargiters. It is a specifically male kind of corruption, associated with the militarism which was a source of so much anger and disgust in Woolf, and which she was eventually to siphon off into the denunciation of native forms of patriarchal fascism in *Three Guineas*. It is notable, however, that it is Rose who is the instinctive militant here, firing her imaginary gun into the disgusting face even before we are shown it.

Details from this description connect up with others through the novel, creating a recurrent symphony of skin-phobia. The skin of the masturbating man recurs in the seller of violets, seen by Rose's older brother Martin in 1914 later in the novel, whose nose has been eaten away by some, presumably sexual disease. There are connections between this and the eczema shared both by the dog owned by Colonel Pargiter's mistress Mira and by the Pargiters' own family dog. The skin, which should mark out and sustain the separateness and entirety of individual lives, becomes the medium of an involuntary mingling of lives, a passing across of guilt from one skin to another. The difficulty and anxiety aroused by the desire to bring things into contact alternating with the desire to keep them cleanly distinct is often manifested in references to epidermal surfaces and volumes in this novel, in which the skin is the bearer and scene of anxieties of skinlessness. At the beginning of the '1891' section, rottenness, stagnancy and military menace are signified by an image of a skin that has given way: 'There hung the yellow pears on the orchard wall, lifting the leaves over them, they were so swollen. But the wasps had got at them - the skin was broken. With her hand on the fruit she paused. Pop, pop, pop sounded in the distant woods. Someone was shooting'. Seeing the smudgy face of a European dictator -

perhaps Mussolini - Eleanor reacts with the same disgusted violence as Rose: ‘ “Damned – ” Eleanor shot out suddenly, “bully!” She tore the paper across with one sweep of her hand and flung it on the floor. Peggy was shocked. A little shiver ran over her skin’. This is not the only time that a newspaper functions in this novel as a degraded, formless skin, which arouses disgust and horror. Feeling separated by her fatigue from the others at the party in the last section of the novel, Peggy feels ‘plated, coated over by some cold skin’. But if her skin has an inhuman, mineral impermeability, it is also fragile; stretched thin and taut, it leaves her vulnerable to the nausea articulated by the book she opens at random: ‘ “*La médiocrité de l’univers m’étonne et me révolte...la petitesse de toutes choses m’emplit de dégoût*” ’.

Like most other works of art produced before the Holocaust (and this one only just - by the time it appeared, the killing had already begun) *The Years* cannot let itself believe that life is not fundamentally and in essence beautiful, and that beauty might not itself be life. Everywhere the forces of negation and destruction are liable to be encountered, for example in the fierce and destructive March wind, which kills colour, and like the contagion brewed in London in Dickens’s *Bleak House*, spreads from the ugliness of the Isle of Dogs to contaminate Bond Street and the National Gallery. The wind makes things ugly by scattering things, blurring and smearing them together, depriving them of the colour and variegation that is their life:

Triumphing in its wantonness it emptied the streets; swept flesh before it; and coming smack against a dust cart standing outside the Army and Navy Stores, scattered along the pavement a litter of old envelopes; twists of hair; papers already blood smeared, yellow smeared, smudged with print and sent them scudding to plaster legs, lamp posts, pillar boxes, and fold themselves frantically against area railings.

Ugliness is the novel’s great enemy, the horror against which it sets its face. Indeed, the assault on ugliness is often a matter of comparing faces to facelessness itself, which is the proof of the ugly; filth is faceless, defacing; facelessness, namelessness, is the disfigurement of filth.

Mary Douglas has pointed out that dirt is matter out of place. For Woolf in *The Years*, displacement is a sign of life, while dirt appears to be the collapsing work of time. Dirt is the sign and effect of the disfigurements of time, the defacement of original differentiations, the falling together of what once possessed distinctness, and the potential that comes from difference. Martin stands in the sold-up house of his uncle Digby in Browne Street looking at a picture of his mother, which has become at once a work of art and, like the lifeless house in which it resides, dirty. The dirt has penetrated into the picture, making things muddily indistinct: ‘There used to be a flower in the grass, he thought, peering into a dark corner: but now there was nothing but dirty brown paint’. (That flower will reemerge later in the novel, when the picture is cleaned.) The difference between life, openness and appetite on the one hand and shame, ugliness and deathly concealment, is encoded in the minimal and unstable difference between two painterly modes in the novel’s descriptions; between the animating play of light and colour on the one hand, and the dingy blurring together of things on the other. It is the difference between different kinds of dotting, stippling, barring, freckling and chiaroscuro, of colours and forms laid visibly against or on top of each other, and staining, in which colours and forms penetrate and merge into one another. It is the difference between seeing and touching.

The novel is much preoccupied by stains and the sometimes desperately reparative work of washing. When the Colonel goes to visit his mistress Mira in a mean and dingy side-street in Westminster, his sexual transaction with her gets mixed up with the washing that he pays for. When he goes home, his daughter Milly has a stain of green on her pinafore where she has been playing. Milly's innocent stain is perhaps itself tinged by association with the deeper, more invisible stain of Abel Pargiter's deceit; the passage of the stain across from one part of Abel Pargiter's life to the other, from the Westminster basement to Abercorn Terrace, is itself a kind of stain or blurring together of what should be distinct and distinguishable.

Washing, we may surmise, delivers things into their difference, a difference signified by the intense and sharply differentiated effects of colour that abound in the novel. But this is a novel in which it appears that doing your own washing is unthinkable. This means that washing always involves transaction, the bodily joining of and passage between lives. The novel registers the distinction between classes in terms of those who have their washing done and those who do the washing, and the circulation of clothes between rich and poor provides a minor economy which comically shadows the movements between social worlds that the novel itself follows. The unstaining of clothes, the carrying away of dirt and the restoration of clarity and feature, always means the touching of different lives one upon another. Painting, the clarity and beauty of pictorial form, is sometimes directly associated with washing and cleanness: the 'cabbages, cherries and carnations' arrayed in Covent Garden look like 'some celestial laundry'. And washing is going on - or failing to get done - all the time in the novel. When Abel arrives at Mira's flat, the washing has just been delivered, and must be paid for (the fragility of Mira's social situation is suggested by the fact that she can only just pay for her washing with the assistance of Colonel Pargiter). Mrs. Pargeter frets about the cost of the laundry as she lies in her sickroom, the cold, damp cleanness of which is rendered by Woolf in terms that actually suggest staining and uncleanness; Eleanor Pargeter thinks of Mrs Levy, the poor Jewish woman whom she has been charitably visiting that day saying, in the best Dickensian tradition of the deferential, picturesque pauper ' "Them that's been good to me, them I remember...them that's ridden in their coaches when I was a poor widder woman scrubbing and mangling'. Because washing is so associated with staining, objects associated with washing seem tinged with anxiety; Rose, awaking from her nightmare of the masturbating man, with his indistinctly 'bubbling' face, imagines that it is his hand opening her door, casting an angle of light across her washstand and lighting up her jug and basin. (Throughout the novel, the lighting up of things will be a source of unease, as light thickens into a strangely contaminating tinging or touching.) It is hard not to be aware of an anxious disgust at the conditions of male sexuality in this chapter; as Eleanor strains to think what the hidden thing might be that is frightening her sister Rose, her slanted candle spills three drops of grease on to the floor. The strain of holding things together and apart, and the fear of a catastrophic spilling together is conveyed in her sensation of carrying an earthenware pitcher on her head, along with her delayed recognition of the dog's bowl at the bottom of the stairs, with its lump of sulphur (to protect against worms), and the sleeping dog's body over which she must step. Later the dog will try unsuccessfully to cross the threshold into Mrs Pargeter's sickroom. Animals - dogs, cats (the masturbator who 'mews'), sheep and worms are the signs and vehicles of male sexuality, which is associated in its turn with the generalised sense of death, disease, shame and disgust which haunt this chapter unnamably.

If washing is a kind of passage between social worlds, then dogs are a similar sort of go-between; the Pargiters' dog recognises in Eleanor 'one of those satisfactory women who give you a bone, but wash their hands afterwards'. The servant Crosby, who takes the ailing, smelly dog with her when she leaves Abercorn terrace, even seems to become a kind of dog: when Eleanor kisses her, she notices 'a curious dry quality of skin', which reminds us of the eczema which the Pargiters' dog shares with Mira's. When Abercorn Terrace is being sold, the ill-washed house-agent's clerk, who, Eleanor thinks disdainfully, is 'hauling himself up into the class above him...by means of long words' (the words in question being 'lavatory accommodation') inherits a doggy tinge, as he in his turn steps cautiously over the sleeping dog, and goes out, 'leaving yellow footprints in the thick white cushion of snow'. A moment later, Crosby will herself carry the dog, 'lest his feet should mark the stairs' over the threshold and into its new life in a rented room in Richmond.

The novel that aspires to burst into flames is also frequently doused by different kinds of water, and focussed around hydraulics as much as combustion. The rain in the opening chapter, which one would imagine might provide assurance of the rinsing away or loosening of stains is ambiguously perceived by Delia as an oily coagulation rather than a separation: 'One drop after another slid down the pane; they slid and they paused; one drop joined another drop and then they slid again'. A little later, Woolf uses the rain to effect a stylised transition between the world of London and the world of Oxford. Borrowing both from the fog at the beginning of *Bleak House* and the snow, general all over Ireland at the end of Joyce's 'The Dead', Woolf registers, first the 'fine rain' which is 'peppering the pavements and making them greasy' and then, more reassuringly, the rain imagined out at sea where 'a million points pricked the blue monster like an innumerable shower bath'. Indeed, in this, Woolf's tale of a tub, baths and bathing themselves recur with odd, bathetic frequency. The Woolfs actually had a new electrically-operated 'bath water engine' installed in February 1934 (Lee 1996, 649), and the aging Eleanor shows off a similar apparatus, her new automatically operated shower-bath, to her nephew North in the 'Present Day' section of the novel. ' "You press that knob," she had said, "and look - " Innumerable needles of water shot down.' Rainwater actually has a way of turning into bathwater in the novel. The gentle, generalising rain that falls indifferently and reconcilingly on the separated worlds of the novel is conducted 'chuckling and burbling' through gutters and drainpipes and out of the mouths of gargoyles, though this domestication is not altogether reassuring. We read that it also 'smeared the window where the Jew boy from Birmingham sat mugging up Greek with a wet towel round his head'. Later chapters will make connections between bathwater and a specific kind of racial disgust, which will spill into the novel uncontrollably. A hint of the somatic response which the idea of foreignness seems to evoke is contained in Milly's response in the 1880 chapter to the thought of Mrs Levy's daughter bedecked in the finery which, Eleanor assures us, Jews so love: ' "Jews?" said Milly. She seemed to consider the taste of the Jews: and then to dismiss it.'. This emetic response will recur twice more in the novel. In 1918, the decaying, but eternal Crosby, a relative perhaps of the heroic but grotesquely caricatured charwoman Mrs. McNab in *To The Lighthouse*, will be seen venturing out from her new house on to the greasy pavements, angry at having been asked to perform the lowly task of cleaning the bath (cleaning the bath is a perfectly contrived oxymoron in this novel in which washing seems so insistently associated with dirt):

‘Dirty brute, dirty brute,’ she repeated; her pale-blue eyes glared impotently. She saw once more the blob of spittle that the Count had left on the side of his bath - the Belgian who called himself a Count. ‘I’ve been used to work for gentlefolk, not for dirty foreigners like you,’ she told him as she hobbled.

In the most disturbing and difficult episode of the book, Sara and her cousin North hear the sound of a fellow-lodger in Sara’s building taking a bath and interrupting North’s recitation of a poem. The lodger is a Jew, in the tallow trade (perhaps we are meant to remember the dripping candle in Eleanor’s hand after Rose’s nightmare). His coughing, snorting and throat-clearing merges with the sound of the running water, clearly recalling the bubbling and gurgling of the rain in the Oxford drainpipes in 1880, when another Jew is glimpsed. Thinking of the Jew induces an hysterically phobic reaction in both Sara and North, who feel their bodies invaded:

‘The Jew having a bath,’ she said. ‘The Jew having a bath?’ he repeated. ‘And tomorrow there’ll be a line of grease round the bath,’ she said. ‘Damn the Jew!’ he exclaimed. The thought of a line of grease from a strange man’s body on the bath next door disgusted him.

North feels a ‘shiver’ and physical sickness at the thought of Abrahamson’s hairs. The misanthropic Sara then elaborates an account of going for a demeaning job in a newspaper office. (Newspapers, which feature conspicuously in *The Years*, are more than once associated with bathwater for Woolf. She wrote in April 1935 that listening to her friend Kingsley Martin talk was like ‘reading a living newspaper...He runs off my mind like a torrent of lukewarm water, but leaves it stained & tired’ (Woolf 1982, 305).) Sara’s fantasy turns the Jew into the cause and symbol of every kind of pettiness and ugliness and deception in modern life:

‘And there were people passing; the strutting; the tiptoeing; the pasty; the ferret-eyed; the bowler-hatted, servile innumerable army of workers. And I said, ‘Must I join your conspiracy? Stain the hand, the unstained hand,’ - he could see her hand gleam as she waved it in the half-light of the sitting-room, ‘ - and sign on, and serve a master; all because of a Jew in my bath, all because of a Jew?’ ‘

It is hard not to react to the disgust and violence so shamelessly, so cruelly, so skinlessly on show here with disgusted recoil of one’s own. It is no good for Hermione Lee to say that ‘Offensive though the moment is, it belongs to the novel’s aghast, disenchanted survey of ‘civilized’ life... It is not just “the Jew” who “stinks” ’ (Lee 1996, 680), since the use of the Jew to typify modern life (a mainstay of Nazi propaganda) is precisely what is most offensive and painful about the passage. Woolf was herself married to a Jew and shared his name (and bath). It is as though this intimacy allowed her to feel and articulate a kind of physical horror that might otherwise have been politely forestalled - and how one wishes that it had. There is a refuge perhaps only in the thought that it would have been as impossible for Woolf to have written this passage five years later as it is difficult to stomach reading it now.

Hand to Hand

Sara's disembodied hand, gleaming ghostly in the half-light and yet stained by the thought of contact with the Jew and the sordid modern world which he is thought to typify, connects with a series of images of hands and fingers which enact the play of the book's arguments about the possibilities of human connection. Writers and painters and composers all pay disproportionate attention to hands and fingers, because they are so intimately involved in the production of the work itself, especially in a period which saw the steady move away from the employment of the hand in the production of art. The knitting and grasping and clasping and fidgeting and fumbling and other postures of hand and fingers that occupy so much attention in *The Years* are ghostings of the hand that is writing them. Late in the novel, the aged Eleanor, whose perceptions have enclosed so much of what is seen and described in the novel, imagines trying to grasp the scene she sees in front of her and integrate it with other times:

She held her hands hollowed; she felt that she wanted to enclose the present moment; to make it stay; to fill it fuller and fuller, with the past, the present and the future, until it shone, whole, bright, deep with understanding.

The hand here is also a synecdochic version of that bodily form which Woolf was aiming to grow in *The Years*. But, throughout the novel, hands and fingers have also been the source and expression of awkward disconnection, or brutal clinging; Eleanor's hollowed hand seems like an answer to her father's mutilated hand, with its two missing fingers, as he fumbles at the neck of his mistress Mira, and then, just a little later, fumbles out a sixpence to reward his son Martin. In the imagination of the young Rose, who is fascinated by 'the shiny knobs of the mutilated fingers' of her father, this graceless fumbling for money connects with the man who is about to expose himself to her in the street, holding out his hands to her and then unbuttoning his clothes as she races past. It is answered by the 'white and wasted hand' of their dying mother, the grasping hand of old Mrs. Potter, 'knotted and grooved like the gnarled roots of a tree', as well as the young man from Balliol twisting his fingers of whom Kitty thinks as she lies in bed. The effort of writing and rewriting the novel subjected Woolf herself to manual strain: 'But why does my hand shake?', she asked herself in September 1933, 'Why can't I write clearly?' (Woolf 1982, 177). During the writing of the novel, Woolf also had a couple of sittings with a palm-reading psychiatrist, Charlotte Wolff, a German-Jewish refugee who had been taken up by the Huxleys. Hermione Lee suggests that this experience may lie behind the passage in which Peggy thinks about the lines which the past have written in the palm of her hand (Lee 1996, 667-8). Woolf thought of finishing the novel with Eleanor releasing some coppers around which her hand has been unconsciously clenched, a gesture of munificence which would be a loosening of the claw-like grasp of Abel Pargiter's mutilated hand which fixes perceptions in the opening section. Instead, the novel ends with Eleanor holding out her hands to Morris, in acceptance of the new day and the renewal of the ordinary, ongoing contingency of things that it will bring.

It would be too easy to suggest that, in this final gesture, which anticipates the lifting of the curtain on to the future which concludes Woolf's next, and final novel, *Between the Acts*, represents a final, redeeming reaching across boundaries, and the

promise of a dissolution of hatreds and overcoming of disgust. But I think this would be both an idealisation and a betrayal of this novel that in the end could not bring itself to deny the extremity of the ugliness it confronts, and the occasional ugliness of its own response to it. Woolf's own self-disgust at the writing of her novel communicates strangely with the various forms of disgustedness within it. She called the novel 'my vomit', and imagined it as a kind of cyst or carcinoma, 'a vast - what can I say - bony excrescence - bag of muscle' that had to be 'cut out of my brain' (Lee 1996, 669, Woolf 1984, 3). But her recoil seemed only to draw her in and drive her on. The reason that the novel was such a struggle to write was that it resisted the demands of form; more frightening than this for Woolf, it seemed to insist on the necessity of deformity. Woolf's problem was that, for all the laborious crafting of the novel, it insisted on taking its form from deformity itself, untransfigured. Woolf's disgusted recoil from the male world that is held so exorbitantly but unspeakably to blame for all the nameless pain of the world, remains incomplete, in the sense that she feels compelled to remain in this alien, oblivious world. The novel will not be able to find a way to smother or sublimate into art an ugliness and cruelty and stupidity that it will be forced to acknowledge as in part its own. It is a novel that goes further than any other in attempting to write out of the condition of deformity and ugliness, rather than to write them out of the picture, or clean them up into art. This is why *The Years*, the most successful of Woolf's works in her lifetime, is also the most lacerated, the most uneasy, the least concluded, the least her own, of all Woolf's works. Perhaps because of its very incapacity to get a grip on itself, it reaches further than anything she ever wrote.

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