

“this curious silent unrepresented life”: Representation and Lesbian Sexuality in Woolf’s *The Voyage Out*

Virginia Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out* features a character named Terence Hewet, a putative author whose aesthetic project is to write a novel called and about “Silence — the Things People don’t say.”¹ Terence outlines his interest in the lives of ordinary women and his distaste for the manner in which women are represented in patriarchal discourse. “Just consider” he explains to his soon to be (and soon to be doomed) fiancée Rachel:

its the beginning of the twentieth century, and until a few years ago no woman had ever come out by herself and said things at all. There it was going on in the background, for all those thousands of years, this curious silent unrepresented life. Of course we’re always writing about women; but it’s never come from women themselves ... I still don’t know in the least how they live or what they feel, or what they do precisely ... the lives of women of forty, of unmarried women, of working women ...

They won’t tell you. Either they’re afraid, or they’ve got a way of treating men. (217)

As several critics of *The Voyage Out* have noted Hewet’s comments offer a first glimpse of some of the issues which were to evolve into major preoccupations in Woolf’s work.² Indeed over a period of thirteen years Hewet’s voice develops until in *A Room of One’s Own* — or in the fashion of the maturing process of *Room’s* parallel text *Orlando* — it becomes that of a woman writer: “all the great women of fiction” we are told in *Room* “were, until Jane Austen’s day, not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex. And how small a part of women’s life is that.”³ The types of women who are referred to by Terence — older, single and working women — were to become important figures in Woolf’s writing, and *The Voyage Out* itself seems to illustrate Terence’s project.

Three women characters are of particular significance. Helen Ambrose, the wife of Rachel’s uncle, uses the holiday journey to South America on which the novel concentrates to remedy the limiting effects of Rachel’s insular,

conservative education by exposing her to a range of intellectual and social experiences. In the final step in Rachel's re-education Helen hopes to find her a sympathetic husband with liberal views about women and about marriage. This seemingly progressive but in fact highly conventional solution is characteristic of the response in some contemporary male authored texts to the challenge posed to patriarchy by the "new woman" question. In novels such as H.G. Wells's *Ann Veronica or Marriage*, or E.M. Forster's *A Room with a View*,⁴ the discovery of the man who "understands" deflects a rebellious, or talented, but confused young heroine from more challenging feminist possibilities.

Such possibilities are suggested in a minor character in *The Voyage Out*, Miss Allan, a middle aged spinster schoolteacher who during the course of the novel writes a history of English literature. Working in a cramped environment with limited money and support, Miss Allan casts an ironic shadow upon the privileges of Terence and the other male intellectuals in the text, in particular Rachel's uncle Ridley who spends most of the story locked in his study translating Pindar, protected from other concerns by his wife Helen. Like Mrs Ramsay in *To The Lighthouse*, Helen is very much a servant to her husband and his intellectual tasks, and the limitations of the marriage are sufficient to etch a question mark into Helen's attempt to shape Rachel in her own image. Poised between Helen's world of marriage and Miss Allan's world of spinsterhood is Rachel herself, a gifted amateur pianist who is the main object of Terence's interest, both literary and romantic. In the end Rachel does remain single but only by virtue of her unexpected death shortly after she and Terence have become engaged. Nominally the cause of this death is a mysterious tropical disease, but it seems a physical expression of the narrative's (dis)ease — that is to say its unease — with the closure represented by progressive marriage.

Rachel's predicament illustrates the need for independence which is a central tenet of *A Room of One's Own*: "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (6). The principal speaker in *A Room of One's Own* — not Woolf of course, but the fictional construction Mary Beton — is a character whose development can be traced as much from Rachel — a young woman constrained from self-fulfilment by patriarchal demands — as from the author's spokesman role occupied by Terence. As a single, writing, working woman Mary would attract Terence's interest as a potential subject for fiction. Now obviously if Mary were to be represented through the filter of Terence's curiosity it would cut across the criticism of the limitations of patriarchal representations of women — criticism which it is her function to embody and articulate — and would engage Terence in the practice of representing women, a practice to which he is opposed. But this highly ironic imprisoning representation of the woman's view by a man who wishes to hear women speak freely for themselves is precisely what does, at times, happen in *The Voyage Out*.

Juxtaposition with a later more assured, more decidedly feminist Woolf text helps to illustrate the extent to which *The Voyage Out* is composed of a knot of technical negotiations and ideological contradictions which Woolf's later fiction would seek to resolve.

In trying to explain Terence's function in the text Rachel Blau Du Plessis suggests that Woolf uses the character of the sympathetic male writer to provide what Du Plessis terms "permission and cover"⁵ for the expression of anti-patriarchal sentiments. Viewed in this light the powerful vein of irony running through the text is a by-product of a narrative strategy, one indeed which performs the supplementary task of silently commenting upon precisely those difficulties upon which Terence dwells: here is a woman — Woolf — coming out and saying things, but in order to do so she needs to employ a way of treating men.

But is the irony all coincidental? Virginia Blain suggests for instance that the narrative is notable for its "gender conscious ironies" which work to remind us of "the sex-war as a kind of grim backcloth to the romantic love story."⁶ Terence is frequently revealed as an incipient patriarch, his will to examine the condition of women being itself an example of the illness he is in the act of diagnosing. A further exchange between Terence and Rachel brings these two strands of the narrative into collision:

"It's the man's view that's represented you see. Think of a railway train: fifteen carriages for men who want to smoke. Doesn't it make your blood boil? If I were a woman I'd blow someone's brains out. Don't you laugh at us a great deal? Don't you think it's all great humbug? You, I mean — how does it all strike you?"

His determination to know, while it gave meaning to their talk, hampered her; he seemed to press further and further, and made it appear so important. (217)

Here the sympathetic male liberal can express the woman's socially and culturally forbidden resentment of patriarchy by fantasising the sort of violent response which, at the time of writing, would have been extraordinarily difficult for a woman character, in particular speaking in the text of a woman writer. Terence's analogy for the stifling injustice of male dominance of narrative point of view foreshadows Woolf's subsequent uses of the railway train as an analytical metaphor in her critiques of narrative form.⁷ In the most famous example of this, the essay "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown", the railway carriage provides the figurative vehicle for Woolf's attack upon the methods of the Edwardian realists — H.G. Wells, Arnold Bennett and Galsworthy. Woolf finds herself sharing a railway compartment with a mysterious little old lady named Mrs Brown and man named Smith. Fragments of conversation and barely perceptible gestures lead her to infer that Smith — who has a menacing habit of playing with a pocket knife — is bullying the old lady and probably blackmailing her. Woolf then extrapolates from this story to show how Smith's bully tactics are like those of the social realist novelists who would represent Mrs Brown through an intrusive exploration of her life, through emphasis upon facts and, in so far as her situation constitutes a social problem, through polemics. Woolf by contrast would seek to render the emotional and psychological texture of the woman's inner life.⁸

By championing women's rights on the railways, Terence approximates the position of Woolf, but at the same time he comes close to the aggressive

intrusiveness of Smith and Bennett. The description of Rachel's response is notable for its concentrated use of language which suggests phallic intrusion; his "How does it strike you?" being transformed into "a determination to know", a need to "press further and further". The tension accelerates when Rachel, at his prompting, begins to describe her everyday life with her spinster Aunts and her frequently absent, yet dominating, businessman father:

... "I was happy and I was miserable. You've no conception what it's like — to be a young woman." She looked straight at him. "There are terrors and agonies," she said, keeping her eye on him as if to detect the slightest hint of laughter.

"I can believe it," he said. He returned her look with perfect sincerity.

"Women one sees in the streets," she said.

"Prostitutes?"

"Men kissing one."

"You were never told?"

She shook her head.

"And then," she began and stopped. Here came the great space of life into which no one had penetrated. All that she had been saying about her father and her aunts and walks in Richmond Park, and what they did from hour to hour, was merely on the surface. Did he demand that she describe that also? Why did he sit so near and keep his eye on her? Why did they not have done with this searching and agony? (219)

Now obviously this is the "curious silent unrepresented life" of women, yet Terence's curiosity — the means by which we gain access — is as stifling to Rachel as the cigarette smoke in the railway carriages set aside for men. In a continuation of phallic imagery Rachel resists Terence's "penetration" into the silent, secret space of her sexuality. Yet through this evasion of conventional representation we do sense a confusion of fear and desire — in effect, the terrors and agonies of being a young woman.

Once the couple become engaged, Terence's attempts to transform Rachel into a text become quite blatant. In a moment of high irony he tries to use Rachel as a model for the novel *Silence*, and in the process silences her own creative pursuits:

... he observed aloud, "Women — under the heading I have written:

'Not really vainer than men. Lack of self-confidence as the base of most really serious faults. Dislike of own sex traditional or founded on fact? Every woman not so much a rake at heart as an optimist, because they don't think.' What do you say Rachel?" he paused with his pencil in his hand and a sheet of paper on his knee.

Rachel said nothing. Up and up the steep spiral of a very late Beethoven sonata she climbed, like a person ascending a ruined staircase. (298)

Terence continues in a similar vein and is rejected again:

Attacking her staircase once more, Rachel again neglected the opportunity of revealing the secrets of her sex. (298)

Unable to penetrate the secrets of the female sex Terence objects to the noise which Rachel is making and persuades her to write conventional notes of thanks in response to cliché-laden engagement congratulations, despite her distaste for the superficial language of this bourgeois ritual. He goes on to sort through a stack of Rachel's books and with her agreement launches a vehement critique against what he terms "antiquated problem plays, harrowing descriptions of life in the East End ..." (299), and advocates a more poetic mode of writing.

We know from a much earlier chapter in the novel that Rachel's books include an unnamed novel "whose purpose":

was to distribute the guilt of a woman's downfall upon the right shoulders; a purpose which was achieved if the reader's discomfort was any proof of it. (124)

The reader at this point is not Terence but Rachel, a woman alienated by the use of woman as a didactic signifier in a social problem text. Clearly this rejected text works upon the principles of representation which Woolf herself criticised in essays like "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown". Yet the terms of its subject matter, if not its form, seem curiously descriptive of *The Voyage Out*. For surely this is a "story of a woman's downfall" and even if its primary purpose isn't to engage in polemics in its distribution of guilt, guilt is certainly, if more subtly, being distributed.

Terence's easy dismissal of the story of a woman's downfall offers an ironic, and guilt-dispensing, commentary upon his blindness — he doesn't see that *he's* contributed to a woman's downfall. And oddly he has contributed to it precisely because he has silenced Rachel's own developing ability to formulate a critique of the way her sex and its secrets are represented. Rachel doesn't need Terence to explain this book to her. She rejects it at her first reading before they have ever spoken a word. Interaction with Terence interrupts and indeed terminates an early stage in the text where Rachel, reading and assessing without acquiescence to male guidance, seems on the point of developing her own aesthetic — one which interconnects with her passion for the anti-representational signifying practice of music.

The text's refusal to fully develop Rachel's potential as an artist, to use her instead of Terence, poses a powerful unasked question, a significant silence. It illustrates the difficulties which women have, in Terence's words, in "coming out and saying things for themselves". And these difficulties are commented upon in another strategy employed in *The Voyage Out*. Rachel, the heroine, may not write, but on the margins of the text amongst the minor characters who populate the hotel where Terence lives, there *is* a woman writing a text within this text by a woman, the spinster schoolteacher Miss Allan. Her book, a

history of English literature initially to be called "*Beowulf*" to Swinburne and then changed to "*Beowulf*" to Browning, is completed, but with one telling omission:

"Yes I think I can fairly say I have finished it," she said. "That is omitting Swinburne — 'Beowulf' to Browning — I rather like the two Bs myself. 'Beowulf' to Browning," she repeated, "I think that is the kind of title that might catch one's eye on a railway bookstall." (323)

When Miss Allan voices a concern for the responses of the public to which her book is to be marketed — the railway station reader, a reader vastly different from the intellectual elite which Terence is and Ridley Ambrose's texts would attract — we can assume on the principle of the structure of power suggested in the lack of sexual equality in Terence's earlier reference to the railway carriage that these will be an expression of, or an acquiescence to, a patriarchal construction of a man's view. The glimpses that we get of Miss Allan's book indicate that it addresses a male canon, and a heterosexist one at that. As a scandalous symbol of the era of aestheticism and decadence Swinburne would be a risqué object of study for a spinster schoolteacher and her likely readers, in particular given his focus upon lesbian relations in the extravagantly decadent novel *Lesbia Brandon*.⁹ Indeed a lesbian text has an ideologically charged role in *The Voyage Out*, for it is Sappho's "Ode to Aphrodite" which Terence's friend St John Hirst reads in church during a pompous, paternalistic sermon by the English vicar Mr Bax. Intercut with Hirst's reading is Rachel's recognition of the dishonesty underpinning Bax's brand of Christianity — a mixture of bourgeois, patriarchal and imperialist platitudes which constitute, in effect, the ideology upon which she has been raised.

Louise De Salvo's analysis of a series of drafts of *The Voyage Out* written between 1908 and 1915 reveals that overt references to themes related to Sappho and the issue of lesbianism have been melted down into fine, broken subtextual strands, most particularly the ambiguous relationship between Helen Ambrose and Rachel which in an earlier version involved an open expression of passion on Helen's part.¹⁰ The alterations which Miss Allan makes to her manuscript can be usefully seen as in some sense a reflection upon the editing of *The Voyage Out*. The erasure of Swinburne is, of course, another form of silence. Yet like all silences in *The Voyage Out* it is an articulated one: what is hidden is at least gestured towards by virtue of the reference to its silence. Spoken only to be negated, yet nevertheless, however brokenly or obliquely, spoken, these silences are powerfully evocative of the internal and external modes of censorship which keep the secrets of the "curious silent unrepresented life" of women secret not only from men, as Terence implies, but also between women. Thus for instance when Rachel's developing friendship with Terence brings an increasing discomfort into her passionate attachment to her older female mentor Helen we learn:

Hewet, indeed, might have found some excellent material at this time up at the villa for some chapters in the novel which was to be called

"Silence, or the Things People don't say". Helen and Rachel had become very silent. (225)

Fragments of another possible novel slip through under the guise of the imaginary text, *Silence the things people don't say*. The things that people don't say connect to the silence that is the love that dare not speak its name. At another point in *The Voyage Out* a slightly different form of silence gestures towards an extratextual world where, it seems, young women are debating ways of living which neither Rachel nor the text can openly articulate. A seemingly inconsequential dash brings a significant silence into a discussion about Miss Allan by two middle aged married English women who are her fellow hotel guests:

"What a fine creature she is!" murmured Mrs Thornbury, as the square figure in its manly coat withdrew.

"And I'm sure she has a hard life," sighed Mrs Elliot.

Oh it *is* a hard life" said Mrs Thornbury. "Unmarried women — earning their livings — it's the hardest life of all."

"Yet she seems pretty cheerful," said Mrs Thornbury. "I envy her knowledge."

"But that isn't what women want," said Mrs Elliot.

"I'm afraid it's all a good many can hope to have," sighed Mrs Thornbury. "I believe there are more of us than ever now [...] And I have heard young women talk quite openly of —". (114)

As the punctuation indicates, what young women talk of openly cannot — in the context of this narrative — *be* talked of openly. Yet it is typical of all "silences", of all "the things people don't say" in *The Voyage Out* in that it speaks very powerfully even as it is censored.

In a discussion of the textual strategies of *A Room of One's Own* Jane Marcus has suggested that the later Woolf text pioneers

new reading and writing strategies, enlisting punctuation in the service of feminism with the use of ellipses for encoding female desire, dashes to make absent figures more present and transforming interruption ... into a deliberate strategy of woman's writing.¹¹

Marcus includes in this the editing out of the text of allusions to the recent trial for obscenity of Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. An earlier draft of *A Room of One's Own*, Marcus notes, shows Woolf toying with the possibilities of describing the path-breaking representation of women's friendship in the imaginary text *Life's Adventure*, not, as in the final version "Chloe liked Olivia. They shared a laboratory", but rather through a reference to a trial for obscenity.¹² The traces of the suppressed reference remain in the preamble to the discussion of *Life's Adventure* through the playful signalling of the forces of censorship:

I turned the page and read ... I am sorry to break off so abruptly. Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that curtain

over there the figure of Sir Charles Biron is not concealed? We are all women you assure me? Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these "Chloe liked Olivia ..." (79)

Sir Charles Biron, or Sir Chartes Biron, was the judge for the trial of *The Well of Loneliness*. Woolf, despite defending *The Well of Loneliness*, had a low opinion of it as fiction and Marcus argues that *Room* works to interrogate the Hall novel, and "suggest that women do sometimes like women and avoid the censor and lugubrious self-pity at the same time."¹³

The Voyage Out, Woolf's first novel, reveals that Woolf was developing aesthetic strategies of response to the silencing of lesbianism within patriarchal culture — whether this silence be the lack of literary models or the threat of censorship well before Radclyffe Hall's novel made the issue and its representation into a public scandal. In considering Woolf's articulation of this silence it is useful to apply some of Michel Foucault's points about the discursive constructions of minority sexual identities emerging around the period in which *The Voyage Out* was written. In *The History of Sexuality* Foucault writes:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth century psychiatry, jurisprudence and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphroditism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a reverse discourse; homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.¹⁴

How does this process of reverse discourse work? In an article titled "Inverts and Experts: Radclyffe Hall and the lesbian identity" Sonja Ruehl uses the idea to argue that sexological discourses about lesbianism, in particular Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion*, made it possible for Radclyffe Hall to write *The Well of Loneliness*:

in Foucault's perspective to organize a new field of knowledge is to organize a new set of power relations: power is granted to the definers — the experts and administrators of others' sexuality. At the same time the process of categorisation makes resistance to that power possible.¹⁵

The Hall novel is a first step to resistance. Its negative side is that in constructing the heroine Stephen Gordon through the categorisations of sexologists like Ellis, *The Well of Loneliness* reinforces the inscription on the lesbian body of, in Esther Newton's famous term, "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian",¹⁶ the lesbian as nature's mistake. In technical terminology this is the "congenital invert", the woman who should have been a man; the man tragically trapped in a woman's body. The positive side is that the work of the experts gives a language and a pretext for speaking to the inverts, it makes

lesbianism a subject for serious inquiry, and provides a base from which this construction of lesbian subjectivity can be queried, supplemented or overturned.

One way in which the discourses of sexology provide opportunities for reversal is through loose strands which can be caught and unravelled. The most notable loose strand is one of liberal progressive tolerance. If a congenital invert is a mistake of nature it would clearly be inhumane to persecute her. This attitude is characteristic of Ellis's work and also that of his friend and contemporary Edward Carpenter, a socialist sexologist who was himself a homosexual and whose ideas influenced two writers of great significance to Woolf: her immediate predecessor Olive Schreiner, and her contemporary E.M. Forster.

For Ellis inverts may, as he puts it in the preface which he wrote at Hall's request for *The Well of Loneliness*, be "different from their fellow human beings" but nevertheless "sometimes of the highest character and the highest aptitudes".¹⁷ The qualities which are attributed to inverts — which as Ruehl suggests are strongly evidenced in Stephen Gordon the "butch" lesbian who allows her "femme" partner to find greater happiness with a man — include, in particular, a highly refined spiritual and creative sensibility. Ruehl perceptively reads Ellis as neutralising the problem of sexual desire by overvalorising these other components.¹⁸

In a similar vein, Carpenter, in his *The Intermediate Sex*, draws attention to famous figures from history, most particularly Sappho. In *Love's Coming of Age* he provides a powerful image for educated working single women, whether lesbian or otherwise, to occupy, speak from, and reverse:

The women of the new movement are naturally drawn from those in whom the maternal instinct is not especially strong; also from those in whom the sexual instinct is not preponderant. Such women do not altogether represent their sex; some are rather mannish in temperament; some are "homogenic", i.e. inclined to attachments to their own, rather than to the opposite sex; some are ultra-rationalizing and brain cultured ... Perhaps the deficiency in maternal instinct would seem the most serious imputation. But then, who knows (as we have said) what evolution is preparing? Sometimes it seems possible that a new sex is on the make — like the feminine neuters of Ants and Bees — not adapted for child-bearing, but with a perfect instinct of social service, indispensable for the maintenance of the common life ... it is certain that their effort will result in a tremendous improvement in the general position of their more commonplace sisters.¹⁹

In *Sexuality and its Discontents* Jeffrey Weeks notes that whilst Carpenter's "views on women are clearly by modern standards, normative and essentialist" they can nevertheless be understood as embodying a not unfruitful ideological contradiction in which, as Weeks puts it, "all the then existing cultural assumptions about women are encoded into what was intended as, and to some extent was, an acceptable progressive discourse."²⁰ Carpenter defuses the new woman's challenge to categorisation by constructing a new category — the new sex. The threat which these women pose to the masculine public sphere is

counterbalanced through their recontainment within a nurturing social role, tinged with the domestic ideology of motherhood, and in the service of the majority of representative women who remain within the private sphere. These women who lack maternal instincts are transformed into asexual racial mothers.

Writing in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf seems to relocate some of these ideas into the domain of a specifically female cultural inheritance through the description of the gradual process of evolution in which women's persistence in their newfound independence would, through a communal psychic effort, through living out what she terms "the common life", (108), bring about the birth of the great female poet who would possess the androgynous creative sensibility — balanced interrelating masculine and feminine elements — which Woolf attributed to Shakespeare. In the writings of Carpenter, Shakespeare was referred to as one of several male equivalents of Sappho. In *Room* Woolf suggests that it will be the task of the great female poet, Shakespeare's sister, to develop the aesthetic possibilities suggested by the imaginary novel *Life's Adventure*, with its concentration on a type of work based on a potentially lesbian female bonding which has little to do with the patriarchal domestic sphere.

In terms of applying the Foucauldian line of reverse discourse it is important to note that the discourses of sexology through focusing upon relationships between women helped to open up a sealed space from which women could speak for and amongst themselves. Despite these factors, however, any resemblance which sexological writings might bear to a liberating exploration of lesbian desire is purely co-incidental. They work to neutralise desire, to divert attention from it or explain it away, not simply through transformative liberal strategies of containment but also in their ultimate grounding in a phallogocentric model of sexual desire: the lesbian as pseudo-man, the theory of penis envy, the butch/femme polarisation. And in regard to the phallogocentricity of such discourse I want to turn here to Luce Irigaray's commentary upon Freud's "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman", a case study with many similarities to Ellis's work. Irigaray writes:

So there will be no female homosexuality, just a homosexuality in which woman will be involved in the process of specularizing the phallus, begged to maintain the desire for the same that man has, and will ensure at the same time, elsewhere and in complementary and contradictory fashion, the perpetuation in the couple of the pole of "matter".²³

Explicating Irigaray here, Teresa De Lauretis writes: "With the term homosexuality [...] Irigaray puns on the French word for man *homme*, from the Latin *homo* (meaning "man") and the Greek *homo* (meaning "same") [...]"²⁴ Woman's desire for another woman "like herself", in Irigaray's term, is as much a "silence" in sexological and psychological discourse as it is in traditional

patriarchal discourse. Instead it is a male/female opposition, which in turn disguises a relation between men, which is articulated.

Woolf transforms the various silences surrounding lesbianism — censorship, elision, misrepresentation — into a figure of speech, or rather of non-speech. Silence becomes one of the kernels of the experimental aesthetic practice articulated in such ideas as the women's sentence. Shari Benstock, working with the same material from *Room* as Marcus, and developing Marcus's account, has commented on Woolf's use of ellipsis as a rhetorical/grammatical device which:

marks the impossibility of figurability and the failure of representation. As such it serves to figure woman-in-culture, where she denotes absence (of the phallic signifier), silence, and non-presence. Woolf's texts, which elliptically interlock with each other, turn these figures and tropes inside out (the turning is always figured by ellipses) so that "deviation" constitutes a new form of structure.²³

Benstock sees these practices as characteristic of experimental modern women's writing, in particular what she terms Sapphic modernism — that is the work of, amongst others, Stein, Barnes, Woolf and H.D. Rachel Bowlby, who has considered Woolf's broken sentences through an analysis which relates the railway metaphor to narrative line, although not specifically in relation to lesbianism, has suggested that these formal discontinuities reflect otherwise inexpressible sexual trauma and madness. Referring to both Rachel's illness in *The Voyage Out* and Septimus Smith's madness in *Mrs Dalloway*, Bowlby comments: "Off the rails, the sufferer's different place makes the line of normality and convention appear as such."²⁴

In Foucault's discussion of reverse discourse, inverts are seen to occupy and transform the categories and vocabulary of the experts. As well as reversing aspects of expert interpretation about lesbianism which were articulated, Woolf, at the level of formal experimentation, moulded into an aesthetic practice that which was not articulated — the silence of lesbianism within patriarchy and the silences which punctuate the treatment of lesbian sexuality within expert discourses.

In *The Voyage Out* we see the first glimpses of Woolf's development of both these lines of reversal. The treatment of Miss Allan seems close to Carpenter's "new sex". The use of the neutral pronoun "it" in the description of Miss Allan as a "square figure in its manly coat" provides one of several examples of the ways in which the spinster writer's gender is problematised and, I think, rather problematically constructed in relation to references which stress her masculine characteristics, most specifically in relation to her work, and as Mrs Thornbury calls it, her knowledge. The Sapphic elements are obviously largely contained in the editing both of her own manuscript and of Woolf's. Despite Mrs Elliot's deploring cry, "that's not what women want", Miss Allan is held in high regard. Mrs Thornbury envies her knowledge and her estimation of her as a "fine creature" is generally shared, Terence admires her, and in a book full of writers she is the only one who actually finishes her work.

Fragments from a letter written to her sister reveal that she supports a spendthrift brother through her earnings from teaching and writing, maintains a close supportive interest in suffrage work, and is integrated within a community of women from her own professional group.

The one person Miss Allan can't help, however, is Rachel, who at one point turns to the older woman in a confused, unarticulated search for guidance:

She smiled at Rachel very kindly. She seemed to have known and experienced so much, as she moved cumbrously around the room, that surely there must be balm for all anguish in her words, could one induce her to have recourse to them. But Miss Allan [...] showed no signs of breaking the reticence which had snowed her under for years. An uncomfortable sensation kept Rachel silent [...] there was nothing to be done but to drift past each other in silence. (261)

Miss Allan senses that there is something wrong with Rachel and would like to help her, but is constrained by years of social conditioning: "She was not an impulsive woman, and life had schooled her to restrain her tongue." (263) Miss Allan the schoolteacher can't put Sappho or Swinburne into her text. Nor for that matter can she, herself, find any texts within patriarchal culture which speak for the life of a single woman. Her favourite reading when on holiday is a paradigmatic tale of male *Bildung*, Wordsworth's *The Prelude*. Nevertheless the subtext opened up by Miss Allan's censored manuscript and by her half-glimpsed, half-realised life hints at the possible alternatives in social, cultural and emotional structures which she is constrained from sharing with Rachel.

Without access to this "difference of view" Rachel cannot break free from her entrapment within a story whose structural and thematic texture is, I think, brilliantly described in the language used to approximate Rachel's own creative discourse of music:

Rachel said nothing. Up and up the steep spiral of a very late Beethoven sonata she climbed, like a person ascending a ruined staircase [...] (298)

The ruined staircase is like the half finished sentences of *The Voyage Out* which fall into silence, like its elusive allusions to censored real and imaginary texts, and like its structure: a novel which appears to be moving towards the traditional closure of marriage only, by virtue of Rachel's death, to break off suddenly before the couple have set foot into the next story, the story of marriage. And indeed the double meaning of the word "story" enforces the metafictional power of the architectural image of the ruined staircase. Rachel withholds "the secrets of her sex" from Terence, the male writer, whose probing need to define resembles the expert's will to categorise. Rachel refuses to become the heroine of his story, a story where her status as heroine is confirmed by his sympathetic approbation.

Rachel's resistance, through silence, to categorisation, although a powerful statement, does not empower her. Silence, too, keeps her from communicating

with Miss Allan, the woman who could provide her with the guidance and knowledge which might lead her to reconstruct the ruined staircase, a metaphor of fragmentation which might also be seen to evoke the "anguish" for which Rachel believes Miss Allan's word may provide a balm.

If Rachel could, by forming this connection, reach the next story, then she would become a heroine closer to those of subsequent Woolf texts: Lily Briscoe, the patriarchally defined old maid in *To the Lighthouse* who reverses the terms of a discourse which would confine her to fruitlessness and successfully completes her painting; Orlando, the male poet who becomes a female, playfully undermining the process of categorisation along the way; or Miss La Trobe, the avowedly lesbian playwright in *Between the Acts* whose play about the history of England is the subversive rewriting of patriarchal history which Miss Allan cannot achieve. Or like *Room's* Mary Beton, whose combination of evasions and allusions allows her to pose and answer one of the questions about the secret of her sex which Rachel will not reveal to Terence, and to do so whilst avoiding the censor and a mode of representation structured by the categorisation of the experts. The question is: "Is dislike of one's own sex traditional or founded on fact?"

Notes

1. Virginia Woolf *The Voyage Out* (London: Grafton Books 1988), 220. Subsequent references will be given in the text.
2. See Rachael Blau Du Plessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth Century Women Writers* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 48-53; John Bayley, "Diminishment of Consciousness: A Paradox in the Art of Virginia Woolf." in Eric Warner ed. *Virginia Woolf: A Centenary Perspective* (New York: St Martins Press 1984) 69-82; Virginia Blain, "Narrative Voice and the Female Perspective in Virginia Woolf's Early Novels." in Patricia Clements and Isobel Grundy eds *Virginia Woolf: New Critical Essays* (London: Vision 1983), 119, Christine Froula, "Out of the Chrysalis: Female Initiation and Female Authority in Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out*" *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring 1986, 63-92.
3. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Grafton Books, 1987) 79. Subsequent references will be given in the text.
4. H.G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1968); H.G. Wells, *Marriage* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1986); E.M. Forster, *A Room With A View* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Ltd., 1978).
5. Du Plessis, *op cit*, 51.
6. Blain, *op cit*, 119.

7. See Rachel Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc., 1988), 2. Bowlby comments that "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" is "a kind of literary Clapham Junction for the crossing and potential collision of questions of representation, history and sexual difference."
8. See "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" in Rachel Bowlby ed., *Virginia Woolf, A Woman's Essays: Selected Essays: Volume One* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1992), 69-87.
9. Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Lesbia Brandon*, (London: Falcon Press Ltd., 1952).
10. Louise A. De Salvo, *Virginia Woolf's First Voyage* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 134.
11. Jane Marcus "Sapphistory: The Woolf and the Well" in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions* Ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York and London: New York University Press, 1990), 164-179; 173-174.
12. Marcus, *op cit* 168.
13. *Ibid.*
14. Foucault, Michel, *History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1987), 101.
15. Sonja Ruehl, "Inverts and Experts: Radclyffe Hall and the lesbian identity" in Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Newton eds., *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature and Culture*, (New York: Methuen, 1985) 169-170, 167. For Ellis see Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex, Vol. II: Sexual Inversion*, (Philadelphia; F.A. Davis Company, 1925, 3rd ed).
16. Esther Newton "The Mythic Mannish Lesbian: Radclyffe Hall and the New Woman" in *The Lesbian Issue: Essays from Signs* ed. Estelle B. Freedman, Barbara C. Gelpi, Susan L. Johnson, Kathleen M. Weston, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1985.)
17. Havelock Ellis "Commentary" in Radclyffe Hall *The Well of Loneliness* New York: Covici Friede Publishers, 1929).
18. Ruehl, *op cit*, 168-169.
19. Edward Carpenter, *Love's Coming of Age: a series of papers on the relation of the sexes* (London: Grant Allen & Company, 1896, 1911.)
20. Jeffrey Weeks *Sexuality and its Discontents* (London, Melbourne: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), 248-249.
21. Irigaray, Luce *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Translated Gillian C. Gill, Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, 1985. (Originally published in French under the title *Speculum de l'autre Femme*, 1974, by Les Editions Les Minuit) 103.

22. Teresa De Lauretis, "Sexual Indifference and Lesbian Representation" *Theatre Journal* 40, 1988: 155-77, 156; Benstock 197.
23. Shari Benstock "Expatriate Sapphic Modernism: Entering Literary History." *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions* Ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow. (New York and London: New York University Press, 1990), 183-203, 192.
24. Bowlby, 165.