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Towards a Poetics of Criticism: Adornoian Negativity and the  
Experiential in the Essays and Musical Marginalia of Virginia  
Woolf

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Doctor of Philosophy

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and  
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## Abstract

Through an analysis of the work of Virginia Woolf and T.W. Adorno's theory of the aesthetic, this dissertation seeks to develop a poetics of criticism that takes account of the philosophy of the non-identical in subjective experience. As the subversion of the positivist and subjectivist tendencies of identity thinking, Adorno's negative dialectic is read here in parallel with Woolf's work as an example of a discourse that preserves the particularity of experience. Much of Woolf's writing about music is in the form of diary entries, letters and notes or jottings and is singularly unfinished. Her writing about music pushes her to the extremes of essayistic practice where she is forced to improvise and invent a musical-critical voice. This dissertation argues that subjectivity and aesthetic experience are constructed *negatively* in Woolf's diaries, letters and essays and by reading her tendency to resist describing musical experiences as a resistance to the domination of conceptual subsumption, I hope to show that Woolf's writing could offer a new perspective on criticism. The present work attempts to develop a three-fold thesis, the presentation of which will constitute a poetics of criticism. Firstly, Woolf's attempts to write a critical selfhood actually serve as a critique of transcendental subjectivity and undermine the ideology of *a priori* subjectivity. Secondly, Woolf's essays complement work done by Adorno on genre theory which asserts that contradiction remains essential to the critical essay, contradiction which secures the identity of negative dialectics and a contradiction that can simultaneously be read as fundamental to the architectonics of a modernist subjectivity. Woolf's essays, therefore, will be read for their potential status as a means of critique. And thirdly, the technique of parataxis as a form of writing that Adorno thought best expressed the inaccessibility of objectivity will be shown to be decisive in analyzing Woolf's fragments. What I hope to assemble, therefore, is a constellation of ideas that map several points of connection between Adorno and Woolf. By effecting a salvaging of Woolf's musical marginalia this thesis argues that ostensibly ill-informed or naïve testimony can be given legitimacy within contemporary music criticism. In addition, this thesis presents all the references to music found in Woolf's diaries and letters, and, as such, the appendices found at the back of the dissertation constitute not only the first attempt to bring this material together, but are also presented in such a way so as to reinforce the paratactical nature of Woolf's writing about music. That is to say, structurally, the appendices appear as they appear in Woolf's original texts, and this thesis has, self-consciously, tried to resist the conceptual over-determination of these fragments. This structural consideration implies that this dissertation fulfils a performative, as well as an analytical function.

## **Contents**

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	5
<i>Abbreviations</i>	7
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
Literary Resources	11
Bloomsbury and Musical London	17
<b>Chapter 1 -Philosophical and Methodological Considerations</b>	<b>22</b>
The Dialectic	22
Expertise and Enigmaticalness	27
Essayism	31
<b>Chapter 2 - The Case for a Woolfian Renewal of Music Criticism</b>	<b>48</b>
Judgement	49
Brief History of Music Criticism	51
Issues in Contemporary Criticism	61
The Problem of Mastery	64
The Renewal of Criticism	67
<b>Chapter 3 - ‘Innumerable Threads’: Writing Unreconciled Subjectivity</b>	<b>71</b>
‘The Common Reader’	74
‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’	78
‘Sketch of the Past’ and ‘Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car’	80
‘Tympan’ and an extract from <i>The Waves</i>	84
<b>Chapter 4 - Narcotic Pleasure: The Essay as Form</b>	<b>89</b>
Woolf’s ‘The Modern Essay’ and Adorno’s ‘The Essay as Form’	91
‘Street Music’	100
‘Impressions at Bayreuth’	106
‘The Opera’	110
<b>Chapter 5 – Aspectual Non-Identity: Rhythm and Satire in Woolf’s Urban Musical Observations</b>	<b>114</b>
Rhythm	119
‘Victorian Values,’ music, and Bildung	129
Humour in Woolf’s musical writings	134

<b>Chapter 6- Sovereignty and Autonomy in Aesthetic Experience</b>	<b>140</b>
Aesthetic Negativity	145
Processuality	149
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>157</b>
Towards a Poetics of Criticism	166
<i>Appendices</i>	<i>169</i>
<i>Bibliography</i>	<i>232</i>

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My deepest thanks of all go to Martin. Without him, there would seem little reason to ‘throw our bottles into the sea’. And finally, of course, our two children, Theia and Jude John Robert, who have often provided welcome relief from the task at hand and who are a constant source of entertainment and inspiration.

**Author's declaration**

I declare that this thesis is entirely my own work, and that all quotations from other people's research are clearly marked as such and fully referenced. I also declare that I have never submitted any of this work to this or any other institution in fulfilment of any academic qualifications.

## Abbreviations

### Works by Virginia Woolf

*BP Books and Portraits*  
*CR1 The Common Reader*  
*CR2 The Common Reader: Second Series*  
*CE Collected Essays*  
*D The Diary of Virginia Woolf*  
*E The Essays of Virginia Woolf*  
*GR Granite and Rainbow*  
*L The Letters of Virginia Woolf*  
*MoB Moments of Being*  
*RO A Room of One's Own*  
*SE Selected Essays*  
*W The Waves*

### Works by T.W. Adorno

*AT Aesthetic Theory*  
*MM Minima Moralia*  
*ND Negative Dialectics*  
*NL Notes to Literature*

### **Editorial note**

*My own editorial ellipses are in square brackets. All other ellipses are the author's own.*



## Introduction

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We went to Salome (Strauss, as you may know) last night. I was much excited, and believe that it is a new discovery. He gets great emotion into his music, without any beauty. However, Saxon thought we were encroaching upon Wagner, and we had a long and rather acid discussion. He has an amazing knowledge of detail – I can't think why he doesn't say something more interesting...I must start for the opera.

(Virginia Woolf, letter to Vanessa Bell from Tuesday 24 August, 1909<sup>1</sup>)

Woolf's veiled attack on Saxon Sydney-Turner's urbane musical literacy reveals a question about the nature of musical criticism that precipitates much of the work done in this dissertation. Her accusation that 'knowledge of detail' does not necessarily yield something 'interesting' exposes more about the complexity of the relationship between aesthetic experience and criticism than this seemingly incidental remark would have us believe. But therein lies its importance. Woolf's distracted afterthoughts about the limitations of technical interpretation touch on a potentially philosophically rich terrain, and yet, she resists developing it. This dissertation will continually evoke Woolf's critical exemplarity via her own eschewal of intellectual mastery of the domain of music. Her writings about music are framed by an anxiety arising from the practical impossibility of sound judgement around music. She writes to Ethel Smyth in 1932, 'My taste is very limited. I can't judge music any more than someone else can judge articles in the T.L.S.' (L4: 135) It is with this in mind, then, that my approach to Woolf focuses on a less well defined area of her work and of Woolf scholarship in general, namely, her music criticism.

Even at this early stage, it might be a little misleading to speak in "concrete terms" of Virginia Woolf's music criticism as a *bona fide* subgenre of her oeuvre. Such a category might imply that a well-defined body of work of music criticism already exists, waiting to be examined. However, this is not the case. Many of Woolf's thoughts, musings, and opinions about music were articulated in the form of letters, diary entries and essays, and often did not reach the form of a finished piece of prose. It is well-known that Woolf felt passionately about music, and, certainly, in many instances in her fiction,

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<sup>1</sup> (Woolf, 1975: 410)

music and musicians play an integral role in the narrative and through quite abstract invocations of musical qualities in the composition of the fiction itself. Rachel Vinrace is a pianist in *The Voyage Out* (1915); Cassandra is a flautist and keenly appreciates Mozart in *Night and Day* (1919); *Between the Acts* (1941) is replete with references to musical performances, singing and dancing during the staging of a village pageant. In addition to this, several of her short stories also have explicit musical content, 'The String Quartet' (1921), 'A Simple Melody' (1925) and 'Slater's Pins have no Points' (1928). Interestingly, though, and as Emilie Crapoulet points out in her study *Virginia Woolf: A Musical Life*, what is significant about Woolf's relationship to music is the relative silence she maintains with regards to any development of broader philosophical or aesthetic arguments:

It is particularly noticeable [...] that any aesthetic, artistic or philosophical inquiry into the nature and role of art is constantly avoided: thwarted by a narrator who breaks off from giving us the full conversations [...] conversations are implied but never fully disclosed. (Crapoulet, 2009: 7)

This dissertation seeks to develop arguments that accommodate Woolf's reticence, by theorising that music, for Woolf, is a way of sustaining a specific kind of subjective stance that resists fully determining its own experiences. Furthermore, I will suggest that from this, it is possible to speculate that music functions as a vanishing point in Woolf's non-fiction and organises its discourse in such a way as to reinforce and legitimise the postulate of a fragmentary subjectivity. Some commentators have recognised that Woolf's non-fiction has still to be comprehensively analysed. As Leila Brosnan points out in her study *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism*, Woolf's non-fiction 'has been viewed from angles that disguise its shape and dimensions.' (Brosnan, 1997: 2) My reading of her non-fiction will contribute to the development of these hitherto overlooked aspects of Woolf's criticism.

However, this salvaging of these overlooked aspects of Woolf's non-fiction is also motivated by the potential to realise the philosophical rigour that is implicit in her thought. To that end, it is my intention to show that by reading Woolf's thoughts on music in parallel with T.W. Adorno's aesthetic theories, we are propelled to significant insights into Woolf and to the wider context of modernist criticism. And beyond that, this work will bear upon the practice of criticism and the role of the critic.

Broadly speaking, therefore, this dissertation will analyse the work of Woolf in the light of Adorno's theory of the aesthetic. The principal outcome of this endeavour will

be to effect what I have termed a salvaging of Woolf's musical marginalia, and a small selection of her essays, by exploring the construction of subjectivity, and the ways in which music functions as a site for the articulation and stabilisation of a particular subject position.<sup>2</sup> This will be done by reading Woolf's work in parallel with Adorno's philosophy of the non-identical in order to suggest that subjectivity and aesthetic experience are constructed *negatively* in her diaries, letters and essays. That is to say, by reading her tendency to resist describing musical experiences precisely as a resistance to the subsumption of experience under concepts, this thesis will construct perspectives on criticism in three domains. These three domains are tantamount to a poetics of criticism. Firstly, Woolf's attempts to write a critical selfhood, I argue, actually serve as a critique of transcendental subjectivity and undermine the ideology of *a priori* subjectivity<sup>3</sup>. Secondly, Woolf's essays complement work done by Adorno on genre theory that asserts that contradiction remains essential to the critical essay. It is this contradiction that secures the method of negative dialectics, and is a contradiction that is fundamental to the architectonics of a modernist subjectivity. Woolf's essays, therefore, will be read for their potential status as a means of critique. And thirdly, the technique of parataxis as a form of writing that Adorno thought best expressed the inaccessibility of objectivity will be shown to be decisive in analyzing Woolf's fragments.

At this juncture, it is worth trying to characterise the precise nature of the relationship between Woolf and Adorno here. Woolf is not an example of an Adornoian thesis or concept. What I hope to assemble, instead, is a constellation of ideas that potentially map several points of connection between Adorno and Woolf. The adoption of the rhetoric of the constellation betrays certain sympathies with Adorno's paratactic philosophy, and in this sense the following work self-consciously approaches reflection as the expression of an attitude towards objectivity and not as an act of subjective determination.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> By using the word salvage I make tentative reference to the Benjaminian notion of *Die Rettung* (redemption/rescue). This has strong theological connotations of redemption that go beyond the scope of this dissertation, but do at some level inform my thinking. It also brings into view the idea of radical remembrance of what might be lost or overlaid by writing and history.

<sup>3</sup> Adorno refers to the transcendental subject as an agent of ideology, 'The definition of the transcendental as that which is necessary, a definition added to functionality and generality, expresses the principle of the self-preservation of the species.' (ND: 179)

<sup>4</sup> In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno writes that, 'The constellation illuminates the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden.' (ND: 162)

## Literary Resources

From Woolf's oeuvre, I began by looking at the marginalia and three essays which refer specifically to music, but as this study has developed, I have broadened this reading of Woolf and now include reflections on the following essays, 'The Common Reader' (1925), 'The Modern Essay' (1925), 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927), 'Sketch of the Past.' (1939) and 'Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car' (1942). Strictly speaking, Woolf wrote only three essays on music,<sup>5</sup> and the rest of her musical marginalia consists of copious diary entries and letters that often did not reach the form of a finished piece of prose. Instead, what is left is a series of fragments that could, in essence, give us an insight into how she appropriated music and aesthetic experience in her writing. The present study is original in that it brings together as many of these extracts as has been possible and argues that Woolf has something significant to say about musical experience and the nature of musical criticism. No other work has yet tackled this particular subject. Of recent Woolf scholarship that also concerns music, Emma Sutton has written numerous papers on Wagnerism and Woolf that address, predominantly, the cultural politics of music. Elicia Clements has taken up the socio-psychological role of music in Woolf's fiction in her article, 'Virginia Woolf, Ethel Smyth and Music: Listening as a Productive Mode of Social Interaction' (2005), David Dowling, in 'The Aesthetic Education of Virginia Woolf', mentions music in passing as having an effect on the general development of Woolf's aesthetic faculties. Karen Smythe in 'Virginia Woolf's Elegiac Enterprise' (1992) makes analogies between Woolf's work and the musical form of the elegy. A chapter in the collection of essays, *The Multiple Muses of Virginia Woolf* (1993) entitled "'The Second Violin Tuning in the Ante-Room': Virginia Woolf and Music" pays homage to the musical influences in Woolf's upbringing.

But perhaps the most important text of recent scholarship concerning Woolf and music, for the purposes of this dissertation, has been Sanja Bahun's essay, 'Broken Music, Broken History: Sounds and Silence in Virginia Woolf's "Between the Acts"' which is part of a forthcoming edition on Woolf and Music.<sup>6</sup> Bahun's essay begins by

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<sup>5</sup> In chronological order, 'Street Music', 'The Opera', and 'Impressions at Bayreuth' can all be found in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf: Volume 1 1904-12*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie, 6 vols (San Diego; New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986).

<sup>6</sup> *Virginia Woolf and Music*, ed. Adriana Varga (Indianapolis: University of Indiana, forthcoming).

recognising Woolf's (and in this instance Schoenberg's) concern to develop a means of expressing 'the variegation and simultaneity of impressions received by the human mind/body' (Bahun, forthcoming). Bahun makes the connection between Schoenberg and Woolf by drawing out a shared preoccupation with the fragmentary nature of experience and their concordant desire to make these fragments whole, 'To capture heterogeneity – or, if one wills, isolation – of these fragments and yet present them as a "unified whole," becomes a common mission of modernist music and literature.' (2) Their common mission, as Bahun puts it, highlights 'the congruity between Woolf's mature art and the modernist music poetics.' Moreover, 'this correspondence is based neither on transposition nor on emulation; it is expression wrought by shared history.' (5) This shared history is one which seeks to redeem itself through the '(re)generative powers of art' (6), and thus, modern aesthetic techniques are forced to adapt and respond to the 'annihilating work of history' (6) by finding a way of articulating the '(im) possibility of human agency at the beginning of the Second World War.' (6) Woolf's *Between the Acts* is read for the ways in which it might represent 'the emancipation of sounds' (15), presumably in reference to Schoenberg's emancipation of dissonance in which there is no formal obligation to resolve harmonic, melodic or rhythmic tension. The dialectic is reinterpreted as being agonistic in Bahun's essay:

For Woolf as much as for Schoenberg, the self-reproductive way in which history unfolds is a continuous recurrence of *agons* between conjoined opposites – a structure of unrest that may take the form of historical games, struggles between the sexes, chords in tension, verbal juxtapositions, and epistemic or harmonic unresolves. (14)

This implicit mode of contradiction is precisely what this dissertation seeks to interpret in reference to Woolf's rendering of a self, and in this sense, could be said to be a developing of the 'self-reproductive' movement that Bahun refers to.

In addition to these explicitly musical essays, the present thesis is also indebted to the following books which aided my research on Woolf's essays and the discourse of criticism: Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (2000), Leila Brosnan, *Reading Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism* (1997), Claire de Obaldia, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism and the Essay* (1995), Graham Good, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (1988), Elena Gualtieri, *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past* (2000), Beth Carole Rosenberg and Jeanne Dubino (eds.) *Virginia Woolf and the Essay* (1997).

In addition to Woolf's writing, I will be working closely with two of Adorno's essays, 'Subject and Object' (1969) and 'The Essay as Form' (1958), as well as his major works *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). My reasons for choosing to focus on Adorno's late work *Negative Dialectics* and the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* is because they represent, amongst other things, two extremes of Adorno's post-war thought that must be read as one and the same effort to sustain writing, and indeed, aesthetic experience in the dialectic of melancholy and redemption. If *Negative Dialectics* is a diagnosis of the failure of philosophy and the Western Marxist tradition, then *Aesthetic Theory* can be read as the attempt to salvage something from the failure of reason through the redemptive power of art. Both works confirm Adorno's commitment to the concept of the non-identical, that is, to the resistance to the dominating impulse in thought that seeks to synthesise experience with conceptual thought and resolve immanent dialectical tensions. This commitment to the non-identical presents itself formally in Adorno's work; neither *Aesthetic Theory* nor *Negative Dialectics* are written in continuous prose, both resist paraphrase (true thinking, for Adorno, resists paraphrase), and both to some extent resist easy comprehension. But Adorno's refusal to organize his arguments and observations into subordinating hierarchies which privilege one position over another were more than choices in style, they were fundamental to his rhetoric of the constellation; a Benjaminian term that he adopted to characterize a mode of theorization which clusters contrasting, as opposed to homogenous, elements so as to resist any reduction to fundamental essences or grounding principles. Woolf's mirroring of Adorno's paratactic style through the presentation of formal techniques like ellipses, juxtaposition, bathos and fragmentary, non-linear passages of text confirm the possibility of reading Woolf's as paradigmatic of a non-synthesising, non-dominating discourse.

I characterise my use of Adorno as facilitating a salvaging of fugitive experience in Woolf. The idea of salvaging signifies a potential rescuing of material that may otherwise go unnoticed. The peripheral nature of the remarks about music and musical experiences contained within Woolf's oeuvre means that they could, ostensibly, be regarded as biographical debris; remnants of daily life that are without value, the scraps or detritus of a writer who is perhaps better known for her achievements in and contributions to British modern letters, rather than for her insights into music. A survey of recent literature on Woolf suggests that interest in the critical import of her essays and other non-fictional writing continues to gather force. But what is distinctive about my study is the explicitly theoretical nature of the analysis. The work done here is

therefore dependent on the veracity of Adorno's theses. Given the highly speculative nature of his reflections on the aesthetic and artistic life, it is not my intention here to provide advocacy for Adorno's cultural theory, rather, by reading Woolf through Adorno, I will argue that it is possible to find points of mutual elucidation in their respective work.

This elucidation might also be thought of in terms of Martin Heidegger's *Entsprechung*<sup>7</sup>, a term he uses to imply that any questioning and subsequent response to something be vital, alive, a resonant receptiveness, or a 'responson' in the liturgical sense of participatory engagement. (Steiner, 1978:34) Any reading of Woolf's work, therefore, must not be a passive reading, it must not simply present an analysis or give an interpretation of a given text because the term *Entsprechung* implies that a *correspondence* takes space between thinker and thought, between the fundamental question and the response. The thinker, *der Denker*, and *the critic*, is *responsible* in and for his practice of thinking. Considering Woolf then becomes more about *listening to* her texts, hearing what they might say and being receptive to whatever they might present to us. In answer to the question 'What is philosophy?' Steiner notices that Heidegger actually makes use of a musical analogy to describe what he considers to be the only genuine kind of response to such a question: 'Where there is true matching and correspondence, where question and response are in harmonic relation, there is a phenomenon of accord, of right tuning.' (1978: 35) To look for moments of accord between Woolf and Adorno might also be a way to phrase the nature of the work undertaken here.

Much Anglo-American scholarship subsequent to Adorno's arguments reconfigures itself around the philosophy/art dialectic, and of that subsequent scholarship the present work is indebted to, amongst others, J.M. Bernstein's chapter on Adorno in *Fate of Art*, (1993) Andrew Bowie's location of Adorno within wider philosophical conceptions of subjectivity in his book *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*<sup>8</sup> (1990), and Lambert Zuidemaart's *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The*

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<sup>7</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?* (London: Vision Press Limited, 1956) from p.69 for a lengthy exposition on *Entsprechung*.

<sup>8</sup> The importance of the tradition of musical-aesthetic thought is described by Andrew Bowie who, in his chapter 'Music, Language and Literature' from *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* gives us a reason why it would be useful to remember G.W.F. Hegel when we consider the treatment of the concept of music in late 19<sup>th</sup> Century German aesthetic thought: 'His remarks in the Aesthetics, though enlightening in themselves, are probably most notable because of the way they epitomize a subsequent view of music which plays a role in much subsequent aesthetic theory, particularly in the Marxist tradition.' Bowie, A., *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990) p.180.

*Redemption of Illusion* (1991) for its clear explication of some of the more politically charged aspects of Adorno's theory. Many of these texts have in common the shared acknowledgement of how problematic it is to try to re-frame and reconsider Adorno's arguments given the inordinately complex and, at times, inaccessibly dense nature of his writing. A consequence of this re-framing and reconsidering of Adorno's work is that much secondary literature chooses to focus its summation of Adorno's thought towards different apexes. In other words, it is not just the complicated and, at times, contradictory nature of Adorno's thought that one must come to terms with, but also the fact that so much of what has subsequently been written, can only ever, in truth, refer with any great authority, to one or two aspects of his theory. This is, however, likely to be more an indication of the diversity and overwhelmingly vast scope of Adorno's work than it is a reflection of those who commit to understanding him.

In the figure of Adorno, then, we have on the one hand the philosopher, aesthete, social theorist, music critic, musicologist, composer, and on the other hand there is Adorno the essayist and literary theorist, and it is with these latter identities that this dissertation will be concerned. One of the chief concerns of my analyses of Adorno's work has been their form, and the fact that, independent of their content, much of his work acquires its own aesthetic; the texts presented here are aphoristic, incomplete and fragmentary. And in this sense, they could be seen to be 'in tune' with Woolf's marginalia which are also sketchy, faltering and unfinished.

It can be shown that Woolf's relationship with Bloomsbury was another example of the ways in which an essayistic approach to criticism was being fostered. Furthermore, the rhythms and pace of the 'essayistic spirit' can be seen to be supported and reinforced by an urban environment. In a letter to Vita Sackville-West written on 13 April 1926 she writes:

We all chatter hard, about music – Eddy explains about 19<sup>th</sup> Century music and rhetoric – Duncan attacks: but seldom uses the word he means: he sometimes has to unbutton his waistcoat while endeavouring: very interesting: we compare movies and operas: I'm writing that for Todd: rather brilliant. All, to me, highly congenial, and even a little exciting, in the spring light; hammers tapping outside; trees shaking green in the Square: suddenly we find it's 7 and all jump up. (L3: 255)

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‘Chattering hard’ about music was a pastime Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group indulged in frequently; in fact, chattering *about* music was more often done by Woolf than, say, playing or performing music. Though not explicitly ‘musical’ herself (musical in the sense that we might understand somebody to be who can, for example, play an instrument or read musical notation) Woolf, as has been shown, expended a great deal of time and energy not just attending actual musical performances and concerts, but also participating in and contributing to the discourse that surrounded music at the time. In a letter to Vanessa Bell on Monday, 10 August 1908 she writes:

By this mornings post, too, I got a card, with musical hieroglyphs; halfway though breakfast, I sang my song to keep myself in spirits, and saw it, as though in a mirror before me – mocking me. I at once changed my tune, and sang the second song; which no one knows. Tell the Chipmonk [Clive] his malice is thwarted; I sang for half an hour, and all the house crouched on the step to listen. (L1: 348)

Woolf very much enjoyed music and wanted to be good at music, and at talking and writing about music. Most of her musical culture revolved around the London scene at the time, and a lot of her diary and letter entries simply state that she was going to or had been to a concert. In fact, though, there is reason to believe that music played more than a supporting role in the development of Woolf’s critical vocabulary. She was continually searching for the kind of established critical framework that would allow her to write fluently about any given art form, and although she could rely on the well-established literary canon of criticism, she would often express her frustration at the lack of a canon of music criticism. It may well be, then, that Woolf’s frustration at the absence of a more formal critical language for music was compounded by the informal nature of her immediate intellectual and cultural surroundings, most notably the Bloomsbury Group. But it may also be that this frustration led Woolf to developing an *essayistic* approach to music, as opposed to a more formally coherent one that she thought she lacked.

Woolf’s developing critical style in the context of Bloomsbury demonstrates this perfectly: the informality of the intellectual style of Bloomsbury fostered a longing for a more formal set of critical-analytical tools with which she could write about music, yet at the same time, this informality also allowed her to develop the hypothesis that a critical response to a work of art could manifest itself in the preservation of the distance

between the art-work and the viewer, listener or reader. Rather than attempting to over-determine the work of art through interpretation or explanation (both of which a rigorously formal musical-technical vocabulary might facilitate), Woolf intuited that an adequate response to a work of art might mobilise and deploy alternative, essayistic critical strategies that emerged from a more sense-oriented, more immediate kind of engagement with art. It is my intention here to go into more detail about the Bloomsbury Group, and they are discussed as an example of how the essayistic spirit may have come to be fostered in Woolf, a spirit that begins with the people she lived and worked amongst.

## **Bloomsbury and Musical London**

The Bloomsbury Group has come to promote, stand for, even, the development and radicalisation of aesthetic and artistic ideals, and they may also be remembered for their commitment to the art of criticism, and the discourse of judgement concerning art and literature. Speaking straightforwardly (following from Woolf's own example on the subject), Bloomsbury could be considered a place, a group, a specific juncture in history, an artistic assemblage, a collection of friends, or an intellectual clique. And, for the most part, all of these labels would possess an element of truth and could be regarded individually (and collectively) as a reasonably accurate summation of what Bloomsbury was. S.P. Rosenbaum writes in the introduction to *Victorian Bloomsbury: The Early Literary History of the Bloomsbury Group*:

The Bloomsbury Group was a collectivity of friends and relations who knew and loved one another for a period of time extending over two generations. Because friendships were the original and enduring bonds of the Group it is somewhat misleading to think of Bloomsbury as a movement based on philosophical, moral, artistic, or political affinities. The Group had such affinities, and understanding them is essential to its history, but the affinities came with the friendships, not the other way round. (Rosenbaum, 1987: 3)

In terms of people, the Bloomsbury Group was a collection of English writers, philosophers and artists who frequently met between about 1907 and 1930 at the houses of Clive and Vanessa Bell in Bloomsbury. They discussed aesthetic and philosophical questions and were strongly influenced by G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica* (1903) and by A.N. Whitehead's and Bertrand Russell's *Principia Mathematica* (1910-13). Nearly all

the male members of the group had been at Trinity or King's College, Cambridge and most of them had been "Apostles", i.e. members of the "society," a select, semi-secret university club for the discussion of serious questions, founded at Cambridge in the late 1820s by J.F.D. Maurice and John Sterling. Tennyson, Arthur Hallam, Edward Fitzgerald, and Leslie Stephen had also been Apostles. By the early 1900s, the literary critic Lowes Dickinson, the philosophers Henry Sidgwick, J.M.E. McTaggart, A.N. Whitehead, G.E. Moore, and the art critic Roger Fry, who became one of the Bloomsbury group himself, were all members of the group. The Bloomsbury Group also included the novelist E.M. Forster, the biographer Lytton Strachey, the art critic Clive Bell, the painters Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, the economist John Maynard Keynes, the Fabian writer Leonard Woolf, and, of course, Virginia Woolf. Other members included Desmond McCarthy, Arthur Waley, Saxon Sidney-Turner, Robert Trevelyan, Francis Birrell, J.T. Sheppard, the critic Raymond Mortimer and the sculptor Stephen Tomlin, Bertrand Russell, Aldous Huxley, and T.S. Eliot.

In order to contextualise the development of Woolf's essayistic spirit, it is necessary to remember some of the ideas that influenced the artistic and intellectual thinking of the Bloomsbury Group. These ideas (very broadly speaking) could be said to be concerned with the influences of the growth of Socialism and the artistic movements of Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. For the purposes of this dissertation, I wish to focus on a more oblique aspect of the Group's intellectual and artistic nature, an aspect which I think supports the notion of Woolf's developing essayistic practices. I will refer to this aspect as the dialogic<sup>9</sup> nature of Bloomsbury. In a letter to Vita Sackville-West written in 1927 Woolf comments that:

English village life seems to me stark raving mad – their feuds, their jealousies, their suspicions – Oh and does it strike you that one's friendships are long conversations, perpetually broken, but always about the same thing with the same person? With Lytton I talk about reading; with Clive about love; with Nessa about people; with Roger about art; with Morgan about writing. (L3: 337)

It could be said that of the many influences that the Bloomsbury Group had on Woolf, it was their conversation and dialogue that is most relevant to the concept of essayism and to this dissertation. The nature of the intellectual and artistic dialogue that was characteristic of Bloomsbury, in which individual positions could be seen as

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<sup>9</sup> The Bakhtinian term 'dialogic' is developed in his work, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, ed. by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

changing and mobile, ill-drawn, perhaps, directly pertain to essayism and the notion that the essayist works out his position in dialogic fashion. Moreover this approach means that a critical subjectivity can come to be represented by the momentary, haphazard, even aimless character of conversation that eventually finds form in Woolf's essays, diary entries and letters. Furthermore, not only does this approach make essayism an extension of a critical practice that already occurs, (that of dialogue, sophistry, debate, Plato etc) it also seems to reflect the inherently unstable quality of Woolf's (indeed so, perhaps all of our own) evaluative judgements about art, and in particular, about music.

Reading any biographical history of Bloomsbury, one cannot but be struck by the seemingly exhaustive nature of Bloomsbury's dialogue, and the practically symbiotic relationship between intellectual and artistic contemplation or reflection, and talking, or, as was often the case judging by Woolf's correspondence, arguing. Quentin Bell says this about the group's capacity for and level of dialogue:

Nothing is more indicative of a group than its talk, nothing is more difficult to reconstruct. Even of those latter conversations...little now remains...I should say that the talk was not brilliant. By that I mean that there was not so much in the way of pyrotechnics, none of that launching of mots, that conscious soaring scintillation...It is true that Maynard Keynes was fond of paradox, that Lytton Strachey could suddenly produce remarks of devastating acuteness, and that the whole of Desmond McCarthy's astonishing charm seemed to lie in his tongue, while Virginia Woolf was able, in later life, to enchant her friends with a particular kind of conversational fantasy. But the tone was, I think, derived from G.E. Moore, which meant that there was a certain high seriousness in the conversation despite its gaiety, that there was quite as much argument as gossip, and that in argument it was supposed, at all events, that the contributors were looking for truth, not victory. (Bell, 1968: 33)

In many ways, as important as it is to shed light upon the aesthetic debates surrounding the Bloomsbury group, any consideration of their reflections on art must to some degree be conditioned by the political climate at the turn of the century. Despite the fact that Woolf and her contemporaries could be said to have been entering an ethos of modernism, or could be thought to have produced work belonging to a modernist era, many of Bloomsbury's and indeed many of Woolf's early engagements with art and literature contained the residue of a Romantic idealism that stubbornly refused to disappear from the discourse of art. This, of course, is not a feature specific to Woolf but is characteristic of modernism in general, even in its most brutal forms.

Indeed, according to E.J. Hobsbawm, the development of artistic culture in Britain from the late 1870s to 1914 was reflective of a much more complex divide that seemed to be appearing across sections of society. For instance, the status of art during this period was indicative of a much wider sense of crisis that revolved around the terms 'modern' and 'contemporary' and which questioned the very identity of bourgeois society. Hobsbawm argues that this crisis could be identified in the differences between those who made art and those who consumed it. Whilst artists, he suggests, were invested in the 'flight forward' into progress and development, the general public were left stranded by contemporary art practices that displayed a growing interest in the concepts of utopianism and theory. The general public:

Unless converted by fashion and snob-appeal, murmured defensively that they 'didn't know about art, but they knew what they liked', or retreated into the sphere of 'classic' works whose excellence was guaranteed by the consensus of generations. (Hobsbawm, 1987: 219-20)

We see then that early twentieth century Britain was itself concerned with the nature of criticism and its epistemological status. Unable to judge whether what they liked was permissible, the British public relied on the established repertoire of musical classics. Such 'classics' in music at least could be found, very generally speaking, in the work of Mahler, Strauss, Debussy, Elgar, Vaughan Williams and Sibelius, and could also be detected in the continual growth of the operatic repertoire, with Wagner, Strauss and Puccini constituting the main stock of composers whose work was being played in the concert halls. In literature too, the names of writers such as Thomas Hardy, Marcel Proust and Thomas Mann were on the cusp of becoming commonplace and, on the whole, one could argue that the status of 'high art' at the turn of the twentieth century had never been more secure. However, the most obvious threat to what had come to be considered the 'serious' arts was the simultaneous growth of more popular forms of art; operettas and popular song, musical comedy and bandstand orchestras, reproductions of paintings and books, the genre of jazz and the beginnings of the cinema were all symptomatic of a shifting cultural demographic that was revolutionising technology and discovering the potential mass market appeal of art. Quite simply, it was 'the sheer size and wealth of an urban middle class able to devote more of its attention to culture, as well as the great extension of literate and culture-hungry lower middle classes and sections of the working classes' that make it possible to view the early years of twentieth century Britain in terms of its relative artistic and cultural achievements. However, all

this obvious change and apparent 'progress' in cultural life could not disguise a persistent uncertainty about the concept of the 'modern'. (Hobsbawm, 1987: 221)

Woolf was well aware of these tendencies and worried away at the problem of consumption, the turnover of novelty, and of the very real and problematic effects of cultural inundation (which arguably also define early 21st Century cultural economies). In 'The Decay of Essay Writing' she writes:

But if you have a monster like the British public to feed, you will try to tickle its stale palate in new ways; fresh and amusing shapes must be given to the old commodities. (SE:3)

As a final remark of this introduction, it is worth pointing out that many of the marginal texts that come under scrutiny in this dissertation are not directly intended to feed "a monster like the British public". Rather, they belong to sites of personal privacy or intersubjective intimacy. And writing that occupies this peculiar register is perhaps difficult to subject to rigorous scrutiny since it was not composed in a manner that was conditioned by the criterion of defensibility.<sup>10</sup> But what remains significant about Woolf's marginal writings is that fugitive experience becomes a site of intense reflection.

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<sup>10</sup> It is arguable that as Woolf became more self-consciously 'a writer', she would have begun to compose her diary entries and letters. But, still, the point remains that she would not have composed them in anticipation of them being subjected to any overtly philosophical scrutiny.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Philosophical and Methodological Considerations**

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In this chapter, I will survey and analyse the decisive philosophical concepts that underpin this thesis and will draw out their methodological implications. Rather than setting out methodological principles from which systematic conclusions can be drawn, what this chapter will do is acclimatise the reader to a philosophical approach that is suspect of over-rationalising the process of generating knowledge. I am presenting, therefore, philosophical styles which are self-critical, self-reflexive, hesitant, and therefore, at times, torturously slow in building their intellectual resources. But this is precisely what it required for this examination of criticism. In a sense, criticism is constituted by unstable and often ill-defined practices and concepts. Woolf occupies these unstable domains in a remarkable way. The first, and most fundamental idea that is pertinent here is that of dialectics. Arguably, many of the key insights of dialectical theory have been mislaid, along with the problematics that gave way to the theory in the first instance.

#### **The Dialectic**

The concept of dialectics is crucial to the arguments presented here. In order to get at the interior of many of the rhetorical constructions of criticism, it is important to subject them to their epistemological presuppositions. I am arguing throughout this dissertation that these presuppositions have been ruthlessly examined since the high point of Idealist philosophy in the late Eighteenth Century. It has been acknowledged countless times that Hegel's philosophical aesthetics has been crucial to many subsequent reflections on art and experience. Most importantly though, for criticism, was his development of the concept of dialectics - precisely because it challenges the idea that we are obliged to make distinctions, either metaphysical or actual, between categories of understanding. By removing the limitations or boundaries of separation, dialectics undermines many of the dualisms inherent within a philosophical understanding of art (true-false, beautiful-ugly, etc.). Thus, dialectics fundamentally destabilizes our relation to objects and concepts, and for Adorno, dialectical thought was more representative of what it is actually like to be in the world.

Though Hegel never wrote explicitly on the philosophy of music, or on the philosophy of criticism, his work is still relevant here by virtue of his articulations regarding the cognitive processes of thinking and the consequent relationship between epistemology and aesthetics. One of the most powerful connections between epistemology and aesthetics came to be epitomised by the Romantic concept of *Bildung*, (as will be mentioned in Chapter 5 of this dissertation) in which it is considered plausible, if not preferable, that one attain complete self-consciousness by way of an aesthetic education. For Hegel, however, it was conceptual thought that represents the greatest source of knowledge about the possibilities and potential of experience. It was essential, for him, that as thinking subjects we fully understand the various ‘stages’ and ‘movements’ of thought, and that as rational beings we strive for the *objective* articulation of self-consciousness and reality.

It was in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) that Hegel first set out his conceptions of forms of consciousness as part of his system of idealist philosophy (indeed, Hegel thought of the *Phenomenology* as an introduction to the *Science of Logic*). In part, his project was to expose the dialectical nature of consciousness through its inherent contradictions. Broadly speaking and *contra* Kantian philosophy, Hegel is critical of the idea that reality appears to us through our faculty of knowledge, and that, in order to get access to this reality, we must therefore analyse knowledge. In fact, he dismisses Kant's argument – which states that as a consequence of our reliance on the subjective faculty of knowledge we are unable to know things *in themselves*, and reinterprets the problem as one that is focused on the immanent critique of consciousness itself. It is almost as if Hegel is unwilling to engage with our potential capacity to know what is ‘outside’ consciousness, or, indeed, whether this is at all possible, before he has examined what we first come to encounter this ‘outside’ with, namely, consciousness. Furthermore, to truly understand this consciousness, we must begin with only consciousness, with nothing outside consciousness, so that the dialectical process can articulate itself as the *self-movement of consciousness*, ‘The series of configurations which consciousness goes through along this road is, in reality, the detailed history of the education of consciousness itself to the standpoint of Science’ (Hegel, 1807; 1977: 50) Consciousness's self-relation is further articulated ‘Consciousness provides its own criterion from within itself, so that the investigation becomes a comparison of consciousness with itself’ (Hegel, 1807; 1977: 53).



The Hegelian dialectic seeks to examine the conditions of our conceptions of knowledge, that is, it asks whether the material reality of knowledge corresponds with our conception of that knowledge. What things appear to be and what things *really are* is another way of understanding this distinction, and, for Hegel, the contradictions that arise within this relationship constitute much of his dialectical theory. Interestingly, it is useful to conceive of Hegelian dialectics as both historical and ontological, for whilst, in the first instance Hegel commits to engaging with reality in the historical sense, i.e., he explains dialectics through processes of human action (Master-Slave), he also devotes much time to understanding the nature of our conceptions of reality (perception, sense-certainty etc.) before 'applying' his theory to material existence. Nevertheless, as Charles Taylor argues, these two strands of Hegelian dialectics are intimately bound:

This means that the perfection of knowledge, where knowledge of the world comes together with self-knowledge, has not always been realised. The practice of knowledge, unlike that of playing hockey, say, cannot be divorced from our conception of it. Knowledge is ipso facto imperfect if it is in error about its own nature. Hence perfect knowledge can only be attained when men reach an adequate conception of it. Thus the dialectic of theories of knowledge is connected to a dialectic of historical forms of consciousness. (Taylor, 2005: 132)

Criticism, in the broadest sense therefore, both institutionally and culturally, could be seen to constitute knowledge as such. But further inquiry into knowledge, as Adorno argues, inevitably results in the tendency to synthesise or master our experience in the name of knowledge. The concept of knowledge carries a teleological burden that criticism seeks to escape. Moreover, and more importantly for our purposes here, knowledge can only ever speak to universal concepts, thus, the non-identity of experience is passed over in the pursuit of knowledge.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel presents us with the idea that sense certainty constitutes immediate and absolute knowledge. We sense things, they are just there, and we know them to *be* because they simply *are*. Initially, this register of understanding appears to be extremely rich, our sense certainty affords us seemingly inexhaustible access to knowledge and content. If we accept the notion that our senses can lead to an unobstructed account of the world and of objects, for example, there is a table because I can see it, I can see that it *is* blue, that it *is* smooth, then we seem have an unrivalled, 'full' account of experience. However, merely stating that something just is, involves us simply registering the being of things, and is in fact, according to Hegel, the poorest type of knowledge. We are not required to do any thinking and the immediacy of the object appears to be sufficient. Furthermore, what sense-experience *does not*

*acknowledge*, what it leaves out is the content, the particulars or details of a thing. There is a tension, therefore, between the seemingly inexhaustible richness of sense-certainty, and the awareness that this sense-certainty is in fact, rather empty. Because, according to Hegel, we try to make out, to perceive what is before us, this act of perceiving is in fact our consciousness acknowledging that our sense-certainty is not as sufficient as we first think it to be. Sense-certainty deludes itself into thinking that it can account for the particulars of an object or a thing, but in truth, all it is capable of is expressing a universal. All sense-certainty allows us to consider is the universal. What remains to be accounted for is the particularity of an object or experience.

Adorno's philosophy of the non-identical, essentially, his *Negative Dialectics*, was intended to produce a materialist thinking that could go beyond idealism without incurring the double accusation of transcendence or immediacy.<sup>11</sup> Identity thinking claims that conceptual thought can seize hold of all and any object, including humans and human experiences, through manipulation of concepts alone. This thinking, Adorno strongly associates with the rise of the bourgeois class. The critique of identity thinking therefore, is a kind of ideology critique. However, any attempt to go beyond identity thinking from within the confines of transcendental thought,<sup>12</sup> gives rise to an equally untenable position; that is to say, it becomes self contradictory. In order to put into effect the counterclaims to idealism, one would have to believe in the possibility of transcendence and of a discourse in which things are merely given. These 'givens' of experience present thought with a *fait accompli*; inquiry can go no further. The way of out this problem for Adorno, was through immanent critique of the concept, *but in such a way as to preserve the illusion of constitutive subjectivity*.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Negative Dialectics was supposed to represent a critique and a development of Hegelian dialectics. Adorno's primary concern was with the relinquishment of the drive to resolve dialectical tension, 'As the thinker immerses himself in what faces him to begin with, in the concept, and as he perceives its immanently antinomical character, he clings to the idea of something beyond contradiction.' (ND: 146)

<sup>12</sup> I am working here with Kant's concept of transcendental idealism. One of the most fundamental relationships for Kant is one that concerns consciousness and reality, being and thought, subject or object. Before Kant, philosophy had worked on the assumption that there were objects in the world about whose existence we could be sure of, that is to say, we could assert the existence of objects outside of ourselves, objects were, to put it simply, just there. However, Kant argued that objects could not exist outside of our relation to them, that, in fact, the object existed for our consciousness, and that we could not be sure of the existence or reality or the world, outside of our own consciousness. This implied also, that we could not understand the nature of the concept of being, without understanding the nature of consciousness, and that indeed, being and consciousness were one and the same thing. Kant asserted that we could not know 'things in themselves' but could only know them through our consciousness of them, that our experience of objects or of reality was mediated by our consciousness.

<sup>13</sup> Adorno reflects that, 'The confidence that from immediacy, from the solid and downright primary, an unbroken entirety will spring – this confidence is an idealistic chimera.' (ND: 40)

Taking up the left-over philosophical aporia present in a post-Hegelian and post-Kantian world, one of Adorno's central concerns was how to rescue philosophy from its own conceptualization, given that, for Adorno, rationality and philosophy had failed when it allowed the horror of Auschwitz to occur. In the now famous maxim, Adorno begins *Negative Dialectics* by claiming that, 'Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed.' (ND: 3) Rationality had become *irrational*, and the only way to salvage the discourse of philosophy would be to turn philosophy's critical reflection back on itself. What this amounts to for Adorno, is the critique of metaphysical a priori, of first principles or essences. Adorno's task, therefore, was to radically reinterpret subjectivity and the philosophy of the concept from within the confines of their own structures. This immanent critique gives rise to his philosophy of the non-identical. 'The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder[...]' (ND: 5). Identity thinking subsumes objects under concepts, but in doing so, it must necessarily forget some aspect of that object that the concept cannot account for. Concepts cannot ever completely grasp an object in its totality, but can render some partial aspect of it visible to language. For Adorno, this subjective dominating impulse represents a fundamental injustice to the object at hand, because some aspect of it will be disregarded in the name of understanding. Yet we are faced with a problem because all thinking, therefore, is compliant with identifying thought, '[...] the appearance of identity is inherent in thought itself, in its pure form. To think is to identify.' (ND: 5) The totalizing effect of identity thinking makes, for Adorno, a false whole which must therefore be shown to be false by the subject, 'Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance, I have no way but to break immanently, in its own measure, through the appearance of total identity.' (ND: 5) The non-identical, therefore, is the name given to the process which honours the particularity of experiences, events, people and objects. The non-identical gives form to the obscured aspects of an object. Woolf fits into this dialectical movement by virtue of the ways in which her work will be shown to honour this philosophy of the nonidentical by doing justice to those aspects of experience that identity thinking overlooks.

## Expertise and Enigmaticalness

The significance of a potential salvaging of Woolf's musical marginalia and the mutuality of Adorno and Woolf's work come together in one of Adorno's under-developed theses in the 'Draft Introduction' of *Aesthetic Theory* in which he writes:

Aesthetics was productive only so long as it undiminishedly respected the distance from the empirical and with windowless thoughts penetrated into the contents of its other; or when, with a closeness bordering on embodiment, it judged the work from within, as sometimes occurs in the scattered remarks of individual artists, which are important not as the expression of a personality that is hardly authoritative with regard to the work, but because often, without recurring to the subject, they document something of the experiential force of the work. These reports are often constrained by naiveté that society insists on finding in art. Artists either stubbornly resist aesthetics with artisanal rancour, or the antidilettantes devise dilettantic theories that make do. (AT: 425)

In other words, Woolf's 'scattered remarks' about music are important not because they confirm or deny any aspect of Woolf's character, but because they make comment upon the experiential. Again, the mutuality of Woolf and Adorno is evident from this quote because Woolf's remarks require aesthetic theory if they are to be considered more than intuitions, and Adorno's theory needs Woolf's writing if it is to successfully conceptualise aesthetic experience without sacrificing the phenomenological.

If, for argument's sake we were to consider Woolf the musical dilettante in respect to a technical musical fluency and Adorno the connoisseur, then again, it seems possible to call into question Woolf's contribution to a musical discourse. But it is precisely her status as dilettante that is important to salvage, because, as Adorno notes, Woolf's dilettantism actually allows her to preserve what he terms art's enigmaticalness, which in turn, produces an interpretation which recognizes the limits of pursuing complete comprehension of the art work. The preservation of art's enigmaticalness represents the task of aesthetics for Adorno because it is the incomprehensibility of art that is to be comprehended, not necessarily the work in itself. Woolf's relative lack of expertise around music therefore brings us closer to the concept of enigmaticalness:

Its enigmaticalness may in an elementary fashion confirm the so-called unmusical, who does not understand the 'language of music,' hears nothing but nonsense, and wonders what all the noise is about; the difference between what this person hears and what the initiated hear defines art's enigmaticalness. (AT: 160)

Woolf does not properly constitute what Adorno here calls ‘unmusical’; after all, she was famously a great admirer of music, and an enthusiastic listener of music. She knew very well what ‘all the noise [was] about’; she simply did not have a technical musical literacy. But we can see Woolf appearing more vividly in Adorno as he develops the concept of enigmaticalness:

Whoever refuses to re-enact the work under the discipline it imposes falls under the empty gaze cast by a painting or a poem, the same empty gaze that, in a sense, the art-alien encounter in music; and it is precisely the empty questioning gaze that the experience and interpretation of artworks must assimilate if they are not to go astray; failing to perceive the abyss is no protection from it. (AT: 160)

The first word that resonates with Woolf’s writing in Adorno’s quote is ‘re-enact,’ because, as I will show, some of Woolf’s writing can be thought of as having ‘musical’ qualities itself, with rhythmic and melodic features being thrown forwards. So that while she may not be commenting explicitly on the work itself, she is, to an extent, re-enacting a sonic memory through writing. Take her recollection of the sound of waves on the beach at St Ives from ‘Sketch of the Past’: ‘It is of hearing the waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one, two, behind a yellow blind.’ (MoB: 78) The breaking waves are rhythmised, and she discovers a metre in their pattern. This metric pattern is mimetically reconfigured in the repetition of ‘one, two, one, two,’ and the alliteration and assonance (‘sending’/ ‘splash’ and ‘behind’/ ‘blind’) apparent in the phrase mean that this particular memory is far from a distant recollection, rather the images and sounds of the past are given renewed status as lively sonic experiences. And yet, this phrase, poetic as it is, seems also to engather a void into itself. There is nothing else going on other than a listening to the waves breaking, and the ‘yellow blind’ throws the picture off balance by reverting drastically to the visual, producing a synaesthetic clash between the visual and the aural. The ‘yellow blind’ invokes the visual, but the blind itself is an obscuring object and it creates a boundary between the inside and the outside. Furthermore, the phrase as a whole captures the non-locatability of the seascape. The phrase poeticises an empty listening. The ‘empty gaze’ can be salvaged precisely because it can be seen to perform an important function in Adorno and Woolf’s reflection on the aesthetic. Arguably, aesthetic reflection needs the empty gaze because without it, artworks would be subsumed by theory, or identical to their interpretation. Aesthetic reflection, if we are to follow Adorno’s logic, can tolerate a degree of alienation in the face of aesthetic

phenomena and critical discourse, can, therefore, capitalise on the sense of the wonderment, confusion and misapprehension that is present in such ‘art-alien’ encounters. And in Woolf’s case, this misapprehension often stimulates the autobiographical narrative of the dialectic of revelation and concealment in works of art. We can see this at work in the following note in Woolf’s diary from Saturday, 13 February 1915:

We wrote and after luncheon L. went to the Library and I went to a concert at the Queen’s Hall. I ran into Oliver Strachey, standing very like a Strachey in the Hall, because he dislikes sitting inside waiting for the music. I got by luck a very good place, for the Hall was nearly full – and it was a divine concert. But one of the things I decided as I listened (its difficult not to think of other things) was that all descriptions of music are worthless, and rather unpleasant; they are apt to be hysterical, and to say things that people will be ashamed of having said afterwards. They played Haydn, Mozart no. 8, Brandenburg Concerto, and the Unfinished. I daresay the playing wasn’t very good, but the stream of melody was divine. It struck me what an odd thing it was – this little box of pure beauty set down in the middle of London streets, and people – all looking so ordinary, crowding to hear, as if they weren’t ordinary after all, or had an ambition for something better. Opposite me was Bernard Shaw (D1: 33).

Woolf’s account of her struggle to make sense of musical experience betrays a sense of alienation. The theoretical difficulty here is to discover the connection between, on the one hand, her distracted listening, and on the other her subsequent assertion regarding the worthlessness and unpleasantness of musical description. Everything hinges on her use of the word ‘divine’. Her admission that she is unable to remain concentrated on the musical performance, and yet, her pronouncement that it was a ‘divine concert’ actually reinforces and exemplifies Adorno’s insistence that aesthetic reflection must assimilate the empty gaze. In context, Woolf’s informal and colloquial use of the adjective divine conveys to us the “excellence” of the music – but the remark also hints at a metaphysical dimension that is reinforced by her situating of the concert space, and which is then punctured and then illuminated by this divine music. This is then further developed as she imagines the concert hall itself as ‘a little box of pure beauty.’ The metaphysical and quasi-religious rhetoric is further developed by the notion of purity, and makes the disjunction between the beauty of the music and the *shameful* descriptions of the music all the more acute. In a sense, the word ‘divine’ is the only word Woolf has that would sustain the structure of the aesthetic experience and protect her from the shame of description. This kind of construction is not the outcome

of a listening, as such, but through her deep assimilation of the basic relationship between individuals and musical utterances, she produces a kind of ‘abyss’, in the Adornoian sense. This abyss appears because the divine metaphor is both full and empty. By not concentrating on the music being played, by turning away from the artwork, and by allowing herself to be led by a line of questioning, Woolf actually produces an insight about the experience of listening, and assimilates experience and interpretation. Thus, she can be seen to be preserving art’s enigmaticalness. Furthermore, Woolf’s observations about the limitations of language in conveying what music can express chime with Adorno’s argument, ‘that artworks say something and in the same breath conceal it.’ (AT: 160) Rather than framing her thoughts as an aside to her aesthetic experience, as Woolf does by placing them in parentheses, I would like to reposition them as being of central importance to reflection upon aesthetic experience. Her partial attention to the musical performance illustrates perfectly Adorno’s juncture ‘that one understands something of art, not that one understands art.’ (AT: 161)

The metaphorical description as ‘a little box of pure beauty’ is not the invocation of any philosophical discourse about beauty *per se*; rather it is an enchanting of the physical space, and gestures towards a pre-rational aspect to her experience.<sup>14</sup> Woolf’s ‘box of pure beauty’ is both a description of the concert hall and the invocation of the promise of magic, where unreal and ‘divine’ things occur. Her idea that the concert hall could be other, and perhaps *more* than it actually is can also be incorporated into Adorno’s logic. According to him, stabilising a view of the object that allows it to become more than it is whilst retaining its sense of unreality is ‘the idea of art’ (AT: 104). A concert hall cannot really *be* a box of pure beauty, but we can imagine the concert hall *as if it were* a box of beauty and this is how she ‘gains control of its semblance...as well as [negating] it as unreal.’ (AT: 104)

Adorno’s theory affords a degree of legibility to certain aspects of experience that might be lost. Thus, for him, art works preserve, but crucially resist resolving, the antagonistic nature of experience. In Woolf this is constituted as the articulation of the struggle to determinedly account for the ways in which music affects her. In a letter to Vanessa Bell from 1909, she writes, ‘We heard Parsifal yesterday; it was much better done, and I felt within a space of tears. I expect it is the most remarkable of the operas; it slides from music to words almost imperceptibly. However, I have been niggling at the effect all the morning, without much success’ (D1: 406). The ‘niggling’ experience

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<sup>14</sup> The theme of enchantment dominates much of *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno says at one point, ‘Artworks speak like elves in fairytales.’ (AT: 160)

Woolf articulates is another example of the preservation of the incomprehensible and the non-identical in art. Woolf's inability to articulate precisely what it is about a musical experience that she finds so moving, can be likened to an aspect of Adorno's aesthetic theory that advances the state of astonishment as being indicative of the moment when language falls short of comprehending experience.

Aesthetic feeling is not the feeling that is aroused: It is astonishment vis-à-vis what is beheld rather than vis-à-vis what it is about; it is a being overwhelmed by what is aconceptual and yet determinate, not the subjective affect released, that in the case of aesthetic experience may be called feeling. (AT: 217)

That Woolf was 'within a space of tears' suggests that she was indeed overwhelmed not necessarily with the actual performance of Parsifal but with the effect the production had on her. This sense of distance between the actual performance and the experience of the performance is further reinforced in her diary entry which remains speculative in the extreme; she 'expects' that the opera is remarkable and she cannot perceive with certainty the relationship between the words and the music. Thus, what can be salvaged from Woolf's observations on music is this sense of uncertainty.

## Essayism

The essay is a form and practice of writing and reflection that has a long and established history. Yet, the essay is also marginal; it is not regarded as a secure context for the establishment of disputable knowledge claims. But neither can the essay be dismissed as being without cognitive import. And while it might enjoy a certain stylistic freedom, or be marked by a personal literary fingerprint, the essay cannot be understood as being simply, or unconditionally, a literary or aesthetic object *per se*. It is this double character of the essay, the fact that the essay thrives in the interstices of the literary and the critical (i.e., has a cogent, world-revealing content) that here requires theoretical examination and development.

Therefore, the generic limitations of the essay will be used here to explore an inter-disciplinary tension within the writing of music criticism. The essay's status as that which presents both aesthetic and cognitive information lends the articulation of musical aesthetic experience a potential form; the essay writes knowledge, but also tests the boundaries of the dissemination and presentation of this knowledge by writing *a*



*subjectivity*. To what extent, therefore, does our perception of the potential objectivity of criticism change when we allow the subject to speak? Essayism marks the point at which the distinction between art and philosophy and literature and the self are entangled, overlap, and ultimately become indistinct.<sup>15</sup>

We know that the form of the essay played a crucial role in the development of Woolf criticism, but, as Leila Brosnan points out in her study on *Virginia Woolf's Essays and Journalism*, work that has been done on Woolf the essayist has tended to focus on the *content* of the essays themselves rather than the relationship between the essay and its implications for genre theory<sup>16</sup>. Brosnan's work is similar to the work done here on Woolf which continues to develop ways of critically appraising Woolf's non-fiction without falling prey to the dangers of looking at her marginalia with the intention of creating a unified system. As Brosnan points out, it would be all too easy to insist that snatches of Woolf might illuminate particular theoretical positions, but without due care to the specific qualities of such an illumination, one can do justice neither to the text nor the theory itself (Brosnan, 1997: 9). It seems important therefore to develop a reading of Woolf's essays that engages with a critical theory of subjectivity that is constituted through a philosophy of the non-identical in order that such a reading remain, in some senses, *metacritical* so as to avoid the concretization of any one particular reading. This would, in turn, provide a reading of Woolf that remained faithful to Adorno's skepticism regarding the infallibility of a metaphysical discourse. All reflection therefore is contingent upon a recognition of the instability of philosophical a prioris.

The disruption of the supremacy of metaphysics and of grand narratives concerning the development of a modernist aesthetics allows the critical status of the essay to come into focus. In terms of the historical context during which Woolf was writing, she was very much still connected to the legacy of the English essayistic tradition which gave

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<sup>15</sup> Scholarly research into the genre of 'essayism' might have once been thought of as belonging exclusively to the domains of literary theory, or English, but, as this dissertation will show, it is becoming increasingly incumbent upon us to consider the *form* of music-critical writing.

<sup>16</sup> Anyone familiar with Woolf studies will know that research on Woolf's essays is a growing industry. For general reading see: Joeres Boetcher, Ruth-Ellen and Elizabeth Mittman, *The Politics of the Essay; Feminist Perspectives* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), Julia Briggs *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (Orlando: Harvest, 2006), Alexander Butrym *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1989), Jane Goldman *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Hermione Lee *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage, 1997), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. Susan Sellers, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; 2010)

rise to writers like William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, Francis Bacon and Samuel Coleridge Taylor. At the same time, and separately, various schools of European intellectual thought were developing and expanding critical and theoretical work on genre theory and, in particular, the essay. This work remains, to this day, indebted to T.W. Adorno and György Lukács, whose attempts to analyse and reconstruct the essay as a predominantly critical text, through and against various strains of late-Romantic philosophical thought, propelled the status of the essay from pleasure-oriented, semi-autobiographical prose, to a potentially revolutionary tool in the domains of art and criticism. Not since Adorno and Lukács's expositional writing on the critical potential of the form of the essay has a theorization of the form been so compelling. I submit that it seems intellectually irresponsible to ignore the consequences their work has for musical-critical writing. It is my intention, therefore, to draw out the parallels between Woolf's essayistic development and the concurrent developments in European essayism. In the essay 'Montaigne' from Series One of *The Common Reader* Woolf writes:

Let us simmer over our incalculable cauldron, our enthralling confusion, our hotch-potch of impulses, our perpetual miracle – for the soul throws up wonders every second. Movement and death are the essence of our being; rigidity is death; conformity is death; let us say what comes into our heads, repeat ourselves, contradict ourselves, fling out the wildest nonsense, and follow the most fantastic fancies without caring what the world does or thinks or says. For nothing matters except life; and, of course, order. (CR1: 63)

Woolf recognized not just the seemingly limitless possibilities concerning the content of the essay, but also the *critical* capacity of the essay. She takes great care to specify that whilst the form of the essay is extensive in what it permits the author to include in its writing, one should also be mindful of 'order', as if to remind the reader that even chaos requires some direction. However, this invocation of 'order' reads a little ambiguously because it is tacked on to the end of an otherwise effusive and evocative passage. The notion of 'order' is also rather intriguing, for the last thing anyone expects to read at the end of such an energetic train of thought is that we must stop and curtail our 'fantastic fancies' in the name of order. Moreover, if we read her summoning of order as being anticipated by the earlier references to 'rigidity' and 'conformity' we might again be surprised to note that these two terms are considered to bring about 'death', which only makes her claim to 'order' all the more unexpected.

Woolf was certainly keen that writers and readers alike be mindful of certain principles of linguistic coherency and sense, but, and to read a little more into this notion of order, perhaps one might speculate that she was making glances in the direction of the *form* of the essay, because a further (albeit perhaps unintended) nod in the direction of the theoretical conditions of the essay comes when Woolf suggests that we must ‘say what comes into our heads, repeat ourselves, contradict ourselves’ (CR1: 63). Perhaps what this paragraph convinces us of is that Woolf was, even at this stage, considering both the form and the content of essayistic writing. She was aware of the relationship between form and content as existing as a necessary dialectic. Woolf’s tendency to mention, but not necessarily develop, broader aesthetic and philosophical ideas in relation to reading and writing has been noted by Ann Banfield, who identifies such concerns in Woolf’s fiction, ‘Yet the subject of...the external world, the nature of perception – does enter Woolf’s novels couched in explicit philosophical language’ (Banfield, 2000: 4). It is possible, also, to hear this ‘explicit philosophical’ language in Woolf’s non-fiction and in the essays in particular, for her invocation of ‘essences’ and ‘being’, two terms that also occupy a space in a philosophical discourse, seem to suggest a familiarity with questions related, but not limited to, artistic form, aesthetic experience and subjectivity. In fact, as Banfield argues, Woolf’s proximity to certain philosophical discourses was a direct result of her involvement with the Bloomsbury Group. The link between Bloomsbury and essayism comes about through a consideration of the essayist as *being like a philosopher* and in ‘The Modern Essay’ also taken from Series One of *The Common Reader*, Woolf identifies certain characteristics that the essayist and the philosopher have in common. Woolf recognizes that it is the pursuit of *truth*, and the burden of this task, that links the philosopher and the essayist. This, in turn, allows parallels between Woolf’s work and the work being done on European essayism to be seen more vividly. So, how was philosophy at that time articulating itself, and what were the influences that Woolf was coming under?

In terms of British intellectual history, she was writing during a time that coincided broadly with, ‘*work on knowledge*’ (Banfield, 2000: 4) that was being done by Bertrand Russell *Principles of Mathematics* (1937) and *Our Knowledge of the External World as a Field for Scientific Method in Philosophy* (1926), G.E. Moore *Principia Ethica* (1903) and Alfred North Whitehead *Science and the Modern World* (1926). One of the reasons why Bloomsbury came into contact with these various philosophical developments was because burgeoning interest in theories of knowledge had largely been borne out of philosophies of science, but the problem of knowledge necessarily invoked other

disciplines, namely art, because of what Russell names ‘“*the gulf between the world of physics and the word of sense*”’ (Banfield, 2000: 5). Russell, Moore and Whitehead were concerned with how to reconcile two seemingly opposite theories of how we come to have knowledge of the external world. On the one hand was the world of scientific empirical data, and the other was the world of sense perception and sensation. Philosophy had to find a way of making knowledge objective, without dismissing the importance of subjective sensation (Banfield, 2000: 6). Adorno puts it this way, ‘In sharp contrast to the usual ideal of science, the objectivity of dialectical cognition needs not less subjectivity, but more. Philosophical experience withers otherwise.’ (ND: 40) However, there was also another text that made an impact on British philosophy and Woolf at this time and this was the appearance of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Philosophicus* (1921):

The years 1911-1913 are also those in which the young Wittgenstein entered the English philosophical scene, those of the intense exchange between him and Russell. The profound crisis created for Russell by Wittgenstein’s criticism led to Russell’s abandonment of the Theory of Knowledge text. Wittgenstein as a philosophical influence sets [...] a kind of terminus ad quem to the period of the theory of knowledge. (Banfield, 2000: 7)

And in amongst these monumental yet subtle shifts in British philosophy, Woolf, though by her own admission limited in philosophical capacities, was falling in and out of conversations at the heart of which may well have been many of these issues:

This does not prevent the *Tractatus* from playing a role in our reconstruction of Bloomsbury’s intellectual world. It came out of the period of Russell’s theory of knowledge, and its conceptions, language and dominant metaphors find their counterparts in Woolf, not because she came under its influence, but because she shared its ways of thinking. (Banfield, 2000: 9)

One of the most explicit examples of Woolf’s externalization of this philosophical background appears during her contemplation of what it *means to be* an essayist in her essay on Montaigne. She implies that a truly ‘great’ essayist is one who has the ability to traverse our artistic, moral, and ethical modes of being. This immediately challenges the notion that the essayist merely knows how to write in the tradition of *belles lettres*. Instead, Woolf describes the essayist as a sage or a mentor, as someone who is

renowned for profound wisdom, a *philosopher*.<sup>17</sup> The essayist has the task of making sense of the ‘unpredictable’ soul and the world around him. The essayist is entrusted to order the chaos of the mind.

Liberated from the structures and influences of social custom and without the help of guiding institutions, Woolf concedes that for the essayist it is, ‘far more difficult to live well the private life than the public.’ She does, however, identify figures from the past that have done so;

It is an art that each must learn separately, though there are, perhaps, two or three men, like Homer, Alexander the Great, and Epaminondas among the ancients, and Etienne de La Boétie among the moderns, whose example may help us. (CR: 64)

In fact, this ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ spread itself is interesting here, for on the one hand Woolf rejects historical narrative at the outset and writes an ahistorical account of the essay, yet on the other hand, she can’t seem to resist the vivid references to historical figures. The fact that she betrays ahistoricity in favour of the deeply historicist approach suggests that she somehow knew what enormous impact her invocation of history would have on her argument. She also gives us an insight into some of the contradictions that must necessarily abide in the essay. And, it is, of course, the responsibility of the essayist to negotiate these contradictions. And thus, Woolf allows us to consider what an enormous task, indeed, burden, the essayist has ahead of him.

She describes the essayist as a man of extreme learning, but that, in addition to his knowledge of world, he must also be a sage, a reflective individual whom we might all be able to rely on, someone whom we could trust to make sense of the world. Importantly, Woolf develops, and essentially *elevates* the status of the essayist from simply someone with gifted abilities in writing, to a philosopher who is able to critically evaluate the world and his position in it. But Woolf doesn’t entirely neglect the importance of the literary skill of the essayist and the enjoyment he might offer the reader, and she remains committed to the pleasurable aspect of essay reading and writing. She writes in ‘The Modern Essay’:

Of all forms of literature, however, the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words. The principle which controls it is simply that it should give

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17 Note that in Woolf’s diary from June 1918 she writes, ‘We discussed the moral eminence of Moore, comparable to that of Christ or Socrates, so R. and L. held.’ Oliver Bell, Anne ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Volume One 1915-1919* (Harcourt Brace and Company: Florida, 1977) p. 155. Ray Strachey (honorary Parliamentary Secretary of the National Union of Women’s Suffrage Societies 1916-21) and Leonard Woolf.

pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure. Everything in an essay must be subdued to that end. It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed, with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world. (CR: 211)

As will be shown, it is in fact the contradictory nature of the essay as form, as developed by Adorno that will guide the rereading of Woolf's essays. And, contra the perception that Woolf succeeds in articulating insights into the precise nature of an essayistic subjectivity, I will show that in fact her writing actually presents the impossibility of conceiving of such a subjectivity in its entirety. This attempt to write a strong subject position is undermined by continuous self-reflection that casts doubt on the status of the writerly self. However, it is precisely this attempt to inscribe subjectivity that reveals the essay as a form of writing that rejects the potential sundering of subject and object. Its form is also its content because the essay is in essence, *an attempt*, and can therefore only ever piece together a picture of wholeness. Perhaps the most common understanding we have of the term is to essay, to try, to make an attempt, from the French *essayer*. The writer essays, the attempt is an action, a gesture, the writing of the essay is an activity, the writer *makes* the essay, as one might make a picture, a sentence, a telephone call. But the essay is also a noun, it is a thing among other things, it is a text, an inscription, a piece of prose, a comment upon something or other, it is an insight into the interiority of the author, a signature, perhaps. As a verb, the meaning of the essay is indisputable; it is an attempt. There is little ambiguity to be found in this understanding of the activity itself. But, as a noun, as a thing, one single, over-arching definition of the essay cannot be found. The essay is not one, singular writing, but many kinds of writing.

Claire de Obaldia in *The Essayistic Spirit* makes the following introductory remarks about the essay;

The essay is an essentially ambulatory and fragmentary prose form. Its direction and pace, the tracks it chooses to follow, can be changed at will; hence it's fragmentary or 'paratactic' structure. Rather than progressing in a linear and planned fashion, the essay develops around a number of topics which offer themselves along the way. And this sauntering from one topic to the next together with the way in which each topic is informally 'tried out' suggests a tentativeness, a looseness, in short a randomness which seems to elude the unifying conception

– syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic – of a recognizable generic identity. (de Obaldia, 1995: 2)

The essay opposes continuous prose by virtue of its multiple 'directions' and 'number of topics', in other words, the essay seems to be characterised by the lack of a centrifugal or overarching thesis that is logically developed and argued throughout the course of the work. This lack of coherent argument is the cause of what de Obaldia refers to as a 'tentativeness' or 'randomness' of form, but, crucially, de Obaldia identifies the consequence of this 'randomness' as impacting upon the *identity* of the essay. In other words, she makes a connection between the varying number of topics contained within the essay and the resulting impact this has on the structural organisational success of the essay, which, she argues, contributes to the essay's identity.

According to de Obaldia, the identity of the essayistic text is based upon its rejection of a unifying conception. This unifying conception is dependent on the syntactic (the rules of grammar and logic), semantic (signification of or meaning between words) and pragmatic (the use of linguistic signs in relation to actual situations or human behaviour) properties of the text.<sup>18</sup> The emotive, figurative or expressive modes of meaning are extinguished and ultimately dismissed from the cognitively rational construction of meaning, and thus the identity of the text becomes based on its structural and empirical ability to *make sense*, in a syntactic and cognitive manner. This particular sense of meaning, de Obaldia argues, is lacking from the form of the 'essay', and as such, we are left with a view that the essay constitutes a 'random' form of writing. Essays are considered, in the most general sense, to be trials, attempts, or forays into subjects that may or may not be related. Characteristically, the essay is a form of writing that does not have a specific direction; it does not articulate a purpose, a thesis or a formal argument which it either proves or disproves throughout the course of the writing before arriving at a firm conclusion. Rather, what is articulated in the essay is often only loosely related to what it might claim to be about and the ostensible subject matter sometimes differs from what is *actually* written. The essay can be thought of as a piece of writing that is reflective; the essay muses, it records thoughts and events in their instantaneousness, in the 'here and now', as opposed to concentrating on a specific area of enquiry. Montaigne says as much in the opening of his essay 'On Repentance':

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<sup>18</sup> We might presume that de Obaldia's reference to the three elements of the 'sign' have been taken from the American logical positivist Charles Morris's theory of language. See Morris, C., *Logical Positivism, Pragmatism and Scientific Empiricism* (Paris: Hermann et cie, 1937).

Others shape the man; I portray him, and offer to the view one in particular, who is ill-shaped enough, and whom, could I refashion him, I should certainly make very different from what he is. But there is no chance of that. Now the lines of my portrait are never at fault, although they change and vary. The world is but a perpetual see-saw. Everything goes incessantly up and down – the earth, the rocks of Caucasus, the pyramids of Egypt – both with the universal motion and with their own. Constancy itself is nothing but a sluggish movement. I cannot fix my subject. He is always restless, and reels with a natural intoxication. I catch him here, as he is at the moment when I turn my attention to him. I do not portray his being; I portray his passage; not a passage from one age to another or, as the common people say, from seven years to seven years, but from day to day, from minute to minute. I must suit my story to the hour, for soon I may change, not only by chance but also by intention. It is a record of various and variable occurrences, an account of thoughts that are unsettled, and as chance will have it, at times contradictory, either because I am then another self, or because I approach my subject under different circumstances and with other considerations. (Montaigne, 2003:235)

Montaigne's self-deprecating tone is clear enough as he establishes that much of the content of his work is a record of himself and his fluctuating moods, and we are given to understand that he will present a series of little vignettes about his own experiences without recourse to any clear argument, or to any clear conclusion. What is at stake, though, in reading Montaigne's essays is the extent to which an irreverent rhetoric masks a more serious intention. The particularity of his self-address also reveals aspects of universal human qualities. And though he is quick to point out that his essays generally concern only himself, there is a distinct sense in which his writing alludes to the universal or common man. His self-reflections invite us to see not only him, but also ourselves and other people too. Moreover, Montaigne repeatedly makes reference to his commitment to a 'truth': 'But truth is so great a thing that we ought not to despise any medium that will conduct us to it.' (2003:344) 'The active pursuit of truth is our proper business.' (2003:292)

Woolf's review of the genre of the essay in 'The Modern Essay' leads to the appearance of certain key principles that give some order to the apparent chaos of essayistic writing. Interestingly, Woolf's own particular piece of writing on the essay also happens to be a perfect example of the form. First impressions might lead to the reader to consider that Woolf's essay is rather whimsical, or light-hearted. The style in this essay is rather chatty and informal, 'the essay can be long or short, serious or trifling, about God and Spinoza or about turtles and Cheapside' (CR1: 211) and the language is straightforward, but vivid and picturesque:



Yet it is true that the essayist is the most sensitive of all writers to public opinion. The drawing room is the place where a great deal of reading is done nowadays, and the essays of Mr Beerbohm lie, with an exquisite appreciation of all that the position exacts, upon the drawing room table. There is no gin about; no strong tobacco, no puns, drunkenness, or insanity. (CR1: 218)

In place of logical argument, essayism favours multiple, dissociated themes; instead of structured conclusions, the essay is inconclusive; the essay can be loose, malleable and fleet-footed, whereas what we might consider ‘academic’ prose can be rigorous, stiff and exacting. Such adjectives to a certain extent parody both disciplines, and in no way do I wish to suggest simplistically that we must attach crude value judgements about the two disciplines, rather, the point is a little more circumspect. The essayistic spirit remains faithful to an aspect of musical experience that academic prose must do away with in order to fulfil a particular institutional expectation. This aspect of musical experience which essayism complements is tied up with music’s temporality and what we might term ‘ineffability’<sup>19</sup>. Woolf’s musical marginalia gives a voice to the ordinary experience of music and in doing so challenges the status and limits of authoritative criticism in academia. Graham Good remarks in his book *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*:

There is a strong case for increasing the role of the essay in academia, both as an object to study and as a form of writing for that study. This does not imply a return to an elitist, belletristic cult of sensibility as a form of personal superiority – this “gentlemanly amateur” image of the essayist belongs mainly to the Edwardian period and is by no means typical of that anyway. Anyone who can look attentively, think freely, and write clearly can be an essayist; no other qualifications are needed. Potentially, as Addison and Steele showed, the essay is one of the most popular forms of expression, the most available to writers and readers. It is a direct individual-to-individual communication. As such it is likely

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<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Jankélévitch (1903-85) remains a relatively unknown philosopher of music and his French philosophical colleagues have much more readily been admitted into the lives of English-speaking thinkers – Derrida, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas. His work *The Ineffable in Music* is only beginning to be acknowledged as an important moment for the progression of music aesthetics having only recently been translated in 2003 by Carolyn Abbate. He writes, ‘the mask, the inexpressive face that music assumes voluntarily these days, conceals a purpose: to express infinitely that which cannot be explained. Music, said Debussy, is made for that which cannot be expressed. I will be more precise: the mystery transmitted to us by music is not death’s sterilising inexplicability but the fertile inexplicability of life, freedom, or love. In brief, the musical mystery is not “what cannot be spoken of”, the untellable, but the ineffable.’ Music’s overwhelming abundance is his interpretation of its ineffability, a state he contrasts with *untellability*, ‘Death, the black night, is untellable because it is impenetrable shadow and despairing nonbeing, and because a wall that cannot be breached bars us from its mystery: unable to be spoken of, then, because there is absolutely nothing to say, rendering us mute, overwhelming reason, transfixing human discourse on the point of its Medusa stare.’ (Jankélévitch, 2003: 71-72).

to offer divergent views rather than express a consensus. It is not free from ideology, because no individual consciousness is free from it, though the essay encourages a critical attitude. A positive description might call the essay an anti-ideological expression of the free individual reporting and reflecting on his experience in defiance or disregard of authority; a negative account might see it as embodying bourgeois ideology, the world view based on the isolated self, separated from community, and forced to construct its own precarious significance in an alien world. But regardless of whether the essay is seen as a happy form or a sad one (like the epic and novel respectively in Lukács's theory of the novel), it provides an opening to individual experience of the past. Theory and system are powerful and necessary organisers of human knowledge, and they usually hold pride of place in academic institutions; but the lived individual experience which eludes system, and which the essay expresses and symbolizes, has an important place as well. (Good, 1998: 182-3)

This study is broadly in agreement with Good's support of the essay as a form of writing that makes a place for individual experience. But it is not simply that we must be in favour of the essay because it allows particular, personal experiences to be articulated, but rather, and this is where this dissertation picks up a less well developed area of Good's study, the essay rivals the authority of academic discourse because, as Adorno and Lukács noted, it is the critical form *par excellence*. The essay remains a site of individual struggle because it refuses to submit to organized social, cultural, political or intellectual systems of any kind.

The form of the essay also has a role to play in the relation between Woolf's work and the broader project of European Modernism, because, as Elena Gualtieri in *Virginia Woolf's Essays: Sketching the Past* suggests:

As Woolf turns to examine the status of her own work within the development of literary history, the essay is offered as a possible source of disturbance of a historical paradigm which would see the 'old post-Dostoevsky argument' (D2 248) about character in fiction superseded by a better representation of character in a sort of progressive move towards the best possible literature. This is a remarkably un-English conception of the genre which associated it not so much with leisurely pursuits and the exercise of style for style's sake, but rather with a different way of thinking about history and modernity. In this sense, the essay becomes an interruption to progress and, at the same time, signals the emergence of a type of literary history that questions the identification of modernity with the culmination of progress. (Gualtieri, 2000: 4)

In other words, it becomes possible to think of the essay as not simply a genre of writing that is defined by its relation to other literary genres, but as a form of writing that could be defined by its unique ability to traverse the aesthetically pleasing and the critically astute. By this, I suggest that the essay is of special interest because, although

it is often considered a 'marginal genre' in comparison to the novel, play or poem, it also, historically, has some obligation to the concept of truth. The full extent of the critical potential of the essay is seen here in Gualtieri's assertion that the essay plays a fundamental role in disrupting a (literary) paradigm of history that equates modernism with progress.

One of the reasons why this conception of the essay provides such fertile material for the Continental commentary on the essay is because Lukács and Adorno considered the essay one of the biggest mysteries of modernity. As a kind of writing that is able to distil historically specific events and experiences, the essay could also transcend temporal limitations and be thought of as purely objective. Gualtieri summarises Lukács's position thus:

Lukács insisted that the essence of the essay lies precisely in its ability to bring together modes of being and of thinking that are commonly thought of as being in opposition to each other. He admits that the aesthetic and the epistemological domain relate to two different forms of consciousness (the things itself and the concept), produces two different types of expression (the image and meaning), and two different ontologies (that of giving form, or creation, and that of inquiry, or intersubjective relationship). Yet he claims that as a modern genre still in its prehistory the essay present features from both sides of the distinction. It asks the fundamental ontological questions, 'what is life, what is man, what is destiny?', but provides them not with 'the answers of science or, at purer heights, those of philosophy' but with a form, a 'symbol.' (Gualtieri, 2000: 4-5)

These ideas are extremely pertinent to Virginia Woolf's musical marginalia because even though it seems ostensibly difficult to see that they could have anything objective to say whatsoever about musical life, there are powerful intellectual arguments that suggest otherwise. Outside of her musical writings, Woolf herself was reflecting on the ways in which the experiences of life could be contained within a written form. She writes in her diary on Sunday, 20 April 1919:

Moreover there looms ahead of me the shadow of some kind of form which a diary might attain to. I might in the course of time learn what it is that one can make of this loose, drifting material of life; finding another use for it than the use I put it to, so much more consciously and scrupulously, in fiction. What sort of diary should I like mine to be? Something loose knit, and yet not slovenly, so elastic that it will embrace any thing, solemn, slight or beautiful that comes into my mind. I should like it to resemble some deep old desk, or capacious hold-all, in which one flings a mass of odds and ends without looking them through. I should like to come back, after a year or two, and find that the collection had sorted itself, and refined itself and coalesced, as such deposits so mysteriously do, into a mould,

transparent enough to reflect the light of our life, and yet steady, tranquil composed with the aloofness of a work of art. (D1: 266)

In response to Woolf's question about the kind of diary she should like hers to be, it would seem appropriate to suggest that she has almost already articulated the answer herself. In fact, her question seems like a bit of a red herring as she describes so beautifully the essayistic nature of the diary. The diary, as a form of essayism, is able to make use of the 'loose, drifting material of life', it is 'loose knit, and yet not slovenly', and, as Woolf intimates, those unconnected, haphazard 'odds and ends' all fuse together in the sort of unstructured structure that embodies the essay. Moreover, Woolf's critical insight goes a stage further when she recognizes the potential for individual experience to obtain the status of a work of art and, like Lukács, she identifies that this happens when lived experience manifests itself as form.

These indistinguishable boundaries between form and content are what make the essay such a good example of its resistance to systematization. The essay is shaped by experience itself, but the essay also produces experience, in that it creates it through writing. This means, therefore that the essay cannot make 'any appeal to the notion of an unmediated, transparent experience'. (Gualtieri, 2000: 6) As Good recognizes:

The truth of the essay is a limited truth, limited by the concrete experience, itself limited, which gave rise to it. The essay is a provisional reflection of an ephemeral experience of an event or object. If one event followed another, we would have a narrative; if one object followed another we would have a descriptive catalogue; if one thought followed another we would have a logical argument...Thought in the essay tends to be presented as experienced, not as afterthought; as it responds to objects and events on the spot, not as it is later arranged and systematized. This is the essential uniqueness of essayistic discourse: neither the order of thoughts nor the order of things predominates. (Good, 1998: 7-8)

In other words, even though the essay to some degree produces experience because it does not transform experience into a system of knowledge it retains a degree of fidelity to the 'fundamental formlessness of personal experience.' (Gualtieri, 2000: 6) It is possible to glimpse this sense of 'fundamental formlessness' in the Woolf's diary entry from Wednesday, 23 October 1918:

I went up to the concert and heard the ghosts of lovely things, since the substance somehow escaped me; partly owing to my mood, partly to the usual vulgarity of Wood. Even so the ghosts of two Bach pieces (one for a duet of violins) were exquisitely lovely. Edith Sichel, whose entire soul is now open to me through her

letters, makes me determine to write descriptions neither of pictures nor of music.  
(D1: 206)

The diary notes that the concerts were part of Sir Henry Wood's Promenade Concerts and the pieces played were Bach's Suite No. 2 for Flute and Strings, and Concerto no. 3 for Two Violins and Orchestra. Woolf also heard works by Beethoven, Mozart, Glück and Dvořák. Woolf's vivid references to 'ghosts' and 'souls' implies that she can only account for traces of her musical experience; there are semblances, impressions of the pieces by Bach, but they lack 'substance' and 'somehow escaped' her. Woolf dismisses her findings by reasoning that it is either her own mood or the 'vulgarity' of the composer that causes her to hear only the outlines of the pieces, but, to my mind, this is an unnecessary gesture, for there is something about Woolf's musical ghosts that rings true. I would suggest that they appear because of the temporality of listening and also because one can only ever get impressions of a piece upon hearing it perhaps for the first time, in a concert hall. Without the luxury of close listening or score reading, various complexities and nuances in the music will be intimated, but ultimately lost in a concert performance to all but those with an intimate knowledge of the work. Woolf is simply articulating this experience. Her utterance is special, though, because she brings into focus so sharply the strange experience of first listening. Woolf's vivid image of the ghost is enough to convey the precise nature of what is rather 'difficult to put into words.' Moreover, it is not just that Woolf pinpoints a musical phenomenon with seemingly no effort; she goes on to make a rather pointed remark about the difference between music and writing. In reference to Edith Sichel's<sup>20</sup> letters, she remarks that it is possible to gain access to Sichel's 'entire soul' –this is quite an opposite experience from the elusive musical ghosts. But the difference might not be all that great, because even though letters give us 'entire souls' and music only shadows, one could argue that the soul also occupies a similar imprecise, ambiguous space in our consciousness. The soul too is immaterial. On reading Sichel's letters, though, Woolf determines that she will not write descriptions of either music or painting. But, as shall be demonstrated below, this is something she cannot commit to.

Importantly, though, what Woolf is doing in this diary entry is privileging an aspect of musical experience that has little to do with the actual music, as such, but is rather concerned with how she is experiencing the music as it is happening, and allowing that experience to stand autonomously. She does not go back, retrace her steps

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<sup>20</sup> Edith Sichel (1862-1914) was an English author and wrote, amongst other things, a volume on the Essays of Montaigne. Edith Sichel, *Michel de Montaigne* (London: Constable, 1911).

and try to fill in the gaps by describing precisely the musical textures, the way it was performed, the narrative of the movements, etc. She does not reconstruct the concert, resigning it to a moment in the past. Instead, she retains the ‘present-ness’ and immediacy of the musical experience by just saying what it was like and without attempting to shape its ‘*fundamental formlessness*.’

In 1919, Woolf writes in a similar vein in another diary entry about a tea-party she had attended:

The company was decorous and fur bearing as usual; and the music like the voice of spirits in another world enticing the hopelessly damned. Sir Henry (Newbolt) wrote a patriotic song to the tune of it. But how nice they are too! (D1: 245)

Again, the mention of the musical ‘spirits’ ‘enticing the hopelessly damned’, puts music firmly into another realm, far away from material reality. Music is the thing that lures us into a damned world, music is a weakness, a vice, and Woolf can’t help but notice its mythical qualities. Yet, in a breath these subterranean references are dismissed and music is able to be spoken about in rather banal terms; it is ‘nice’ and it has tunes. This quote is a good example of the ways in which music can provoke complex literary evocations as well as inconsequential observations that say nothing beyond simple description.

Woolf’s musical utterances embody the essayistic spirit. The essayist rehearses a response to a work of art by representing something of the truth of the object and something of its likeness. In other words, the essayist gives a critique of the work of art, but she also re-presents the work in the way George Steiner might recognize when he suggested that the best response to a work of art is another work of art.<sup>21</sup> Claire de Obaldia points out that one of the dangers of calling something *essayistic* is to imply that it has more to do with literature and less with actual reality. However, she points out, in accord with Lukács, that to say something about the essay’s literary status is to have said very little about it at all. She goes on to use Virginia Woolf as an example of a writer who took the generic complexities of the essay more seriously than most, and as someone who was concerned with the aesthetic comportment of the essay, not just with its pleasure-giving aspects. De Obaldia also draws on the work of Graham Good in *The Observing Self*, suggesting that he successfully draws out the importance of the ‘active, creative role which likens the essayist to the artist’ (de Obaldia, 1995: 9).

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<sup>21</sup> See George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

One of the implications of suggesting that there might be similarities between the essayist and the artist is that the essayist is continually driven to create the work anew in his or her criticism of it. Woolf does the work of this recreating, as we see in the above quote, when she reproduces the inconsistent, quality of music. Music, by its very nature, is inconsistent – phrases can be related, like sentences can be, melodies can develop like an argument or point can, but the precise nature of the connection is often not visible. In the same way that if Woolf is talking about music one moment and what those who are listening to the music are wearing the next, is the connection between those two thoughts any less valid than if she had only mentioned the actual music itself? I would suggest that, like music, Woolf recreates a way of being that music also inhabits. And this way of being is to do with a sense of coherence or bindedness. Woolf puts two different experiences side by side and encourages us to see them as united and as connected and this is an aesthetic gesture. This is also the archetypal ‘modernist’ stance – traditional methods and views are subordinated to ones that say two opposing forces can be connected. Coherence, in Woolf’s musical writing comes about because she forces us to see music as co-existent with all our other experiences, musical and non-musical experiences are joined up. De Obaldia points out the impact that this artist/essayist configuration had on ‘modern’ criticism:

In fact, criticism for Lukács, as for most German theorists, is not just one aspect of the essay but the essence itself for the genre, and the work of art is its most natural object. In Lukács’s piece, the question of the essay’s belonging to the realm of literature on the basis of a shared attitude towards life is therefore raised in terms of the essential nature of criticism as a work of art, that is, of the essay’s acquisition of the creative independence or autonomy endemic to the work of art which it discusses. (de Obaldia, 1995: 10)

Woolf’s musical marginalia are creatively autonomous, and because they are essayistic, they are therefore critical.

György Lukács begins his 1910 essay by asking whether or not there is any kind of unifying principle in the form of the essay that would allow it to be considered a literary genre in its own right. In truth, however, what Lukács really asks is not whether such a unifying principle exists, but whether this unity is even possible, ‘to what extent has the really great writings which belong to this category been given literary form, and to what extent is this form of theirs an independent one?’ (Lukács, 1974: 1) Lukács’s concern with the precise characteristics of the essay and its relation to other literary forms develops into a more pressing question still; ‘To what extent do they (the great

writings) endow the work with the force necessary for a conceptual re-ordering of life, and yet distinguish it from the icy, final perfection of philosophy?' (1974:1). Lukács recognises that the essay has the potential to be both a form of critique, and a form of expression. The essay has the potential to 're-order' life, and yet, it must remain essentially human in characteristic, that is to say, it must avoid the 'icy perfection' of systematic philosophy. Speaking more broadly about the practice of criticism, Lukács suggests that criticism ought to be considered, 'at the very best, an art.' (1974: 2), and for him, this means valuing, above all, the form of criticism, i.e. the essay. For the remainder of the essay he attempts to understand the essay's 'intended form of expression' and 'the ways and means whereby this expression is accomplished.' (1974: 2). Granting the essay aesthetic autonomy results in Lukács at the same time granting criticism the status of art, because for him, the essay is synonymous with criticism, 'The critique, the essay-call it provisionally what you will-as a work of art, a genre?' he asks. (1974:1)

But perhaps the most important aspect of Lukács's essay comes in his conclusion in which he asserts, 'The essay is a judgement, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging.' (1974: 18). Indeed, if we consider the essay essentially as a judgement, then this chapter's reflection on the philosophical and methodological complexities of criticism become even more pertinent. And, in addition to this, as Lukács notes, the thing of value in the essay is not any conclusion it presents, rather, it is the very process of the act of judging that the essay lays bare.



## Chapter 2

### The Case for a Woolfian Renewal of Music Criticism

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The following chapter will attempt to familiarise the reader with a brief history of the domain of music criticism in Britain since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in order to highlight some of the problems of music criticism and to put forward a case for the renewal of criticism. The presumption that there is simply a genre or a category of writing we might label ‘music criticism’ is at once both premature and, I would argue, misguided; only the briefest survey of the recent historical analysis of the word ‘criticism’ is enough to convince the reader of the diverse, not to say ambiguous, senses of such a term.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, one of the earliest examples of the use of the word ‘criticism’ can be found in the work of the Elizabethan playwright Thomas Dekker, dating from 1607, in which his reference to the word ‘criticism’ implies that one’s actions could be ‘criticised’, that is to say, one’s actions could be *judged*. To judge is to evaluate based on a set of pre-established conditions, or criteria. To be able to judge something, then, is, in part, an act of comparison; I compare one set of behaviours with another, one performance with another, one piece of music with another.

Woolf recognized that judgement was at the heart of criticism, but for her, judgements by contemporary critics seemed always to be stuck in the past, judging the works of today by the standards of yesterday. In ‘How it Strikes a Contemporary’ (1923) she writes:

The only advice they can offer is to respect one’s own instincts, to follow them fearlessly and, rather than submit them to the control of any critic or reviewer alive, to check them by reading and reading again the masterpieces of the past.’ (CR1: 232).

However, her immense sense of obligation to the past was tempered by her sense of responsibility to the future. From ‘Poetry, Fiction and the Future’ (1927), ‘Is it not the critic’s duty to tell us, or to guess at least, where we are going?’ (SE: 74).

## Judgement

But what are the other cognitive, conceptual, indeed, moral and ethical components of judgement making? One compares, certainly, but one must also discriminate, distinguish, reject, accept, define, evaluate, interpret and describe. All of these actions are constitutive of the practice of criticism. It is in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that Kant articulates his famous 'Copernican turn' in which he sets about criticising the assumption that our understanding follows the existence of objects. Rather than being able to deduce 'a priori' knowledge (given that one of the aims of philosophy was to ascertain the nature of 'objective truth') through the effects of objects upon our senses, Kant claims that it is, in fact, the other way around, that objects become knowable through the subjective faculties of judgement. And it is in this sense that the Kantian object is 'that concerning which a subject can make a true judgement, not something which is true independently of its appearing to the subject' (Bowie, 1997: 32).

Settling for a moment on the concept of judgement and remaining within a Kantian discourse, we are drawn back to the aesthetic and its seemingly inextricable connection to reason. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant suggests:

Judgement in general is the faculty of thinking the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, principle, or law), is given, then the judgement which subsumes the particular under it is determinative...If, however, only the particular is given and the universal has to be found for it, then the judgement is simply reflective. (Kant, 1952: 18)

Judgement, then, is thinking about an object within the context of the concept we have of that object. If we listen to a particular piece of music, some of our understanding of that piece is tied up with notions of 'music', 'art', 'beauty' and so on. In addition to this, Kant suggests that if the universal is already given, i.e., if we have notions of what 'beauty' is, if we already have the concept and our task is to fit the particular object into various concepts, then our judgement is determinative. However, if we have no concept, if we only have the object, the piece, or the text, and we must find the universal, the category, or the description, then our judgement is reflective. Kant makes the distinction between understanding (that which supplies us with concepts) and reason (that which is able to make inferences from concepts), and locates judgement as that which mediates between the two – understanding and reason, because the subject is

free to make differing subsumptions of particulars. In the case of the determinate judgement, we can understand this to mean that the concept is sufficient to determine the particular, that is, the particular contains nothing that would exceed the explanation given by the concept. However, it is the status of reflective judgements that pertains to this discussion of criticism.

Thus, if we destabilise the criteria with which we judge, or indeed, if we begin to question the very condition of our judgements, then, in a sense, we have to interrogate how these 'pre-established' conditions have come to be. For, to reflect upon the very existence and the very tradition of certain 'critical' vocabularies is one of the purposes of this work. Furthermore, if we take Dekker's use of the word, to criticize a person's *actions* is to make a comment upon how that person has conducted themselves in the world. It suggests that judgements can be made regarding disposition, choices and behaviour, which, in turn, implies that the word 'criticism' carries with it certain moral connotations.

For the moment, though, let us consider the word 'criticism' within the domain of music for, though it would be unwise to suggest that the artistic and the ethical are easily separated, such concerns are not central to this dissertation at the present moment. For the time being then, let us initially understand the word 'criticism' as having something to do with the act of judgement-making in order to establish how the term has been adopted into the discourses of art and literature.

The development of the term 'criticism' continues with Matthew Arnold in 1875 who states that that: 'I am bound by my own definition of criticism: a disinterested endeavour to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the world' (Arnold, 1875: 45). Arnold's quote is interesting not least because it inadvertently draws to our attention a number of issues that continue to be extremely pertinent to a contemporary consideration of the term 'criticism.' The first implication in Arnold's quote is that it is possible that one could assert one's own definition of the term criticism without recourse to a unified or general understanding of the term. In other words, Arnold is bound by his definitions only. The notion, then, of understanding the term 'criticism' objectively becomes problematic if one is only ever bound to one's own definition of the term.

Nevertheless and despite these subjectivist tendencies, Arnold goes on to suggest that the act of criticism involves 'propagating' 'disinterestedly' 'the best that is known'. Again, a plethora of problems arise when we begin to question the potential scope and limitations of Arnold's definition. By what or whose standards, and under what

conditions would it be possible to judge knowledge? Arnold's implication is that criticism could be involved in the reproduction of '*the best that is thought and known in the world*' suggests that it would be possible to have not just a universally agreed understanding of what criticism is, but also to have a general understanding about that which is thought '*best*' in the world. Arnold's quote is useful, if only as an instance of how the term 'criticism' rapidly becomes embroiled in the charges of relativism and subjectivism, and is a good example of how difficult it is for even the most practised 'critic' to become tangled up in the methodological and epistemological complexities of the word 'criticism'. Without a definitive definition, and, lacking too, a general sense of its own usage (is criticism, for example, an act of fault-finding, is it necessarily derisive?<sup>22</sup> Or does criticism pertain mostly to the evaluation and assessment of art and literature?), it becomes clear that a contemporary consideration of a *music* criticism carries with it not just the burden of the clarification of the term criticism, but a further complication - the object of the criticism, in this case the music itself.

## Brief History of Music Criticism

In the following section I will rely on the *Grove Dictionary of Music*'s article entitled '*Criticism*' to assist in orientating us around some general issues involved with the analysis of the term 'criticism'. Although the article is fairly limited in its development of some of the more pertinent issues – issues that include, but are not limited to, notions of the 'aesthetic' and 'aesthetic experience'; the philosophical legacy of certain Enlightenment and Romantic concepts that continue to influence the way we think about art; the problems associated with a 'critical language'; musical hermeneutics and, more recently, the reassertion of 'criticism' through the work of what has come to be known as 'New Musicology'<sup>23</sup> – the article is useful inasmuch as it invites us to

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<sup>22</sup> The idea that 'criticism' is a destructive force is one that is deeply rooted in our sense of the word - the following quote is from Friedrich Schlegel's *Philosophical Fragments* and highlights the double-bind of criticism – on the one hand we acknowledge a sense of derision inherent in the word criticism, yet at the same time we recognise the potentially banality of a discourse that is devoid of criticism; 'If some mystical art lovers who think of every criticism as a dissection and every dissection as a destruction of pleasure were to think logically, then "wow" would be the best criticism of the greatest work of art. To be sure, there are critiques which say nothing more, but only take much longer to say it.' Friedrich Schlegel, trans. by Peter Firchow, *Philosophical Fragments* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991) p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> I refer here to the work of prominent 'New Musicologists' – Rose Rosengard Subotnik, Susan McClary, Lawrence Kramer, Richard Leppert, Kofi Agawu, Richard Taruskin etc. For criticism of 'New Musicology' see Pieter van der Toorn – *Music, Politics and the Academy* (1996) and Charles Rosen 'The New Musicology' in *Critical Entertainments: Music Old and New* (2000:255-272).

consider some of the key arguments that have occupied the domain of music criticism in the recent past. The Grove article begins:

Although many references to music criticism imply the narrow definition, it is important to understand criticism broadly in order to see the continuity among various activities of musical interpretation and evaluation...European traditions of music criticism centring on concert music and opera typically treat music as an art, as do critical traditions worldwide that derive from European models. In such discourse, music is one of several art forms along with literature, visual art, architecture, theatre and dance; this assumption reflects a conceptual formation that is historically and geographically specific. Often, in music criticism, the central goal is to evaluate and describe music as art, or as an object of aesthetic experience.<sup>24</sup>

The article draws our attention to two main points: firstly, that music is considered an art, and as such, is conditioned by certain historically and geographically specific concepts and secondly, that, already, the function of music criticism has often been 'to evaluate and describe music as art or as an object of aesthetic experience.' What I am chiefly concerned with here is the precise nature of the 'evaluations' and 'descriptions' of such endeavours. The article also briefly acknowledges the problem of defining the term 'music criticism' and we might understand the 'narrow definition' of music criticism that the article refers to as, initially, the writing of music criticism in a journalistic context. Before continuing any further, I think it is important to mention that by referring to the term 'music criticism' this dissertation *is not* implying *only* the kind of music criticism that appears in a journalistic context. The fact that newspapers carry daily reviews of music concerts is symptomatic of the changes that the term 'criticism' has been subjected to and as the Grove article points out, more than a few discrepancies arise when we consider what might be expected of the professional critic:

The music critic...becomes a representative of experienced or cultivated musicians, and can act as an educator in relation to a larger, diverse audience. A tension arises between these two approaches, one grounding critical authority in the absence of individualisation, the other grounding critical authority in special knowledge and training that distinguish the critic from many other people.<sup>25</sup>

The particular nature of the problem articulated here, i.e., that there is an inherent contradiction facing the modern critic; on the one hand he must speak for the people, and therefore be of similar disposition to the people, and on the other hand, he must be a

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<sup>24</sup> Fred Everett Maus, et al. "Criticism." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 19 Jan. 2010  
<<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40589pg1>>.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

specialist, an individual voice of expertise within his field is one of the many problems that arise as a result of a contemporary understanding of criticism. In his article ‘The Authority of Music Criticism’ prominent musicologist and composer Edward Cone<sup>26</sup> makes a useful distinction between the kinds of people who will normally be involved in the practice we call music criticism. These are the ‘reviewer’, the ‘teacher’ and the ‘critic proper.’ He refers to the reviewer thus:

The reviewer writes primarily for the consumer. His reader wants to know what to buy: what concerts and operas to attend, what records to listen to, and what to think about what he hears. The reviewer’s ears, then, must be fundamentally similar to those of the lay audience – although, one hopes, sharper and more focused. His essays must describe as accurately as possible how the music sounded – how it went, if it was new; how it was performed, if it was old. If he is successful his reader will say, “Yes, that is what I heard,” or, “So that is what I would have heard if I had been there.” But the reviewer cannot stop with mere description. He must make a judgement, for what his reader is most anxious to know is, Is it worth hearing, worth attending, worth talking about, worth buying? Will I like it? (Or, Should I like it?) The reviewer’s authority, then stems from his reader’s conviction that the reviewer’s taste is trustworthy – which most frequently means, consonant with the reader’s own. Broader and better informed, to be sure, but basically similar (Cone, 1981: 2)

As Cone explains, when it becomes the responsibility of an individual to account for a musical or aesthetic experience, it is generally accepted that some level of musical knowledge is a requirement of such a role. The precise nature of this knowledge, however, is less clear, and to a large extent, in the case of the newspaper reviewer, the knowledge he possesses is thought to be of a similar level to his readership. This acceptance of a kind of critical laymen is a recent development, however, and we can see how sharply this differs from an eighteenth century understanding of criticism. *Critica Musica* (1722-5), one of the oldest periodicals of the German critical tradition, defined criticism as:

The precise examination and evaluation of...opinions and arguments in old and new literature about music...for the elimination of all primitive [*grob*] errors and to promote greater growth in the science of pure harmony.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Cone, ‘The Authority of Music Criticism’, *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 34 (1981), 1-18.

<sup>27</sup> *Critica Musica* is thought to be the first music journal ever published. Founded by Johann Mattheson, it is in the Leipzig City Music Library. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/143356/Critica-Musica>

What is striking about this quote is the mention of the word 'literature'. To what extent, if any, do we expect today's newspaper critic to have a thorough knowledge of the arguments found in old and new 'literature' about music? Here we can understand the term 'literature', I think, in the widest possible sense for the time being. That is to say we can understand the term 'literature' to mean simply a written document whose subject, in this particular instance, is music. Cone goes on to suggest that the reviewer differs from the teacher because the teacher is concerned with the dissemination of practical advice to the student. The teacher is a professional, he teaches musicians and the teacher's authority resides in, 'the precision of his technical knowledge, the breadth of his musical experience, and the ability to apply both knowledge and experience to the solution of the student's problems.' (Cone, 1981: 3)

One of the fundamental difficulties in fixing a definitive meaning of the concept of criticism stems from the historically inconsistent relationship we have to it. In the eighteenth century, it was accepted, encouraged even, that the discourse of music criticism took place *inside* the domain of texts about music. In other words, the objects under scrutiny were the texts themselves, and not necessarily the musical score. Moreover, contained within the evocation of the term 'literature' is the implication that this commits the '*precise examination and evaluation*' of musical texts to a kind of language that concerns itself with '*opinions and arguments*'. In other words, the practice of music criticism was obligated to notions of rhetoric, of argument, and of reasoned and precise judgements. Admittedly, one could argue that this definition of music criticism suffers from the kind of rhetorical idealism that characterises much of the German Romantic period. Indeed, it remains unclear what '*greater growth in the science of pure harmony*' might imply, even if it is simply being faithful to a historicised idea of musical tonality. Even though the precise date of this quote might be considered a little premature to be thought of as strictly belonging to the period we know as Romanticism, the use of the word 'harmony', I would suggest, has connotations of a 'unified subjectivity', or 'contented spirituality' i.e., a state of being in which one is 'in harmony' with oneself, the pursuit of which often occupied German Romantic thought.

In terms of the state of British music criticism in the eighteenth century, as Herbert M. Schueller explains, the debates of the period centered on ideas that were related to imitation and expression, and, he argues, the story of British music criticism in the eighteenth century remains largely untold. As has been previously mentioned, it was thought in Britain too, that those who participated in the critical writing of music were

familiar also with a literary tradition, and thus were subject to a ‘variety of influences.’<sup>28</sup> Among these influences were two dominant ideas relating to music and its effects. The first is concerned with music’s capacity to imitate ‘nature’ (in the broadest sense of the term, thus including human nature) and secondly, is the idea that music’s function was to represent a given state of emotion or affectation:

In musical composition there followed a demand that any single piece must have a single style or mood, such as gaiety, liveliness, or sombreness. A “sonata” had one mood, not, like the classical sonata, contrasting moods. Music was a language which could express passions, affections, and-later-sentiments. The composer, except when he was writing for instruments, had to make his music correspond with words. His aim was literary, rather than musical; his duty was affective representation of words in music (Schueller, 1948: 547).

Music’s capacity to ‘express’ emotion and capture mood was one of the reasons that opera flourished so successfully in both British and European musical life. Schueller gives the following précis of early British music criticism:

Though British music criticism has little to say before 1750, criticism of the opera in the work of Addison (in the *Spectator*, 1711-12) and of John Dennis (1706) had certain affinities with Continental music criticism. The influences of British thought about music were Italian, German and French. From France came St Evremond (*Sur les opéras*, 1705), Boileau, Charles Perrault (*Critique de l’opéra*, 1674), and others; later came Dubos (1719), Andres (1741), Batteux (1746), and others. From Germany came the *Critica Musica* (1722-25) of Johann Mattheson and the works of F.W. Marpurg (1718-95). From Italy came chiefly musicians and the “Italian style”, but also many technical treatises which, like those coming from France, carried rationalistic presuppositions. And in all of the Continental influences on British music criticism there was material for the philosophical question of imitation and expression in the art of music (Schueller, 1948: 548).

All of these influences as well as the close intersection of philosophical and musical ideas meant that the British eighteenth century music critic, was neither a philosopher nor a musician but rather a little of both; ‘The eighteenth century British music critic was also an amateur philosopher, but as a literary man he was a dilettante in matters musical. Never a musician, he was interested in academic problems.’ (Schueller, 1948: 548) Reflections on the qualities and the characteristics of the critic lead us to

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28 Herbert M. Schueller, “‘Imitation’ and ‘Expression’ in British Music Criticism in the 18th Century”, *The Musical Quarterly*, 34 (1948), 544-566 (p. 546).



Woolf's famous incarnation, the common reader, who will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3. What happens next in British music criticism though, according to Schueller, is that, as a consequence of the music critic's philosophical and literary investment, musical composition in Britain enters a state of radical paralysis, whereby, by 1750 it had rejected the musical developments in Opera in Europe, and was left trying to find solutions to the now historical problems of the Baroque era; 'Tacitly, they admitted that the British composer no longer had the energy to match the efforts of men like Purcell...they indicated that the difficulty was not with Handel's destruction of British musical efforts, but with the stagnation of the British musical imagination' (Schueller, 1948: 549). Schueller argues that this 'stagnation' is a result of the fundamentally 'conservative' nature of art criticism. But I would query this assertion and instead would suggest that this fundamental split between theory and practice, whereby practice is left stranded by the pace of theoretical developments, means that a fissure begins to emerge between the contemporaneity of musical discourse and the practice of musical composition. This fissure or antagonism between theory and practice is something that returns again and again throughout history, and has an enormous impact on the concept of criticism. Criticism has a duty to respond to the art work of its era, but if the language and the ideas accorded to that discourse of criticism rely on a historical set of problems, then criticism can only ever be an antiquated form of appraisal. The critic is expected to make meaning from the activity he observes, yet, this meaning is somehow burdened with priorities from the past. What happens in late eighteenth century Britain, then, is that music becomes stuck on the idea that it is purely imitative, but, crucially, imitation of a limited kind, whereby music can only imitate sounds and motions. This was in opposition to literature and painting which could recreate *things*, trees, faces, etc. (Schueller, 1948: 549). We can see how this problem of theory 'overtaking' practice gathers pace in eighteenth and nineteenth century British music criticism, by looking at the development of the *language* of music criticism, for one of the most fundamental questions we must ask of music criticism is how it arrives at or decides upon the vocabulary it utilises. The Grove article continues:

Descriptive and interpretative language in criticism ranges from technical analysis, to attributions of affect or expression, to the many diverse possibilities of figurative language...Critical language used in interpretation of music can itself become a topic for interpretation; the interpretative issues include, on one hand, the relation of the critical language to the music and to listeners' experiences, and on the other hand, the

relation of the language to other discourses of arts criticism, literature, philosophy and so on.<sup>29</sup>

It becomes clear, then, the issue of language in music criticism is one that is fundamental here. Precisely *how music is written about* requires one to consider not just the interpretative problems that accompany such a consideration, but also, I would argue, asks one to consider the very style of language – that is, one must understand language at its structural level. As the Grove article correctly surmises, the language of music criticism can itself be the object of interpretation. The article continues by speculating about the role of *experience* in music criticism:

Critical judgements of music originate in experiences. They depend on experience of the object of criticism...Enlightenment thinkers, not surprisingly, emphasised the origin of artistic or aesthetic judgements in the experiences of distinct individuals and then found puzzles in the relationship between individual subjectivity and the normative character of the judgement.<sup>30</sup>

Critical judgements, then, according to the article are based on a set of *a posteriori* conditions, that is, conditions that yield a type of knowledge that is dependent upon our experience of the music. But although this tells us that critical judgements of music are based on the experiential, it fails to tell us anything about the nature of ‘experience’, nor of how we arrive at these critical judgements. Schueller suggests that in the eighteenth century judgements about music were (and to a large extent still are) reliant upon an, ‘improper metaphor, upon a pun, and [music] was described by expressions like “high” notes and “low” ones’ (Schueller, 1948: 551) This utilisation of ‘improper metaphors’ is the result of a fundamentally naïve interpretation of our experience of the world, in which, ‘the word heaven should be set to “high” tones...and hell in a “low” position.’ (Schueller, 1948: 551) In itself, this seems at one level, a perfectly reasonable thing to do, yet on the other hand, the fact that this idea survives both the Renaissance and the Baroque period carries with it the suspicion that such practices do not seem to respond to the entirety of a musical experience. It is not until the appearance of the work of John Brown (1763), Schueller explains, that we begin to see a more nuanced interpretation of the idea of imitation, in which imitation

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<sup>29</sup> Fred Everett Maus, et al. "Criticism." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 19 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40589pg1>>.

<sup>30</sup> Fred Everett Maus, et al. "Criticism." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 19 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40589pg1>>.

should come to be understood as imitation of our most essential affectations or emotions. In other words, imitation should no longer be dependent on the particularity of individual words, 'To imitate the hills and the valleys was to distort the imitation, which should deal with the essence of words' (Schueller, 1948: 553). These changes in the concept of imitation give way, eventually, to theories of expression in British musical thought and it became common to believe that music could express emotion and meaning:

According to Baroque theories and according to certain eighteenth century theories that followed them, music could imitate or express the passions, the affections, or the sentiments. (Schueller, 1948: 553)

Importantly, however, these emotions were not just the individual emotions of a particular man, rather they were the emotion of all men, and of all people. And this belief accounts for the movement towards the generalisation and universalisation of experience prevalent in Romantic thought. Moreover, what is so interesting about a retrospective account of British music criticism is that we can see already how problematic the *practice* of criticism becomes when there is discord between theory and practice. Schueller correctly points out that the entire practice of musical composition came to be adversely affected by stagnant intellectual thought, and similarly, theory in turn becomes paralysed by the lack of a practice upon which to comment.

The relationship between theory and practice is picked up by Patricia Herzog in her article 'Music Criticism and Musical Meaning'<sup>31</sup>, in which she suggests that the focus of the argument centres largely on aesthetic value:

The aim of music criticism is the articulation of aesthetic value. And the music critic serves this aim not simply by telling us what, in an impersonal, objective sense, music means, but by telling us why music is meaningful. (Herzog, 1995: 299)

Herzog is also rather forthright about the kind of position the music critic finds himself in:

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<sup>31</sup> Patricia Herzog, 'Music Criticism and Musical Meaning', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 53 (1995), 299-312.

Theory and analysis alone fail to provide an interpretive vocabulary rich enough to do the critic's job. They do not generate the categories that tell us why music matters. And from a critical standpoint, why music matters is essential to what music means. Musical meaning as the critic sees it will not necessarily line up with musical meaning in the eyes of the art historian, theorist or analyst. (Herzog, 1995: 299)

She also criticises music theory of the last 150 years, which, she suggests:

H[as] not provided[ed] an adequate basis for music criticism. Music criticism is underdetermined by what autonomy theorists have traditionally regarded as the "facts" of musical meaning. Accordingly, the scope of musical meaning must be enlarged to accommodate the demands of music criticism. By grounding musical meaning in music criticism (I aim to) restore credibility and vitality to the time-honored practice of music criticism as the articulation of human interests and values. (Herzog, 1995: 300)

Herzog sets up a dialogue between the 'autonomous' theorists, Eduard Hanslick and Peter Kivy, and the 'heteronymous' theorists, musicologists Edward Cone and Joseph Kerman. Though not in great support of the distinction between the autonomous and heteronymous, the former implying a discourse of formalist music aesthetics and the latter implying that the musically beautiful might not be exclusively musical, Herzog concedes that it is difficult to escape from these terms. In *On the Musically Beautiful*<sup>32</sup>, Eduard Hanslick denies that music can move a listener by virtue of its emotional content, and argues that what is beautiful or valued in music must be specifically musical; tones, form, melody, harmony, timbre, rhythm. Importantly though, Hanslick qualifies this by stating that although music can only be beautiful because of its musical form, music is not empty or abstract. Instead, music has what Hanslick refers to as "ideal substance." In other words, what can be discerned in the music is beautiful not just formally, but because the ideas that the music relates to, or indeed, generates, can be considered "ideal" – that is, they can relate to a notion of the truth. In addition to this, Hanslick asserts that music cannot find a form in language, that music is untranslatable. Herzog is quick to point out the contradiction:

That we cannot say anything about the value of music, save assent to it, is a strange statement, to say the least, coming from one of the foremost music critics

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<sup>32</sup> Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful: A Contribution Towards the Revision of the Aesthetics of Music*, ed. by and trans. By Geoffrey Payzant (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1986).

of the nineteenth century. Someone who truly believes what Hanslick says about musical meaning could never have written the way Hanslick did about Beethoven, Schubert, and Brahms, to name just a few of the composers whose music he greatly admired. (Herzog. 1995: 302)

But how do we negotiate this contradiction today? Indeed, how is music criticism conceived of in current discourse? The concern is certainly not a new one in musicological debates, as the Grove article demonstrates:

Controversies over musical meaning, politics and elite culture also became more central to the academic study of music. Kerman (1985) argued that musicologists' preoccupation with 'analysis' had 'produced relatively little of intellectual interest' because it completely ignored the question of 'artistic value'; he urged them to adopt the wider stance of 'criticism'. Over the next decade musical scholarship did undergo a major change; however, the emphasis was not on artistic value but on the sociology of music, its political meanings and its cultural contexts. Musicologists followed literary theorists in asking questions about the kinds of ideas music promotes and why they succeed. Some scholars rejected aesthetic distinctions altogether and treated music as a coded tract concerning sexuality and politics; scholarly papers on the iconography of the pop star Madonna became as common as studies of the Classical style. In the 1990s it sometimes seemed that criticism in the broadest sense had become a goal of musicology, while journalistic criticism often retreated to the comfort of 'reviewing'.<sup>33</sup>

And on the future of musical criticism:

Despite these changes, though, at the beginning of the 21st century the future of traditional music criticism was more uncertain than it had ever been... As the 21st century began, it was increasingly clear that the future nature of music criticism was increasingly unclear, leaving feelings of dismay along with hope for as yet unforeseen possibilities.<sup>34</sup>

To a large extent, this dissertation seeks to clarify some of the uncertainty around the nature of music criticism, and, furthermore, I hope to show that Woolf's writing yields 'as yet unforeseen possibilities' with regard to the articulation of musical aesthetic experience.

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<sup>33</sup> Fred Everett Maus, et al. "Criticism." *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online*. 19 Jan. 2010 <<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/40589pg3>>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

## Issues in Contemporary Music Criticism

In terms of more recent scholarship, the search for a more experientially centred form of writing is reflected in an essay by Rose Rosengard Subotnik entitled *Toward the Next Paradigm of Musical Scholarship* written in 2004. Subotnik writes:

On one side, I wanted thinking about music to intersect not just occasionally but constantly with the most exciting issues available to the mind: defining the good in life (moral philosophy and social theory) and in art (criticism and aesthetic theory). On the other side, I wanted to find ways of engaging with music that permitted me to say something valuable about a piece without invariably needing first to achieve mastery over every element of its formal detail. Most of all, I think, I was desperate for a norm of writing about music that centred on good and exciting uses of the English language, uses that banished technical signs to the extent possible and referred those remaining not, at least in the first instance, to scores or complex diagrams but to ideas in the writing itself. (Subotnik, 2004: 281)<sup>35</sup>

Woolf finds ways of 'saying something valuable' about music that contribute to the scholarly paradigm Subotnik describes. This might seem a little strange given that she predates Subotnik by over half a century, but it is possible to re-interpret Subotnik's appeal for a new paradigm by looking again at the material already provided by history. There is no urgent need to throw out old methodologies for the sake of trying to invent a new one; rather pre-existing methodologies need to be adapted to make use of non-musical texts and texts which contain incidental musical references. There is nothing 'new', as such, about Subotnik's Next Paradigm, and, indeed, it is a little surprising that there is no explicit reference to Adorno or identity-thinking in her discussion of 'mastery', but perhaps this is because any explicit naming of identity-thinking, could itself be considered an example of such thought. Subotnik is looking for ways out of structural listening; however, such a manoeuvre doesn't necessarily do away with the ideology of musical meaning, it simply sounds like an alternative method to analysis.

Subotnik's Next Paradigm argues for a new kind of listening that is able to take account for the phenomenal aspect of music but yet at the same time resists the temptation to aspire to complete control over the music through formal analysis. However, a further problem with Subotnik's paradigm is that it implies that analysis really did or indeed does have the potential to obtain full control over the music. But

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<sup>35</sup> Rose Subotnik, 'Afterword: Toward the Next Paradigm of Musical Scholarship' in *Beyond Structural Listening?: Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, ed. by Andrew Dell'Antonio (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 279-303 (p.281).

perhaps the issue is not one of control, but rather of containment. Analysis seems to place certain boundaries around music, it implements limits, but this would not imply that analysis says *everything* about a piece of music; rather that analysis says *something* about music. Subotnik again:

When Fred Maus makes his elegant diagnoses of traditional music theory as itself a kind of defence mechanism, he stresses not only the potentially overwhelming power of music but also the lengths to which analysis typically goes to contain that power; in effect he presented the middle and late twentieth-century paradigm toward a new alternative based on ‘a tense, complex relation of shared agency and responsibility,’ that is, toward a ‘positive model of shared creation.’ (Subotnik, 2004: 286)

Pursuing the ‘meaning’ or ‘truth’ of a musical text occupies students and scholars alike, but Subotnik and the other essayists in the collection suggest that there is growing ‘distrust and rejection of mastery as a goal or even as a virtue.’ She continues:

And indeed, one can argue that the turn away, in this volume, from associating musical works with mastery reflects the larger turn towards scholarly self-reflexiveness and, with it, a growing willingness to acknowledge a whole range of limitations – creative, theoretical, epistemological – to which composers and critics alike are subject. (Subotnik, 2004: 289)

It picks up a similar thread that is visible in Ruth Solie’s book *Music in Other Words: Victorian Conversations*, in which she writes:

Nearly forty years ago...I learned what has become a central preoccupation of my historical thought, the cardinal importance of “what goes without saying”: the evidence we will never find is just that information that our historical subjects considered too obvious to be worth mentioning, its very centrality marked by its absence. Far from occasioning the discouragement it might have, this warning spurred my interest in nearly-dead metaphors, informal modelling systems, persistent but unscrutinised cultural tropes – language in general, especially the most casual – for glimmerings of what might be in those blank spaces, legible traces of the unsaid. (Solie, 2004: 1)

As has already been alluded to, Woolf’s writing about music makes a space for the inexpert listener, and, by virtue of her lack of technical musical vocabulary, she is forced to imagine other ways of writing about music. And this, in accordance with Subotnik’s New Paradigm, allows us to use Woolf as an example of a writer who is unconcerned with the mastery of a piece of music. Woolf, I argue therefore, contributes

to an area of musical scholarship that is concerned with the problems of interpretation and experience. Subotnik argues that scholars of music pursue a unified account of interpretation and experience, that is, they seek to find ways of making how we experience music correspond to the ways in which that experience comes to be articulated. Subotnik and others in the volume agree that this approach conceals a misunderstanding about the true nature of listening and musical experience, because it relies on our ability to make sense of and completely master our musical experiences. However, if we renounce the claim to mastery, we do not necessarily give up the claim to a meaningful and insightful musical experience, rather, we acknowledge that the incompleteness of listening still lends itself to interpretation and understanding. Subotnik:

As these and other contributors to this volume again and again make clear, the difficulties of articulating the inarticulable are construed within the Next Paradigm as the condition that underlies all writing about music. (Subotnik, 2004: 291)

The reason why Woolf, in particular, gives us special insights into musical criticism is because she is self-consciously a writer, that is, she is always already reflecting on the value and status of her work. Therefore, she is able to imagine the space between the given of experience, that which one might call reality, and how that experience comes to be articulated in another kind of form, in this instance, essays, diaries and letters. Thus, Woolf speaks directly to another of Subotnik's concerns:

What emerges from these numerous invocations of semiotic inadequacies, difficulties, and gaps is the sense that the Next Paradigm is being shaped, in parts, by doubts, and even a pervasive anxiety, about the status and future of writing. On one level the question being raised is this: in writing about music, what can one say that is valuable and true? The ongoing shift, I cited earlier, from foundationalist principles to aesthetic sensibilities as a standard for appraising scholarship, has decreased the possibility of answering this question with authority; and the erosion of authority raises grounds for doubt, in turn, about the general importance of one's own work. (Subotnik, 2004: 291)



## The Problem of Mastery

In the introduction to *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, Andrew Dell'Antonio contextualizes the book's essays by initially suggesting that they are all a response to one particular issue, namely, Subotnik's conception of structural listening:

Which she sees as originating primarily with Schoenberg and Adorno, and becoming the prevalent aesthetic paradigm in Germanic and Anglo-American musical scholarship. In her usage the term designates an approach to listening that considers musical works as autonomous structures defined 'wholly through some implicit and intelligible principle of unity. Structural listeners who believe in the autonomous art work believe also in the 'possibility of reasoned musical discourse,' and thus seek to find 'objectively determinable' 'interconnectedness of structure...This leads them to 'end by locating musical value wholly within some formal sort of parameter, to which it is the listener's business to attend.' (Dell'Antonio, 2004: 1)

One essay in particular in the collection that deals explicitly with some of the problems of experiencing music (problems which Woolf also articulates) is 'Uncertainty, Disorientation, and Loss as Responses to Musical Structure'<sup>36</sup> by Joseph Dubiel. Dubiel begins by criticizing what he regards as the limiting nature of the term 'structure' by pointing out that it normally connotes a 'pattern...logical consequence...the satisfaction of a requirement...validation.' (Dubiel, 2004: 174) He then, quite rightly, points out that the term also implies that which is *not* structural; in other words, he argues that any attempt to distance oneself from a structural listening implies that a lot of what occurs in music could be *other* than structural. Furthermore, these *other* aspects are necessarily divorced from the structure itself, '...the idea is suppressed that ornament and colour and expression are, among other things, aspects of 'structure...' (Dubiel, 2004: 174) However, Dubiel is altogether too quick to assume that Subotnik's conception of structure supports a reassertion of binarisms. As she points out in the Afterword of the book, Subotnik always intended her idea of structure to be thought of as an *aspect* of style, and in this sense, it would automatically include the ornamental, colouristic and expressionistic aspects of structure that Dubiel thinks

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<sup>36</sup> Joseph Dubiel, 'Uncertainty, Disorientation, and Loss as Responses to Musical Structure', in *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing*, ed. by Andrew Dell'Antonio (Berkeley; Los Angeles; London: University of California Press, 2004), pp. 173-200.

she rejects. Subotnik therefore sees structure and style as being part of a dialectical relationship. However, if Dubiel's early mistake is his limited understanding of the breadth of Subotnik's idea of structure, one way he does ingratiate himself to the reader is by proposing several theoretical approaches to musical analysis that avoid *mastering* the text in any way. The idea of an analytical or critical mastery of a text is one that is singularly important for this chapter, and I will argue that Woolf offers us a way of renegotiating the problem later on. By mastering, I mean to pick up on another theme of Subotnik's critique of structural listening that has previously been mentioned in the Introduction to this dissertation:

On no topic discussed in this volume is there greater unanimity: every contributor casts doubt, at some level, on the possibility and value of mastery as a concept within the framework of studying music...Not surprisingly, rejections of mastery are most often aimed in this book at specifically musical modes of reception...Unity of interpretation with experience is surely the unspoken object within any notion of critical or analytical mastery: it is precisely what these, and any, scholars give up on when they renounce the claim to mastery. (Subotnik, 2004: 289-90)

There are several ways that Dubiel attempts to address the problem of analytical or critical mastery in his essay. In an analysis of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, he begins by claiming that a moment of 'high impact' in the music coincided with a structural manoeuvre in the score that he claims to have been unaware of. Accordingly, he goes in search of the structural detail only to find that the discovery of compositional technique does little to further his desire to account for the 'psychically jarring' experience of listening. However, and somewhat disappointingly, Dubiel seems to get round this short-fall by simply suggesting that, 'the admission of difficulty – in both senses of admission: owning up to it and letting it into the discussion – is an unusual analytical manoeuvre, if not indeed the opposite of the work analysis tries to do.' (Dubiel, 2004: 180) Although this is an admirable sentiment, ultimately Dubiel never quite manages to apply the same analytical rigour to his experiences as he does to the score. His next attempt comes through an analysis of Morton Feldman's *Triadic Memories* in which Dubiel can only manage to articulate that his experience of a particular rhythmic structure is 'wobbly' and yet again avoids fully penetrating his experience by remaining complicit with an idea of 'vagueness':

Part of what I find interesting about this account of this music is the degree of overkill in the notation relative to what I say I'm getting out of it; or, to put this in a more encouraging way, the degree to which what I'm proposing as a hearing does not involve recovering every bit of detail that I can see (or think I see) in the notation. The perceived outcome of this oddly specific notation, I'm claiming, is a particular kind of *vagueness* about a particular kind of thing. (Dubiel, 2004: 186)

Frustratingly, Dubiel seems to become increasingly convinced that the 'vagueness' of a piece of music is an objective fact, and he struggles to find a way of adequately interpreting his listening. One such struggle is apparent when he resorts to giving legitimacy to the surely now irrelevant debate about a composer's intention being a way of working out what a piece 'means'. Furthermore, he seems to conclude his analysis of the Feldman piece by claiming, in a rather banal way, that any working out of what one is hearing '*may take some imagination to figure out*'. Furthermore, and a little surprisingly, Dubiel ultimately thwarts his own attempts to move away from assumptions about musical-technical analysis by reaffirming the potential benefits of such activity:

Actually, a good reason to carry on music-analytic investigations is that they may help us to recognize sensations that we didn't realize we were having. The effort to figure out what the effect could possibly be of some feature of the sonic configuration may lead to a raising of consciousness. (Dubiel, 2004: 187)

What is most striking about Dubiel's essay, and why it is important in this particular context, is the sense that he might have wasted an opportunity to say something significant about the original problem of mastery that Subotnik raises in her critique of structural listening. Dubiel goes so far as to make some interesting and important theoretical insights into the idea of musical structure, but one gets the sense that his attempt at theoretical tenacity gives way to his more accomplished analytical skills. This is most evident in his conclusion in which he seems to support what we might broadly refer to as a 'dialogical' listening, as opposed to a 'masterful' one. Quite rightly, he notes that analysis can fall victim to notions of obligation to the musical work, but, in my view, he consistently fails to reach far enough into the dialectical network of his vocabulary. For example, merely replacing the word 'structure' with his own term, 'systems', Dubiel simply rejects the notion of a singular master of the musical work with a theory that would allow for multiple masters, if you like. This kind

of conceptual confusion means that Dubiel himself seems unable to escape from the binary mode of thinking he warns us about in the introduction to his essay.

One of the main problems with the idea of mastery, which Dubiel fails to mention, is the need, if one is going to deal with such an idea, to adequately account for the place of interpretation inside this matrix of structural listening. Analysis is an interpretative method which relies on the established lexicon of terminology. Calling into question either the interpretative act itself, or, indeed, the language employed in such an activity requires us to look back momentarily to the development of a critical language with which we have, arguably, sought to master works of art.

At the heart of critical practice there is a tension between experience and the resulting articulation of that experience. To articulate the value and meaning of an experience is what is expected of the critic, yet remaining faithful to an experience may come at the expense of that other criterion of criticism; the production and dissemination of knowledge. One of the primary functions of criticism, therefore, has been to try and negotiate the dialectic of experience and interpretation, and what is fundamental to the way we understand the concept of criticism is the way in which the notion of interpretation seems to survive the process of mutation that criticism undergoes throughout the centuries. The ability to interpret is something that has remained central to our understanding of who a critic is and what he does.

## **The Renewal of Criticism**

I would like now to try and expand our understanding of the development of criticism by turning to the work of Simon Jarvis whose article ‘An Undeleter for Criticism’<sup>37</sup> asserts that there is an obligation to renew our thinking about criticism:

Suppressing the question of art, we suppress the ability to think about how our own making may be anything but “production.” Suppressing the question of beauty, we suppress the ability to think how our own experience may be anything but “consumption.” Paid thinkers have a particular responsibility to challenge the mistransfiguration of production and consumption into the permanent and universal lineaments of experience. (Jarvis, 2002: 8)

Jarvis begins his essay by noting that the wildly broad discourse of ‘aesthetics’ requires us to account for two things; experiences and ideas:

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<sup>37</sup> Simon Jarvis, ‘An Undeleter for Criticism’, *Diacritics*, 32, (2002), p. 3-18.

Is there an experience of beauty, or is it only that we sometimes choose to sort and name certain experiences by using a set of terms, originating often in ancient and medieval philosophy and by a long process of mutation and manipulation arriving under the disciplinary heading of “aesthetics”? [...] It does not only ask for information about the history of the formation of the concept of aesthetics; it also asks for information about experiences. But information about experiences is hard to come by. This is not only, perhaps, for the large reason that “information is concerned with alien objects,” rather than with experiences, but also for the more local one that “aesthetics” does not often attempt to describe any experiences with determined fidelity. (Jarvis, 2002: 3)

Jarvis’s quote not only helps explain why I felt it necessary to try and give a brief history of music criticism but it also recognizes the burden felt by those whose job it is to try and write about experience, ‘Professional writing demands not that we merely report on our own subjective experiences, but that we produce knowledge.’ (Jarvis, 2002: 3) The obligation to produce knowledge, therefore, is perhaps what leads Jarvis to mention the strict ‘philosophical grammar’ that imposes itself upon judgements about beauty. He points out that we cannot expect judgements about beauty to automatically constitute knowledge because beauty evades logical reasoning (because it concerns personal values and not simply facts) – yet at the same time, ‘they are not...merely reports of a purely subjective experience either.’ (Jarvis, 2002: 5) The problem therefore, for criticism, becomes about negotiating this middle ground somehow between subject and object. But Jarvis astutely points out that we are, to a certain extent, misguided to think that an experience of beauty can be faithfully rendered by a grammar which seems to obfuscate our conception of both ‘beauty’ and ‘experience’.

Jarvis goes on to try and articulate the process of turning an experience into knowledge and comes to the conclusion that in order to do so, such a:

Making has depended upon the deletion of everything idiosyncratic about my experience and, with it, upon the deletion of everything that makes that experience an experience [...] What has happened here? The field of criticism has been deleted [...] that field which lies between or beyond a rationalism which can prove what is beautiful, and a relativism which knows what it likes. (Jarvis, 2002: 6)

He develops his argument by pointing out that at the heart of criticism lies a tension between the aesthetic and the cognitive, a problem that he explains by analyzing Kantian aesthetics. He suggests, in reference to Kant’s Third Critique, that aesthetic judgement has been based on an initial flaw in the distinction between ‘the good, the

true and the beautiful' (Jarvis, 2002: 8) because it suffers from what he refers to as 'a hierarchical asymmetry.' (Jarvis, 2002: 8) This asymmetry is produced because Kant specifies that "there are two kinds of concepts", "the concept of nature and the concept of freedom." In the tripartite group of 'the good, the true and the beautiful', it is the concept of the beautiful that is, if you like, the odd one out. This is because the good and the true can be sought from the array of concepts given by the two overarching concepts of Nature and Freedom. The beautiful, however, has no concepts that belong to itself. Jarvis explains the consequence of this asymmetry:

The way the categorical separation of true, good, and beautiful is specified is both what deprives beauty of any concepts of its own and what requires that beauty be explained by analogies with the only two sources of concepts available. (Jarvis, 2002: 8)

In other words, aesthetic judgement, according to Kantian metaphysics at least, relies on analogies made to the concepts belonging to the categories of the good and the true, and not on concepts germane to 'beauty'. The effect produced is a kind of incongruous cross-referencing; whereby neither beauty, nor experience can come to be articulated honestly, because they must always employ the vocabulary of foreign conceptual categories. The point that Jarvis is making is that criticism lies in a similar relation to equivocality as the concept of beauty does. Although he concedes that 'characterising the terrain of criticism does not require Kantian epistemology and Kantian antimetaphysical metaphysics to sustain it' (Jarvis, 2002: 9) I maintain that this kind of conceptual enlightening of criticism is helpful in understanding why aesthetic experience is so hard to articulate, and is exemplary in its commitment to a heightened awareness of a specific aspect of the complex legacy of aesthetic thought. Jarvis's attention to detail also prophesises the ending of his essay in which he argues for an honoring of the particularity of experience. He refers to the relationship between phenomenology and philology as being one that the field of criticism might model itself on:

There could be worse models for criticism, always remembering that marriage, "not a contractual relationship as far as its essential basis is concerned," is not seamless cooperation, but at once supersedes and preserves antagonism in love. Such a criticism would by no means imply a retreat from the minute particularity of art or of nature. Instead, it would no longer need to insist that access to the complexity of phenomena arises in proportion to the deletion of everything singular about my response to them. (Jarvis, 2002: 17)

It is not my intention to go into detail about the model that Jarvis ends up with here, rather, I want to re-read Jarvis's argument as being resonant with a problem facing music criticism. His desire to retain 'everything singular' about his response to phenomena highlights a recent musicological debate that is also concerned with the faithful articulation of musical experience. The two writers in this case, Jarvis and musicologist Rose Rosengard Subotnik, seem to converge over a shared desire to expand the parameters of academic discourse so as to admit singular, personal experience as a facet of analysis. I suggest that Woolf's writing about music could be used as a 'model' for the kind of criticism that Jarvis argues is in danger of being overlooked. Woolf's criticism, I will show, preserves the *distance* between the aesthetic and the cognitive by refusing to attempt to master any of her musical encounters through theorization. Her preservation of this distance is, I think, similar to Jarvis's appeal to preserve the equivocal nature of criticism; an equivocality that essentially *defines* criticism.

## Chapter 3

### **‘Innumerable threads’: Writing unreconciled subjectivity**

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This chapter will explore the equivocality that Jarvis recognises splits subjectivity in the writing of experience by looking in detail at four essays from Woolf’s oeuvre, ‘The Common Reader’, ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’, ‘Sketch of the Past’ and ‘Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car’. My reason for choosing these essays in particular is because they attempt to render a fractured subjectivity whole but in doing so they merely affirm the impossibility of such a reconciliation. In these essays, Woolf’s writing of the self produces what is tantamount to a phenomenological analysis of subjectivity as contradictory, transient and therefore illusory; but also in terms of presence and absence, subjectivity is considered in the aspect of life and death. And it is precisely this complex and exemplary pattern of self-affirmation and self-negation that can be salvaged for a poetics of criticism.

I will read the ‘The Common Reader’ somewhat against the grain. This short prefatory essay, which ostensibly acts as an introduction and might be thought to unify the remaining essays in the volume through the stabilising hypothesis of the common reader, actually presents a confused and confusing picture of what reading amounts to. If the essay itself is analysed in terms of its own rhetoric, it is not actually constitutive of a viable subject position for the reader from which the essays may be approached, but it is, rather, a text which subtly undermines such a position. My reading of ‘Street Haunting’ then builds on this sense of instability by arguing that Woolf discreetly and persistently invokes a chimeric selfhood. The title itself implies ghostly presences; a self that is displaced and disembodied. This partial self infiltrates crowds, bodies, minds, people, and noise and sees life manifested through a manifold of perspectives. She examines the capacity of the self to transform and delude itself; to evade itself and eventually negate itself. ‘Sketch of the Past’ will also be read in the light of a fractured subjectivity which relies on recollection and memory as a way of reproducing a partial self. In ‘Evening over Sussex’, Woolf attempts to reconcile four separate selves during a drive through the English countryside, and I will argue that the essay is in fact the narration of the process of the splitting and putting back together of consciousness in which it can be seen that the final, reunified subject is merely an illusion. I will be



arguing that these four essays have two striking commonalities; without explicit philosophical terminology or an overt sceptical agenda, she addresses the fallibility of the thesis of an *a priori* subjectivity. Secondly, and in relation to wholeness, all four essays are concerned with history and an idea of the past. The past, for Woolf, acted as a lens through which one could see all aspects of art's artificiality. But it was, ultimately, the standpoint of the *seer* that Woolf was interested in exploring and defending. The term "history" comes back in her writing as something of a pedal point, it seems an instinct to discover the finality of her own position, acts as a cover concept for the legitimisation and stabilisation of her ideas, and conveys her concern to make broader gestures in the direction of authority. And, moreover, such a person could act as the 'vital connection' between the living and the dead. Let us suppose that the 'vital connection' Woolf writes of is the '*common reader*'. From her point of view, the age of the great critic – 'The Dryden, the Johnson, the Coleridge, the Arnold' was long dead, and all we could do was look back with envy to the past. She knew at this early stage that history had a true bearing on the present, rejecting the scholarliness of other literary histories, instead wanting to capture in her criticism, the immediacy and intimacy of conversation.

The figure of the common reader is essentially fictitious, but it can be read as the articulation of a particular subjectivity that honours a discourse of difference. Woolf constructs the common reader like she would a character in a novel. She writes in a letter to Janet Case on the 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1925:

My dear Janet, I am very glad you like the Common Reader. I was rather nervous lest you should curse my impertinence for writing about Greek [*On Not Knowing Greek*], when you are quite aware of my complete ignorance. I wonder if you think that I said anything to the point about Greek? I am in a state of complete bewilderment, as everyone seems to prefer either Mrs Dalloway to the C.R. or the other way about, and implore me to write *only* novels or *only* criticism, and I want to do both. (L3: 191)

One way of confronting the past is through the making of aesthetic objects. Through the figure of the Common Reader – the reader who Woolf constructs – we now have the ability to 'take on' the stories, the judgements, and the actions of the past. She fictionalises history as a way of criticising it. Suzanne Nalbantian observes that:

Woolf used her discussion of Proust to warn her readers that the purpose of art was not to provide psychological insight into the author, for truth had to be measured by the standards of art rather than life. (Nalbantian, 1994: 139)

Instead, she notices that Woolf has, ‘An aesthetic orientation towards the use of life material.’ (Nalbantian, 1994: 139) Art has the ability to intervene in the making of a history, and for Woolf, writing was a way to of doing this. We might say that Woolf is writing literary history, in the true sense of the phrase. That is to say, she is not writing the history of literature, per se, rather she makes *history literary*. And in her kind of criticism, the book becomes the critic and the form is used critically. In many ways Woolf puts forward a *critical* notion of history whereby she isolates, breaks up and dissolves certain moments of history. We might then say that for Woolf history is not that which dictates the material of the work of art, rather history itself becomes the material with which we construct new works. This is most explicitly articulated in ‘The Common Reader’:

Above all, he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole – a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing. (CR1: 1)

We find a correlation in Adorno:

Understanding in the highest sense – a solution of the enigma that at the same time maintains the enigma – depends on a spiritualisation of art and artistic experience whose primary medium is the imagination. (AT: 162)

For Adorno, subjective mediation of the art work was central to the possibility of the work’s objectivity. The experiencing subject’s activity in the face of the work contributes to, or composes, a perception of the object, thus understanding, according to Adorno, is immanently dialectical, a negotiation between the empirical reality of the artistic material and the arbitrary, ungoverned experiences of the viewing subject. We find a corollary gesture in ‘The Common Reader’ and ‘Sketch of the Past’, Woolf’s attempt to articulate a unique critical subjectivity that negotiates, and indeed, challenges the boundaries of received critical practice and scholarship. The common reader ‘creates for himself’, is guided by his instinct, and prioritises pleasure in aesthetic experience. The common reader has what Adorno might refer to as a ‘creative imagination.’ In fact,

these essays in particular address a number of Adornoian concerns; the subject-object dialectic relates directly to Woolf's theorization of the form of the essay and the role of the essayist; both writers emphasise the importance of imagination in aesthetic experience, and the part/whole dialectic is given new insights through Woolf's work, which, in line with Adorno's thinking in *Aesthetic Theory* testifies, 'to the unreconciled and at the same time envision[s] its reconciliation.' (AT: 221).

There is no shortage of research that attests to the attention Woolf gave to the practices of reading and writing, and her attempts to articulate the precise nature of her own practices fill numerous pages of the diaries and letters. *The Common Reader*, of which there are two series, was first published in 1925 and contains a collection of short essays that had already appeared in journalistic form in literary periodicals or political pamphlets. Despite the fact that these essays would have been commissioned, and therefore subject to the vagaries of editorial constraints, Woolf, nevertheless, tries to find some connecting thread to harness the heterogeneity of the two volumes. In fact, the desire to make some kind of 'whole' from the miscellany of the various essays preoccupied Woolf greatly, both as essayist and novelist. By 1925 Woolf is forty three years of age and has already established herself as a 'serious' writer, though was still not what we might consider 'a household name'. However, the general public would have been familiar with some of her works already; *The Voyage Out* (1915), *Night and Day* (1919) and *Jacob's Room* (1922). *The Common Reader* also comes one year after Woolf's literary manifesto 'Mr. Bennet and Mrs. Brown' (1924). By this stage in her life, Woolf's aesthetic reflection and interest in genre theory has deepened and gathered force. This comes to light in the eponymously titled introduction to the *Common Reader*.

### **'The Common Reader'**

In this briefest of essays, 'The Common Reader' could be thought of as a pivotal figure in Woolf's philosophy of criticism. Neither critic, nor scholar, the common reader is 'worse educated, and nature has not gifted him so generously.' (CR1: 1) Denied the relative epistemological stability of the world of the critic or scholar, the common reader is forced to fashion his impressions in whatever make-shift way he can. He must, 'run up some rickety and ramshackle fabric which shall give him the temporary satisfaction of looking sufficiently like the real object to allow of affection,

laughter, and argument.’ (CR1: 1). Woolf’s deprecating picture of the common reader continues as she describes him as, ‘hasty, inaccurate, and superficial.’ (CR1: 1) But beneath this outward disregard for the common reader’s literary skills, Woolf reinstates the critical importance of the common reader’s approach at the end of the essay when she claims that his observations will, ‘contribute to so mighty a result.’ (CR1: 2) In fact, this is just one of many paradoxes in this essay which can be regarded in the light of Adorno’s philosophy of the irreconcilability of the art work. ‘The Common Reader’ implies commonality and a sense of shared community. These disparate essays find their connection, their wholeness in the common reader. The common reader represents a subject position which unifies, joins together and makes connections with others. This was supposed to be the function of Woolf’s introductory essay. Yet, in fact, the entire piece is characterised by contradiction and communicates not a universal, unified understanding of subjectivity, but something much more sophisticated; the essay purports to an idea of ‘wholeness’, yet undermines this very wholeness in its execution. An example of this first appears in the second paragraph, when Woolf writes, ‘Above all he is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole – a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing.’ (CR1: 1) But Woolf’s ‘whole’ seems to consist only of fragments; a portrait is not a man, a sketch is a mere outline, and art cannot be entirely explained by theory. What is at stake in ‘The Common Reader’ is the epistemological value of the presentation of unreified subjectivity. That is to say, the essay confronts us with the reality of our own experience, precisely because the essay is laced with contradiction and inconsistency *whilst claiming to be otherwise*. There can be no knowledge of an object without the perspective of the subject’s negotiation of that object. And in this sense, we gain knowledge not from the essay itself, but from our confrontation with the particularity of the essay’s contradictions. ‘The Common Reader’, whilst purporting to an idea of wholeness actually presents us with the very opposite, and it is our experience of confronting this contradiction that disrupts the reifying discourse of the subject/object dialectic.

‘Subject and Object’ from 1969 encapsulates some of Adorno’s fundamental philosophical arguments. Martin Jay’s reading of Adorno’s essay is particularly helpful here as it emphasizes the material reality of Adorno’s rationale. Despite the complex philosophical language that surrounds the subject/object dialectic, at heart, Adorno’s concern remained centred on how we relate to our surrounding environments. But the

problem of conceiving of an adequate conception of subjectivity from which one's relation to the world could be established becomes more complex still with Adorno's insistence that a collective concept of the subject fails to account for the uniqueness and individuality of any particular person. Thus, we arrive at an intellectual crossroads:

If on the other hand we tried to define the two terms so as to avoid this type of complication, we would land in an aporia that adds to the problematics of defining...for in a way, the concepts of subject and object – or rather, the things they intend – have priority before all definition. Defining means that something objective, no matter what it may be in itself, is subjectively captured by means of a fixed concept. Hence the resistance offered to defining by subject and object. (Adorno, 1987: 498)

Woolf's essay, replete with inconsistencies and contradictions, therefore prevents the sundering of the subject by means of a fixed concept, and thus the *particularity* of the common reader remains intact. This understanding of the figure of the common reader has implications for the subject/object dialectic because it reinforces the need to critically engage with objects, whether those objects are the specific works Woolf mentions in her essays, the essays themselves, or, meta-critically, the act of reflection itself.

The rhetoric of reflection, and the possible multi-layered interpretations these reflections give rise to, is clear in both 'Subject and Object' and 'The Common Reader.' Woolf's essay begins with a reflection on the past and the opening sentence is an echo from Dr Johnson's *Life of Gray* in which she quotes, '...I rejoice to concur with the common reader.' But the essay's most revealing reflection comes here, 'He never ceases, as he reads, to run up some rickety and ramshackle fabric which shall give him the temporary satisfaction of looking sufficiently like the real object to allow of affection, laughter, and argument.' (CR1: 1). The 'real object' here is the critic or the scholar, but their status as 'object' is interchangeable with 'subject'. Thus the equivocality of the dialectic is on full display. Furthermore, that the common reader would only ever be able to provide a reading that would *look sufficiently like* that of the critic or the scholar further entrenches the complex structures of impressions and reflections, and the illusory nature of the dialectic. Illusory because any separation of subject and object is (as both Adorno and Woolf testify) one of the fundamental errors of epistemology. Martin Jay explains:

To move from error to truth requires a critique of concepts that pits their ambiguous implications against the social world to which they imperfectly refer; the result will not merely be that the concept is inadequate to the world, but also that the world as it presently is constituted is inadequate to certain meanings of the concept. The particular error of contemporary epistemology...is the radical separation of subject and object, which has been a fundamental assumption of Western thought at least since Descartes. (Jay, 1984: 61)

This illusory subject/object aporia is captured vividly by Woolf's essay as she sustains a paradoxical rhetoric throughout. But, as Adorno notes, this aporia is both illusory and real at the same time, and this is precisely why it is meaningful. He writes:

The separation of subject and object is both real and illusory. True, because in the cognitive realm it serves to express the real separation, the dichotomy of the human condition, a coercive development. False, because the resulting separation must not be hypostasized, not magically transformed into an invariant. (Adorno, 1987: 498-9)

This rather confusing use of true and false refers to Adorno's ongoing dialogue with Hegelian dialectics and gives rise to the proclamation in *Minima Moralia* that, 'the whole is the false.' (MM: 50) Truth, as Adorno means to imply here, refers to the current state of the human condition and the contradictory nature of experience. It refers, essentially, to the truth of human suffering as it continually tries to come to terms with the world around it and the objects in it with the dominating impulse of instrumental reason which ultimately falsifies the subject and its experience. 'The Common Reader' ostensibly attempts to suppress heterogeneity for the sake of unification, but, as I have shown, ultimately resists doing so. We can see how this speaks directly to Adorno's philosophy of identity and non-identity, because the resulting effect of Woolf's writing is the salvaging and protection of a non-reified subjectivity. That is to say, Woolf's work testifies to the redemptive power of the remembrance and restoration of difference and particularity to the subject/object dialectic.

### **‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’**

‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’ first appeared in the *Yale Review* in October 1927 and is a vivid insight into the colourful and varied life that wanders through the streets of London. But it is also evidence of Woolf’s inscription of a nomadic self, the wanderer, who identifies herself both as observer of other people, and in disguise, momentarily and haphazardly wearing the identities of others. In fact, the whole essay is built around an illusory self and the metaphor of the seeing eye/I that roams through the crowds, disembodied from any one self. The very first sentence of the essay gives us some clue of what is to come, ‘No one perhaps has ever felt passionately towards a lead pencil.’ (CE4: 155) What we realize, of course, is that ‘no one’ indicates the negation of the self that is developed in the rest of the essay. In a similar way to ‘The Common Reader’, ‘Street Haunting’ is also concerned with wholeness and the unification of the self, but this self is constituted negatively and remains continually dislocated and alien to itself. The opening paragraph sets up the metaphor of disguise and deception immediately by referring to the buying of a lead pencil as a pretext for wandering around London, and as darkness falls we learn that, ‘We are no longer quite ourselves.’ (CE4: 155) Instead, having, ‘shed the self our friends know us by’ we become, ‘anonymous trampers.’ Taking up this anonymous identity, the pervasive rhetoric of seeing begins to develop as Woolf describes the act of spying on an arguing couple. But instead of pursuing insight, the seeing eye merely glides over the surface of things always at a distance from the entirety of the vision it chases. The eye reflects the pearlescent colors around it as ‘a central oyster of perceptiveness,’ but it does not penetrate the surface of things, ‘The eye is not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure. It floats us smoothly down a stream, resting, pausing, the brain sleeps as it looks’ (CE4: 156) The sleepy encountering of the world in which skimming the surface will suffice, advances the metaphor of sight paradoxically. Sight is not used to penetrate or overcome the strangeness of the world, rather the image of the disembodied eye only serves to affirm its unfamiliarity. The eye without a body can only ever access experience partially:

Here vaguely one can trace symmetrical straight avenues of doors and windows; here under the lamps are floating islands of pale light through which pass quickly bright men and women, who, for all their poverty and shabbiness, wear a certain look of unreality[...] (CE4: 156)

Vague tracings of life reinforce the illegibility of experience in which appearances are unreal and illusory. This sense of the unreal is advanced by Woolf's writing of a subjectivity that cannot become real because it is trapped by a series of events that simply reinforce the peculiarly deceptive nature of experience. The infinite deferral of a unified subjectivity by virtue of the disembodied eye/I relies on viewing events and people superficially for fear of, 'catching at some root or branch.' (CE4: 157) This root or branch symbolizes understanding and making sense of the empirical world – a trajectory that the essay undermines by sustaining the image of the fractured self. For Adorno, this refusal to shape experience in concrete terms for the sake of understanding allows the differential nature of things to remain distinct. (Adorno, 1987: 499).

Throughout the essay, Woolf's flâneurial self encounters numerous characters, all of whom represent the fragility of the self and the power of transformation. Her first encounter with a dwarf precipitates a questioning of identity, "What, then, is it like to be a dwarf?" The dwarf draws the seeing eye towards her, 'Look at that! Look at that!' as she herself plays out a negotiation of her own identity. The dwarf episode resonates with the main themes of the essay as we read about her trying on various different types of shoe and regarding herself in the mirror. The dwarf's impressions of herself are radically transformed as she becomes convinced that the shoes diminish the inferiority of her stature, 'Look at my feet, look at my feet, she seemed to be saying, as she took a step this way and then a step that way. The shop girl good-humouredly must have said something flattering, for suddenly her face lit up in an ecstasy.' (CE4: 158) However, as quickly as the dwarf leaves the shop and returns to the streets, the power of the mirror and the flattery of the shop-girl has faded as she is absorbed back into the formless mass of the people on the street, 'the humped, the twisted, the deformed.' (CE4: 158). Almost as if by way of punishment for her fleeting moment of happiness in the shop, the dwarf immediately encounters two blind men, to remind her that though deformed, she could at least 'see herself', even though the sight she saw in the mirror in the shop lasted only as long as she was looking. The representation of experience in 'Street Haunting' continues by stringing together various unrelated events and imaginings; bearded Jews, donkeys, cats, the homeless and the deformed as well as the fantasy furnishings of a fictional party:

Wearing pearls, wearing silk, one steps out onto a balcony which overlooks the gardens of sleeping Mayfair. There are a few lights in the bedrooms of great peers



returned from Court, of silk-stockinged footmen, of dowagers who have pressed the hands of statesmen. (CE4: 160)

The pearls represent the quitting of one persona for the adoption of another, but they also represent the limits of the unreal; wearing pearls on the balcony is held up as the experience so different to buying a pencil that it punctures the momentary reverie and is the catalyst for a reflection on the heterogeneity of the consciousness:

But what could be more absurd? It is, in fact, on the stroke of six; it is a winter's evening; we are walking to the Strand to buy a pencil. How, then, are we also on a balcony, wearing pearls in June? What could be more absurd? Yet it is nature's folly, not ours. When she set about her chief masterpiece, the making of man, she should have thought of one thing only. Instead turning her head, looking over her shoulder, into each one of us she let creep instincts and desires which are utterly at variance with his main being, so that we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the colours have run. Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? Circumstances compel unity; for convenience' sake a man must be a whole. (CE4: 160-1)

This moment of intense reflection takes us out of the bustling activity of the streets and into the quietude of pause and thought. The aspiration for a 'true self' is contradicted and complicated by the rhetoric of the essay which presents a multitude of selves, none of which remain constant, 'But just as we are turning to obey the command, another self disputes the tyranny to insist.' (CE4: 164). The commanding self is the one that reminds us of the task to buy a pencil; the pencil is that which inscribes, stabilises and memorializes, but in this essay, the pencil, like the self, is exposed as a ruse and an illusion. The pencil, in fact, writes the deterioration of the self.

### **'Sketch of the Past' and 'Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car'**

The power of remembrance as well as 'illusory and real' subjectivity in Woolf's writing is perhaps best exemplified in her 1939 essay 'Sketch of the Past'. Woolf's most explicitly autobiographical essay is laden with potential points of connection with Adorno's philosophy of non-identity. By describing the process of writing the self as a

practice that allows only the temporary stabilization of the 'I', Woolf foregrounds an unreconciled subjectivity. She begins the essay by asking, 'Who was I then?' (MoB: 79) and claiming, 'I do not know how far I differ from other people.' (MoB: 79) and, indeed, one could read the whole essay as an ode to negative dialectics, with its emphasis on self-reflexivity, non-domination and 'open' and 'experimental' thought. Woolf's question about how far she differed from other people, not how she was similar, concurs with Adorno's philosophy of difference. In trying to recall her past, Woolf can only remember impressions, sketches and outlines, scraps of sounds, flashes of colour and smells. But both her writing and her memories testify to the resistance of the self to its unification; the self can only write the past in the present, but this self is incomplete, partially remembered and temporal. Writing cannot fix things, concepts, or ideas, but it can trace the attempt, the trial, and the struggle of articulation. Woolf has similar thoughts in the essay:

I am hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories; perhaps it accounts for their strength. Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete. (MoB: 81)

Woolf's constitution of subjectivity comes about largely through moments of what she calls 'non-being', that is, moments of life that are in some way 'insignificant', mundane or easily forgotten; meals, daily chores, snippets of meaningless conversations. These moments of non-being are a way of describing the subject 'at rest'; unburdened, unmoved, singularly unaffected by any encounter or experience with the world. They are in opposition to Woolf's 'violent shock', the name she gives to a moment of consciousness which reveals the brutality of existence and exposes subjectivity as the *continual failure of the articulation of experience*. Woolf describes a fight with her brother Toby as being an instance when she recognized the burden of the moral obligation not to hurt others, an obligation that she had no power over, that rendered her helpless. She then recalls regarding a flower bed outside the house at St Ives and realizing the symbiosis of nature, claiming to utter, "That is the whole". (MoB: 84) And finally she describes trying to come to terms with the discovery that someone she had met once had committed suicide:

It seemed to me that the apple tree was connected with the horror of Mr Valpy's suicide. I could not pass it. I stood there looking at the grey green creases of the bark – it was a moonlight night – in a trance of horror. I seemed to be dragged down, hopelessly, into some pit of absolute despair from which I could not escape. My body seemed paralysed. (MoB: 84)

Woolf's way of coping with these experiences is to try and write about them, to render them sensible and to explain them. Again, writing seems to have the power to inscribe experience:

As one gets older one has a greater power through reason to provide an explanation; and that this explanation blunts the hammer force of the blow...And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. (MoB: 85)

The admission of a desire to explain reveals the impulse to conquer experience through language; a desire which Adorno categorises as a dominating one, and yet, the essay as a whole remains faithful to the non-identical and to a subjectivity that cannot be fixed. But it is Woolf's need for comprehension that is most revealing about the falseness of totality and its very real allure. The desire to 'make whole' one's experiences comes from the desire to overcome experience by fixing it with concepts. In the posthumously published 'Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car', Woolf describes the moment when she realizes that experience can seem in excess of the capabilities of language as 'a pin prick':

But, I thought, there is always some sediment of irritation when the moment is as beautiful as it is now. The psychologists must explain; one looks up, one is overcome by beauty extravagantly greater than one could expect – there are now pink clouds over Battle; the fields are mottled, marbled – one's perceptions blow out rapidly like air balls expanded by some rush of air, and then, when all seems blown to its fullest and tautest, with beauty and beauty and beauty, a pin pricks; it collapses. But what is the pin? So far as I could tell, the pin had something to do with one's impotency. I cannot hold this – I cannot express this – I am overcome by it – I am mastered. Somewhere in that region one's discontent lay; and it was allied with the idea that one's nature demands mastery over all that it receives. (CE2: 290)

The great irony of this passage is that as Woolf attempts to describe her impotency in the face of experience, she only serves to confirm her mastery of language and form –

the experience of writing takes her beyond the limits of her perception of language and thus the artistry she describes as lacking, is, in fact, replete with the abundance of imagination. But her treatment of subjectivity does not rest there, as this essay contains no less than four incarnations of the experiencing and writerly self. The first, described above, believes himself unable to render the beauty of nature through language, the second rejects this idea and is content to be overwhelmed by the profuseness of the world... ‘believe me when I tell you that it is best to sit and soak; to be passive; to accept; and do not bother because nature has given you six little pocket knives with which to cut up the body of a whale.’ (CE2: 291). The third self is a melancholy incarnation who notices that the imposition of the inevitability of death weighs heavy on the possibility of enjoying the present, ‘Gone, gone; over, over; past and done with, past and done with. I feel life left behind even as the road is left behind. We have been over that stretch, and are already forgotten’ (CE4: 291). As if in protest to the frailty of life, the repetitious text tries to cement a presence that is continually dying. And the fourth self, perhaps the most conscious self, suddenly snaps from a moment of reverie in a gesture of survival and thinks of the future, of a place where the continuation of subjectivity, in the collective sense, can be assured, ‘ ‘You, erratic and impulsive self that you are, feel that the light over the downs there emerging, dangles from the future. Let us try to understand this. Let us reason it out. I feel suddenly attached not to the past but to the future.’’ (CE2: 291)

What transpires in the remainder of the essay is the inscription of an interior monologue in which the various selves are collected up and made to be whole, ‘ ‘Now,’ I said, ‘comes the season of making up our accounts. Now we have got to collect ourselves; we have got to be one self...’ (CE2: 292). But the fact remains; Woolf is quoting herself and thus her attempts to unify subjectivity are always *once removed* from the subject in question. Moreover, the unified self is *made up*, fictionalized through the conscious bringing together of disparate parts. Writing cannot unify the self, it merely serves to reinforce that the fractured psyche Woolf tries to piece back together through writing cannot be anything other than the inscription of the *unreconciled* and *unreconcilable* self.

‘Sketch of the Past’ too, can be read as an inscription of the impossibility of reconciling subjectivity through writing:

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. (MoB: 85)

In fact, writing only serves to confirm that this ‘putting together’ of the ‘severed parts’ will only produce the *appearance* of unity; the parts are already severed, any unification of them is simply falsely inscribed by process of writing. The only thing that redeems writing at this point would be the self-reflexivity of its form, where this false inscription is given a voice. This voice comes through Woolf’s self-referential quotes in ‘Evening over Sussex’ and here too:

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. (MoB: 85)

The truth about art is that it has no truth, or, that its truth can be found in the telling of the untruth. As Woolf writes and rewrites ‘A Sketch’ so too does she write and rewrite herself, never fixed, always incomplete, the embodiment of the unreconciled art work.

### **‘Tympan’ and extract from *The Waves***

There is a further way in which the philosophy of non-identity comes to light in Woolf’s work that can be seen from the following analysis of a passage from her 1931 work *The Waves*. Before looking at the specific passages, I turn briefly to Jacques Derrida’s 1972 essay ‘Tympan’ from *Margins of Philosophy* in which he develops the notion that to philosophise is to tympanise – a word taken from the French *tympaniser* which literally means to criticise, or to ridicule publicly.<sup>38</sup> To tympanise, then, for Derrida, is to philosophise with a hammer, to philosophise is to batter, and to strike, it is a violent, aggressive and assertive gesture whose aim to is not just to wound that which is outside of philosophy, that which is anti-philosophical, but whose aim is also to master. The act of criticism then, taking the Derridian line, is akin to a kind of mastering. Interpretation gives way to the desire for mastery. Derrida’s reiteration of Adorno’s identity thinking in which humankind is driven to dominate through

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<sup>38</sup> See Derrida, J. 1982. ‘Tympan’ in *Margins of Philosophy* (Hertfordshire: University of Chicago)

instrumental reason, serves us well here because of the direct link he creates between philosophy and criticism. The role of the critic, to some extent, is to analyse, to define, to interpret and to comprehend; the critic must *overcome* the work of art or aesthetic experience, because he must bring it within the confines of a particular vocabulary or form. He must clarify what the object is, he must label it, and make judgements about it. In 'Tympan', Derrida questions philosophy's ability to withstand its own tendency for mastery, that is to say, he wonders if philosophy can survive its own interrogations, for if philosophy asks a question, he argues, it must surely question its very means of questioning. Derrida's notion of mastery, on other words, is derived from an overtly Adornian philosophical perspective, in the sense that mastery implies domination through philosophy's conceptualisation of the world, and thus the particularity of objects, experiences, and events gets subsumed under general categories and definitions.

And even though the act of naming and defining an object seems to solidify and concretise its existence in a gesture that could appear to be affirmative, Derrida argues that this gesture also affects another kind of state, for, to contain the object within the limitations of the chosen concept means just that, the object is now labelled, it has been determined, it has been conceptually conquered. And in this act of interpretation some aspect of the object is lost, something is left out. What has been forgotten is the particularity of the object, the thing that makes it different from that other thing.

In *The Waves*, Rhoda describes the experience of being in a concert hall:

Here is a hall where one pays money and goes in, where one hears music among somnolent people who have come here after lunch on a hot afternoon. We have eaten beef and pudding enough to live for a week without tasting food. Therefore we cluster like maggots on the back of something that will carry us on [...] swaying and opening programmes, with a few words of greetings to friends, we settle down, like walruses stranded on rocks [...] we lie gorged with food, torpid in the heat. Then, swollen, but contained in slippery satin, the seagreen woman comes to our rescue. She sucks in her lips, assumes an air of intensity, inflates herself precisely at the right moment as if she saw an apple and her voice was the arrow in to the note, "Ah!" (W:109)

Woolf's depiction of the singer is highly evocative, describing her as a sea-green slippery satin covered being that inhales and inflates and hurls herself into the note of music. And the audience too is painted in no less a vivid light; we are asked to imagine them plump with food, stagnant from eating, immobilised and waiting for the music to begin. But the change in the narrative voice at the beginning of the quote *illustrates*

*again the idea of a non-reified subjectivity.* The ambiguity and anonymity of the 'one' who 'pays money and goes in' is transformed immediately into the definitive and inclusive 'we'. But who is implicated in this transformation? Is it the reader? Are we now part of the 'we' or is the 'we' simply referring to the remaining five characters in the novel?

The subject/object dialectic is once again in play, and so too is the idea of mastery or domination. There is no longer any confusion about whom the audience consists of, we now know, the audience is 'we' not 'one'. The reader is no longer in control of the audience's identity. The narrator is now our master and controls our interpretation of the text. The passage continues with the repetition of 'us' and 'our', there is a sense of belonging, the narrator is taking responsibility for a group of people, she is claiming the opinions of not just the 'one' but the many. And suddenly, *the singular voice of the one is lost*. The individual is now part of the group. The change in the narrative voice excludes the particularity of the individual voice. Of course, perhaps ironically we note that the passage is *about* the individual voice, it is about the individual singer, but even with this in mind, Woolf subverts the supremacy of the single voice. As she describes the female singer singing she predominantly describes the somatic aspects of musical production: '*She sucks in her lips, assumes an air of intensity, inflates herself*'. What becomes of the rest of the performance we wonder? What about *what* the woman is singing? The only actual word given to the singer is 'Ah!' which, even though it is repeated four times in the following paragraph, is surely a censorship of some kind.

A further example of Woolf's playfulness around the idea of the mastery of text can be shown with the help of French philosopher Maurice Blanchot's theory of language. Blanchot retains an essentially Hegelian/Adornoian philosophical model of the concept, but he is concerned with orientating the problem of the mastery of conceptualisation towards the discourse of literature. However, this is where the similarities to the Hegelian/Adornoian model of conceptual mastery ends, and Blanchot's theory takes a subtle turn. Blanchot attempts to sidestep the problem of conceptualisation by making a distinction between 'dialogue' and 'comprehension'. The etymology of the word comprehension suggests that it is *always already* a violent practice (the Latin *prehendere* means to grasp, to grab or to seize) because to comprehend something means to abolish the distance between myself and the thing. If I comprehend a text, or a piece of music, I familiarise myself with it, it is not a stranger, not foreign, it is no longer at a distance to me. My understanding is also an overcoming or an overpowering of the thing. Dialogue, on the other hand *preserves* the distance between myself and the

other, a dialogue is a *response* to, not an annihilation of the distance that separates us. In conversation, I address you directly, I single you out, and in doing so, I acknowledge your difference from everybody else, I do not disregard it. Conversation honours particularity, dialogue honours particularity, one regards the other in their irreducible difference. *Dialogue*, therefore, *is not masterful*. Woolf's passage, we might argue, resists comprehension. Her description of the orchestra confirms this:

There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (W: 110)

Woolf preserves the distance between us and the text because she ensures that at some level it resists comprehension. And much as we might guess precisely what the 'oblongs' and 'squares' she writes about refer to, we actually don't ever know because she omits a level of detail that allows the reader to imagine what they might be. Woolf's words make sense, in the syntactical, grammatical way we expect them to, but it is almost as if all she ever really does here is *sketch* the outline of events, people, and experiences, she gives us shapes, lines, and pictures, but never much detail, and she leaves us to fill in the specific details. We do not actually need to know what the oblongs and squares refer to, it hardly seems to matter, because as she presents us with what we might call the silhouettes of experience, she preserves the distance between the thing and us, and in doing so, she cannot do violence to the particularity of experience. The parsimony of her description does not over-determine the object or the experience. Perhaps now we might imagine that the 'Ah!' of the original female is not censorship at all, but rather frugality. Because Woolf resists the temptation to articulate the specific nuances and characteristics of the singer's every word, she actually allows the scene to be filled with imaginative potential. I would suggest that it is precisely the parsimony of Woolf's literary style that makes the possibility of reading her work in the light of Adorno's philosophy of the non-identical so powerful. This is because Woolf's mastery of form means that her writing refuses to submit to the hierarchies of subject or object; only by sustaining the contradictions and paradoxes that are constituent of experience, does writing simultaneously resist the impulse to resolve the immanent tension in the subject/object dialectic. Woolf's writing about experience could be read as the failure of the stabilization of a critical subjectivity. This is evidenced by and through the formal



presentation of a continual self-critique of conceptual thought which manifests itself as the preservation of contradiction.

## Chapter 4

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### Narcotic pleasure: The Essay as Form

As I have tried to show in the previous chapter, Woolf's work can be read as a critique of subjectivity and as a preservation of the particularity of speculative thinking and experience in line with Adorno's philosophy of the non-identical. In this chapter, I wish to examine the form of the essay. In the first part I will set out a picture of the modern essay through a cross reading of Adorno and Woolf. In the second part, I will consider three of Woolf's essays that are explicitly about music. These essays, because they are about music, reveal more aspects of the essayistic task. This examination will explore the characteristics that pertain to the essay genre and will develop the close relationship between the form of the essay and criticism. The essay form, as normally understood, can be characterised by its looseness of construction, its informal first-person perspective and by its negative relation to the dissertation and didactic objectives; the essay stands at a remove from the discourse of falsifiable assertion. However, when the essay form is rediscovered in the modern period, and when it dramatically rediscovers intellectual respectability in the hands of Adorno and Lukács, another picture of the essay appeared, whereby the object under essayistic scrutiny is given primacy in the determination of concepts. The essayistic spirit could be thought to describe the subject in a state of receptiveness to the world, and is not, in actuality, merely an expression of the occasional whims and fancies of the author.

Adorno's argument, as we will see, suggests that because the essay is marginal and unsystematic it denudes the subject of its capacity to dominate through obsessive conceptual clarity and conclusiveness. The essay instead remains open to pre-rational, unprocessed aspects of experience. Indeed, Adorno considered the essay to be closer to a 'true', more viable form of philosophical investigation or research (*Versuch*).<sup>39</sup>

It goes without saying that Woolf is utterly steeped in the English belletrist tradition of literary essayism. But in this chapter, I want to ask to what extent she can be read as

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<sup>39</sup> In *Adorno and Critical Theory*, Hauke Brunkhorst explains that Adorno conceives of the essay hermeneutically, that is to say, he argues that interpretation arises from a consideration of the differences between subject and object, and that the only form capable of disclosing anything to interpretation is the essay because of its experimental trajectory, which nevertheless relies on the pre-existing actuality of objects and events. In other words, the essay's fidelity to the particular preserves its relation to empirical reality; a relationship which may otherwise be eradicated by systematic philosophical investigation. Hauke Brunkhorst, *Adorno and Critical Theory* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 60.

being an essayist in Adorno's sense. Therefore, what I will be looking for, for example, are signs that Woolf's authorial voice is willing to sacrifice itself for the sake of the object, and for the tension inherent in the relationship between the loose construction of the essay and systematic conclusion. But we might also be looking for moments of contradiction between the purported intent of the essay and what actually transpires. Furthermore, there may also be evidence that the essay prosecutes its task with considerable rigour only to nonchalantly revoke its own conclusions. And finally, a highly telling symptom of the dialectical essay is its tendency to mimetically appropriate its subject matter, which, as Adorno goes on to argue secures the essay's aesthetic autonomy:

The positivist tendency to set up every possible examinable object in rigid opposition to the knowing subject remains – in this as in every other instance – caught up with the rigid separation of form and content: for it is scarcely possible to speak of the aesthetic unaesthetically, stripped of any similarity with its object, without becoming narrow-minded and a priori losing touch with the aesthetic object. (NL1: 5)

As essayist and novelist, it might be that Woolf is highly susceptible to the aesthetic possibilities of the essay in ways that go further than Adorno thought possible. But what his theory makes possible is the grasping of these moments, not as inflections of Woolf's already very sophisticated stylistic awareness, but as moments of objective lucidity.

It is perhaps advisable at this juncture to make some remarks about how I intend to approach the following analysis. I will resist treating Woolf's essays as mere exemplars of Adorno's theory, but instead what I hope to show are moments of mutual elucidation between the two authors, and will cross-reference and compare parts of Adorno's 'The Essay as Form' and Woolf's 'The Modern Essay.' It would not be controversial to say that Adorno is the more sophisticated theorist here, and in a sense, his investment in theory allows us to see Woolf's writing in a new aspect. But even though he was accomplished as a writer of literary essays, something of the residue of dogged theorising lingers in Adorno's tone, and he remains guarded by dialectical discipline. Woolf, on the other hand, is continually contradictory, but these contradictions are not supervised by any theoretical principles. In a way, her contradictions appear to arise naturally, and are therefore, less artificial and more beguiling.

## Woolf's 'The Modern Essay' and Adorno's 'The Essay as Form'

We can see this immediately as we compare two passages from their essays. 'The Modern Essay' first published in 1922, can be read in light of Adorno's assertion at the end of his seminal work 'The Essay as Form' (1958) that the essay remains a site of struggle against 'the orthodoxy of thought' (NL1: 23). To quote the final passage in full, Adorno argues:

Even the highest manifestation of the intellect that express happiness are always at the same time caught in the guilt of thwarting happiness as long as they remain mere intellect. Therefore the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible. (NL1: 23)

Given Adorno's comments, a reading of Woolf's essay can be deepened by examining her assertion that the essay's guiding principle should be pleasure, 'The principle which controls it is simply that it should give pleasure; the desire which impels us when we take it from the shelf is simply to receive pleasure.' (CR1: 211) In fact, I argue, the pleasure of the essay and reading the essay are undermined by a family of metaphors which foreground writing and writers as having a somatic density; writings can wound, writers can be wounded and reading is always acting on the body. Any pleasures that are available in reading an essay are vulnerable to the reality of economic existence; an existence that leaves its mark on the body. Counter to the essay's presentation of a self-examination of form via Victorian essayism, runs an imaginative rendering of the body in a state of narcosis. Strewn throughout the essay are imbedded invocations of and references to disease, intoxication and the body in death. And yet, Woolf maintains that pleasure must guide the reading of an essay – thus, I argue, at the heart of Woolf's essay is the refusal to conform to an orthodox idea of pleasure. I will read Woolf's exposition of pleasure with its contradiction in line with Adorno's interpretation of the process of understanding which he argues is necessarily transformed by the form of the essay. Woolf's essay, therefore, not only complicates the notion of readerly pleasure, but *transforms our understanding* of pleasure as such.

The first glimpse of Woolf's somatic counter-text comes in the second paragraph in which Woolf reflects on the purpose of the essay:

It should lay us under a spell with its first word, and we should only wake, refreshed with its last. In the interval we may pass through the most various experiences of amusement, surprise, interest, indignation; we may soar to the heights of fantasy with Lamb or plunge to the depths of wisdom with Bacon, but we must never be roused. The essay must lap us about and draw its curtain across the world. (CR1: 211)

The reading of an essay seems almost like swallowing a drug with immediate effect; the first word signifies the body being consumed by the poison and what is written next could easily be the description of a drug-induced state of semi-consciousness and not a description of reading. Reading an essay is reputedly supposed to induce a hysterical scrolling through of emotions and extremes of ‘high’ and ‘low’ mental states where the body is stupefied, anesthetised and transfixed.<sup>40</sup> The instruction that the reader ‘must never be roused’ gives way to a more detailed reflection on the state of the reader whose palate has been dulled by ‘habit and lethargy’. The essayist has to have a certain technical skill in order to procure in the reader a powerful and contradictory effect. The essayist learns his art nefariously whereby he obtains the tools to ‘sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance[...]’ (CR1: 212). This ‘art’ which is precisely a pre-Enlightenment idea of art as being akin to the art of the conjurer, suggests that there is a sleight of hand due to the essayist. Woolf writes, ‘His learning may be as profound as Mark Pattison’s, but in an essay it must be so fused by the magic of writing that not a fact juts out, not a dogma tears the surface of texture.’ (CR1: 212) Both Woolf and Adorno agree on the non-dogmatic intention of the essay, for example, Adorno notes that, ‘the essay recoils from the violence in [...] dogma’ (NL1: 10). And both writers agree on the violent nature of dogma. But in Woolf’s case, her concerns are motivated by practical considerations – the problem of how to write, and in doing so, she confirms her commitment to trying to understand the role of the essayist. This is in contrast to Adorno, who is more concerned with the essay as form.

This pattern is repeated often; Adorno presents ideas in the abstract and Woolf materialises them. She goes on to reject ‘the voice of a man stumbling drowsily among loose words, clutching aimlessly at vague ideas’ (CR1: 212). The rambling voice is considered unfitting for the essay, and the drunken, intoxicated figure is shunned. Sobriety comes, though, in the next paragraph, ‘The essay must be pure – pure like water or pure like wine, but pure from dullness, deadness, and deposits of extraneous

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<sup>40</sup> Comparisons can be made here to Derrida’s concept of *Pharmakon*, where he discusses the over-signification of the Greek word *Pharmakon*, meaning medicine, remedy and poison. (*Plato’s Pharmacy*, 1972; 1981)

matter.’ (CR1: 213) Woolf’s rhetoric has clearly become very polarised, with one extreme replacing another: absolute intoxication is countered with abstention. Again, she reinforces the idea of a stabilised, complete view of the essay. And again, she opts for sobriety:

But doubtless our abstention saves as much gush, much rhetoric, much high-stepping and cloud-prancing, and for the sake of the prevailing sobriety and hard-headedness we should be willing to barter the splendour of Sir Thomas Browne and the vigour of Swift. (CR1: 214)

And yet, as much as she is trying to convince the reader that sobriety really is the dominant characteristic of the modern essay, Woolf nevertheless indulges the opposite and embellishes what she seeks to suppress, ‘much gush, much rhetoric, much high-stepping and cloud-prancing.’ Her extravagant vocabulary seems to ironically undermine the privileging of purity. In this sense, then, her effort to get beyond dialectical tension is illusory, and she allows the repressed element to return too swiftly. Arguably, in doing this, she conforms to one of Adorno’s criteria of essayistic writing. Instead she, ‘mirrors what is loved and hated instead of presenting the intellect, on the model of a boundless work ethic, as creation *ex nihilo*’ (NL1: 4) However, Woolf cannot entirely secure her diagnoses of the essayistic style. Woolf recoils once more and warns against the dangers of polishing the essay, ‘until every atom of its surface shines.’ To do this would be to asphyxiate the vitality of the manifold of ideas which the essay accommodates:

Yet, if the essay admits more properly than biography or fiction of sudden boldness and metaphor, and can be polished till every atom of its surface shines, there are dangers in that too. We are soon in sight of ornament. Soon the current, which is the life-blood of literature, runs slow; and instead of sparkling and flashing or moving with a quieter impulse which has a deeper excitement, words coagulate together in frozen sprays which, like the grapes on a Christmas-tree, glitter for a single night, but are dusty and garish the day after. (CR1: 214)

The ‘current’ Woolf mentions, but does not fully elucidate, is in contrast to ‘ornament.’ The ornament is ancillary, it is not the actual thing itself. The ornament is superficial and shallow. Woolf finds herself pitting the inorganic against the organic: the current is resolutely not ornamental; it is the essential vital element that defines literature. The vividness of this passage is so striking because it represents the moment at which it is possible to forget that we are reading a tutorial on the essay. Woolf’s

visual imagination punctures the appearance of unity and we are presented with a hitherto unseen aspect of the essay. Her imagination is so vivid that she produces a moment of excess, one might say, *ornamental* excess. The idea of ornamentation is not enough, Woolf has to decorate it. The comparison of the writerly ornament to a Christmas tree is so unexpected and so sudden, that we are torn from the seriousness of the point in question and propelled into a fantasy. This fantasy, however, also draws on the metaphor of decay and depicts the ornament as perishable. Its destiny therefore, is the absolute opposite of the ornamental, since it will wither and detract from the thing it decorates.

Woolf's delimitation of the essay in terms of its principal characteristics – pleasure, sobriety, pureness and current actually constitutes identity thinking. But in the above quote, Woolf is no longer trying to say under which category the essay must fall, she is no longer making comparisons between literature and essay writing, and in this *not doing*, she stops representing what the essay is via abstract concepts and we find ourselves reading an essay. There is a sense in which her own identifications actually threaten to alienate her craft, and it is as if she cannot help but let the non-identical fissure the text. In Adorno's terms, this movement is a kind of force that, 'shatters the appearance of identity.' (ND: 149)

Later in 'The Modern Essay', selfhood is once more a concern. In asking, 'But what did Mr Beerbohm give to the essay and what did he take from it? [...]' (CR1: 216) Woolf opens out an equivocal structure in which to develop an interpretation of the authorial self which, naively, can be assumed to stand behind the essay and must be adapted to the vagaries of public opinion. The construction of the essayistic subjectivity in 'The Modern Essay' is no less contradictory than it was shown to be in previous essays that were examined in Chapter Two. Woolf sounds naively realistic by presuming that the essayist has a self to give, 'What Mr Beerbohm gave was, of course, himself.' (CR1: 216) This giving of the self Woolf considers the most 'dangerous and delicate tool' of essayistic practice. The essay's relationship to authorial personality, I argue, represents a startling account of the dialectic of subject and object. Woolf writes of Beerbohm, 'He has brought personality into literature, not unconsciously and impurely, but so consciously and purely that we do not know whether there is any relation between Max the essayist and Mr Beerbohm the man.' (CR1: 217) The conscious and pure inclusion of 'personality' into the essay stops the essay being devoid of an author. Moreover, there appears to be no difference between 'Max the essayist and Mr Beerbohm the man.' Beerbohm was not trying to reproduce himself in the essay, he

did not pose as the essayist, rather the scale of his experience was proportionate to that of the reader. Interestingly, again Woolf admits that writing seems to allow you to make use of yourself, 'For it is only by knowing how to write that you can make use in literature of your self.' (CR1:217) But that permission is only granted to those who 'know how to write.' (CR1: 217)

But also, again, this momentary stabilisation of subjectivity is undermined by her placing into doubt the possibility of ever gaining possession of the self by writing because writing requires you to, 'Never to be yourself, and yet always – that is the problem.' (CR1: 217) This idea, cut off in the middle of thought, is further evidence of Woolf's arrival at a theory of an equivocal self-possession, and she places this at the heart of writing. Furthermore, this particular sentence, taken as a maxim, comes across as a piece of secure knowledge, yet at the same time it is perfectly self-contradictory, and therefore, arguably, useless as knowledge. This fragment though, has a particular kind of force, it makes a truth claim that breaks through the tone of previous and subsequent musings, it is earnest. Therefore, it is both a fragment and it has a fragmenting effect. The capital N of never defies the rules of grammar. Adorno understands the critical potential of the fragment and actually makes it a *prima facie* condition of thoughtful engagement with an object in the following way, '[...] the essay may not act as though it had deduced its object[...] it thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmentary, and finds its unity in and through the breaks and not by glossing them over. (NL1: 16).

The idea of never being yourself, yet always being yourself is a problem which is given by literature to the writer, and Woolf can therefore create a hierarchy amongst writers according to this criterion of struggle. All these thoughts come together a few lines later, via another pathological metaphor, in which Woolf criticises those essayists whom she regards as having failed to understand the dialectic of the self in writing and left selfhood unmediated, 'We are nauseated by the sight of trivial personalities decomposing in the eternity of print.' (CR1: 217). Thus writing seems capable of bearing witness to the death of the self. And ironically, it is only in death that the future of the self is secured because it lives forever in print. And, for Woolf, the only way of reading the essay is in a state of pure soberness, 'There is no gin about; no strong tobacco; no puns, drunkenness or insanity. Ladies and gentlemen talk together, and some things, of course, are not said.' (CR1: 218) Her reference to things which are left unsaid paradoxically also brings the very possibility of them to mind; in our remembering of the unsaid we honour the particularity of discourse, we remember those



aspects of discourse which remain unarticulated. Her saying of things unsaid ironically allows Woolf to occupy the very subjectivity she is writing because she too leaves things unsaid when it comes to making any broader philosophical claims about the nature of the essay. Perhaps the closest we come to an explicit theorisation is towards the end of the essay in which she states,

This is the penalty which the habitual essayist must now be prepared to face. He must masquerade. He cannot afford the time either to be himself or to be other people. He must skim the surface of thought and dilute the strength of his personality. He must give us a worn weekly halfpenny instead of a solid sovereign once a year.' (CR1: 219)

Woolf herself is 'masquerading' because in advising the inevitable dilution of strength of personality through over-production she actually confirms her intellectual strength by virtue of this particular insight. Furthermore, her argument that the essayist 'must skim the surface of thought' is only plausible at first sight. In fact, as we have seen, her essays actually produce an array of statements which could be considered profound. In writing the self as dissolved and partial, and in suggesting that essayistic thought is merely superficial, Woolf actually concretises the fact that the essayist might have something intellectually salient to say which reinstates the self as whole and consistent and capable of wielding objective knowledge. It would be a mistake, therefore, to suppose that the diminution of the self amounted to a pious self-relinquishment. Instead, the movement here is one of self-modification, it is a questioning of the limits and powers of the self, by the self. For Adorno, this adaptation of the self makes knowledge much more conditional on individual experience. And beyond that this individual experience is mediated by the experiences of humanity as whole:

The relationship to experience – and the essay invests experience with as much substance as traditional theory does mere categories – is the relationship to all of history. Merely individual experience, which consciousness takes as its point of departure, since it is what is closest to it, is itself mediated by the overarching experience of historical humankind. The notion that the latter is mediated and one's own experience unmediated is mere self-deception on the part of an individualistic society and ideology. (NL1: 10)

Woolf too understands the necessity to read the essay in an essential relation to the past. In criticising a clutch of contemporary essayists she diagnoses a common failing:

They share the contemporary dilemma – that lack of an obstinate conviction which lifts ephemeral sounds through the misty sphere of anybody's language to the land where there is a perpetual marriage, a perpetual union. Vague as all definitions are, a good essay must have this permanent quality about it[...]' (CR1: 222)

This 'permanent quality' relates to individual 'obstinate convictions' which Woolf argues secures the permanence of the essay as that which avoids the transitory and the 'ephemeral sounds' of empty words. Contradiction, though, remains at the heart of the essay. Contradiction plays itself out in Woolf writing by virtue of the presentation of claims and counterclaims, and by the accumulation of rhetoric and style in which subject positions are written and rewritten.

For Adorno, contradiction manifests itself through a critical pressure exerted through the opposing forces of the dialectic. Again, contradiction is at the heart of a reading of Adorno's essay, and prior to this effusive support of the essayist, his initial thoughts about the essay and the essayist are rather unflattering: he suggests that the essayist over-interprets, the essay makes meanings out of things that are devoid of meaning in the first place, and the essayist himself 'squanders his intelligence in impotent speculation.' (NL1: 4) Of course, as is typical of Adorno, at this stage in the exposition he is posing one side of a dialectic which he will eventually confront with its contradiction. But in staging this dialectical argument his own position remains ambiguous and, for all that, much stronger.

Importantly, both Adorno and Woolf occupy the role of essayist *and* critic of the essay. But, crucially, where they differ from each other is in their use of language as fulfilling two different priorities. Woolf uses language to create other worlds, imaginary spaces and vivid images; Adorno, on the other hand, uses it to enhance the essay's critical potential. His total commitment to dialectics penetrates his language and style. Language is not used in a painterly manner as we have seen in Woolf, who draws in language both real and imagined worlds. Adorno, in contrast, uses a language that is penetrated by dialectical thought to build up pressure on the opposing sides of contradictions. For example, in 'The Essay as Form' Adorno sets up, in opposition to one another, two opposing discourses; one of intellectual freedom and one that polices intellectual freedom. When discussing the world of intellectual freedom, Adorno invokes the innocence of childhood, employs metaphors concerned with light, and brings extreme emotional states to the forefront, 'the essay reflects a childlike freedom

that catches fire...The essay mirrors what is loved and hated...luck and play are essential to the essay'. (NL1: 4) However, when we enter the world of the policed intellect, he employs words such as '*terrorised*' and '*prohibition*' coupled with metaphors of officialdom: 'slapped with the charge of intellectualising', 'tracking down the individual...' (NL1: 4) Commenting on the essayist's apparently inferior ability to make reasoned interpretations, he suggests:

Letting oneself be terrorised by the prohibition against saying more than was meant right then and there means complying with the false conceptions that people harbour concerning themselves. Interpretation then becomes nothing but removing an outer shell to find what the author wanted to say, or possibly the individual psychological impulses to which the phenomenon points. (NL1: 4)

Intellectual freedom then hinges upon understanding that it would be a mistake to believe that the ultimate meaning of a text relates solely to the author's intention. To do this would do an injustice to the concept of *interpretation*. But whilst 'The Modern Essay' is built around a problematising of the self and writing, in Adorno it is the concept of interpretation that generates the most telling inconsistencies and contradictions. The concept of interpretation signifies a point at which Adorno disrupts continuous discourse, in the same way that Woolf uses the 'self' to interrupt a continuous line of thought. The word *interpretation* takes on a special significance because Adorno transforms the process of interpretation from a relatively simple conception of something that involves our perceptual and cognitive faculties, to something that requires *more* than mere perception or recognition. Interpretation, he implies, should be about something more than reading what the author intended to say.

For Adorno, interpretation, as that which facilitates knowledge acquisition, is not what Descartes insisted it was, i.e., an accumulation of ideas that begin with the simple and proceed in an orderly fashion to the complex. Rather, the essay begins with the complex and will not diminish the complexity which is inherent in the essay's object merely for the sake of the operation of reason, 'In opposition to the cliché of "comprehensibility," the notion of a causal relationship, the essay requires that one's thought about the matter be from the outset as complex as the object itself; it serves as a corrective to the stubborn primitiveness that always accompanies the prevailing form of reason.' (NL1: 15) The Cartesian and 'school-room' concept of understanding is thrown into doubt, and Adorno forces the reader to contemplate the possibility of writing that is resistant to our need for clarity and continuity:

The demand for continuity in one's train of thought tends to prejudice the inner coherence of the object, its own harmony. A presentation characterised by continuity would contradict an antagonistic subject matter unless it defined continuity as discontinuity at the same time. (NL1: 16)

If, as Adorno suggests, the essay falls foul of the Cartesian criteria of clear and distinct ideas and logical development, there is a very real temptation to transfer the essay to the realm of the aesthetic. Adorno is well aware of this temptation and he does not wholly resist it, though any complete aestheticisation of the essay would be just another mistake. Nevertheless, certain figures emerge in Adorno's depiction of the essay which suggest aesthetic tropes. He says that the essay depends upon a moment of spontaneous *subjective fantasy* that is actively discouraged in the moment of disciplined, objective reading. He also entertains the notion that the essay may have aesthetic autonomy. Furthermore, he acknowledges something that is almost fictive in the essay, 'nothing can be interpreted out of a work without at the same time being interpreted into it.' (NL1: 4) However, the opposite claim is also put forward: the essay distances itself from art because of its overtly conceptual nature and 'its claim to a truth devoid of aesthetic semblance.' (NL1: 5) Importantly, Adorno suggests that it is precisely this last point that Lukács fails to recognize in his essay on the essay in *Soul and Form*.

Now, at this point, Adorno begins to deepen our understanding of the relation between art and knowledge, not by attempting to reconcile their differences through conceptual sublation, rather by asserting the importance of bearing witness to their separateness. What is required is a consciousness that has been faithful to and is therefore able to represent the completion of a so-called 'mediating process' between science and art, between subject and object, between self and other. Adorno cites knowledge as one of the most important criterion in any consideration of the essay. Knowledge has traditionally been thought of as belonging to the domain of science but there remains something unquantifiable about knowledge, something that resists scientific categorization, 'the simplest reflection of the life of consciousness would teach us to what a slight extent insights, which are by no means arbitrary hunches, can be fully captured within the net of science.' (NL1: 8) He then uses the work of Marcel Proust as the quintessential example of 'an attempt to express necessary and compelling insights into human beings and social relations that are not readily accommodated within science and scholarship, despite the fact that their claim to objectivity is neither diminished nor abandoned to a vague plausibility.' What science is unable to do,

therefore, is account for individual experience that is ‘maintained through hope and disillusionment.’ (NL1: 8)

One of the reasons that experience is so highly valued in the essay, and in turn, what makes this valuing important to the critical potential of the essay, is to do with the essay’s commitment to the idea of critique. Because the essay can accommodate untruth, because it questions the notions of logical structure, argument and presentation, and because it neither adheres to the rigid hierarchies of science nor philosophical concepts (upon which, after all, science was founded), then the very concepts of truth and history themselves take on fundamentally temporal aspects. Thus, the experience of the writer becomes the experience of humanity in the broader sense of the word, but only in so far as this experience is mediated by history.

Broadly speaking, then, I have been able to identify many points of correlation between Adorno and Woolf’s theory and practice of the essay. I have shown that in ‘The Modern Essay’ Woolf complicates the authorial voice and produces a tension between the looseness of the form and systematic conclusion. Moreover, I have shown the multiple contradictions between what her essay intends and what actually transpires.

I will now read three of Woolf’s essays that are explicitly about music, ‘Street Music’, ‘Impressions at Bayreuth’ and ‘The Opera’ in order to further demonstrate her essayistic style and its potential as a means of critique.

### **‘Street Music’**

‘Street Music’ appeared in the *National Review* in March 1905, and although it was Woolf’s only contribution to the journal, it was widely celebrated by the paper’s editor, Leo Maxse. Structurally, the essay is divided into nine separate paragraphs, with the opening paragraph tackling the subject of the title, Street Music. However, in the second paragraph we are led away from the street musicians to more general observations about the nature of music itself, and here, Woolf begins her imaginative and semantic departure from the title of the essay. The third paragraph brings us back to the subject of the street musician, before we are led away in the fourth paragraph again to the world of ‘Christian altars.’ Paragraph five reinforces the religious theme, before a rather abrupt change of direction in paragraph six which sees Woolf commenting on the contemporary methods of teaching music. This paragraph acts somewhat as a dividing section, and the remainder of the essay concentrates on the importance of rhythm as

Woolf interprets it. So, in an essay ostensibly about street music, the reader is taken on a journey that scrolls through Woolf's theories of the expressive power of music and on the potential importance of rhythm as a structural and aesthetic device. This, I think, highlights perfectly the creative capacity of the essay, but it also demonstrates that the essay is testament to a vital, real and honest encounter with a subject. The essay has no thesis, as such, it announces no specific direction, and it makes no explicit claims to knowledge. Perhaps, though, we might also intimate that Woolf recreates and distils in pure form in her writing the essence of the title: Street music is often brash and loud, it is theatrical and staged, forced upon the ears of those who have not agreed to listen, but are expected to pay money for such an experience. Woolf's text is almost equally unforgiving; it is certainly theatrical and its movement between differing subjects recalls the lumbering gestures of the organ grinder or the amateur band. And because of this, 'Street Music' is convincing, it is informative and intriguing, it captures a particular subjectivity, a particular moment, and, most importantly, it transforms a musical experience into a literary one.

One of the most striking things about this particular essay is the way in which Woolf so emphatically ascribes a special kind of power to music, but her invocation of music as divine is extreme. It could not be further from scientific knowledge, and yet, and referring back to Adorno, her fanciful constructions invite us to reconsider the figure of the street musician. Music is thought to reside at the apex of one's spiritual life, and is capable of channelling nothing less than a god. The first glimpse we get of this view comes early on in the essay when she writes:

Indeed, I once followed a disreputable old man who, with eyes shut so that he might the better perceive the melodies of his soul, literally played himself from Kensington to Knightsbridge in a trance of musical ecstasy, from which a coin would have been a disagreeable awakening. It is, indeed, impossible not to respect any one who has a god like this within them; for music that takes possession of the soul so that nakedness and hunger are forgotten must be divine in its nature. It is true that the melodies that issued from his labouring violin were in themselves laughable, but he, certainly, was not. Whatever the accomplishment, we must always treat with tenderness the efforts of those who strive honestly to express the music that is in them; for the gift of conception is certainly superior to the gift of expression, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the men and women who scrape for the harmonies that never come while the traffic goes thundering by have as great a possession, though fated never to impart it, as the masters whose facile eloquence enchants thousands to listen. (E1: 28)

Woolf immediately establishes an image of the musician as a wanderer. The very notion of the wanderer brings with it connotations of the holy, in both the pagan and Christian

sense, and indeed throughout the essay, Woolf accents the pagan, constructing a picture of the street musician as hailing from a different era. Simultaneously, contained within the idea of wandering is the sense that a musical theme is mapped onto a journey, and there is a musicalisation of the route between Kensington and Knightsbridge. The streets of London are mythologised and musicalised in an attempt to deepen the connections between the crude simplicity of the street musician and the sacred quality of their presence. Indeed, the tension between these two seemingly unconnected registers is at the heart of this essay in which the wandering street musician, a vehicle of the holy, bursts through the mundane and indifferent London setting.

The word ‘followed’ in the opening sentence prepares the reader for the development of the theme of discipleship, and indeed, Woolf writes herself into this relationship as we gain insights into not only her capacity to be swayed and influenced, but also into her desire to understand and capitalise on the power of the divine. But there is another side to the argument, because the introduction of the notion of the coin and payment for art introduces the fundamental schism between the aesthetic and capital. The character of the beggar musician offers a double reading; on the one hand they draw on ancient powers, and on the other, they fall outside ordinary economic activity. Therefore, almost by default, we reencounter the difficulty of remunerating aesthetic activity, which, as Woolf notes later, is already deemed useless:

For if the stringing together of words which nevertheless may convey some useful information to the mind, or the laying on of colours which may represent some tangible object, are employments which can be but tolerated at best, how are we to regard the man who spends his time in making tunes? Is not his occupation the least respectable – the least useful and necessary – of the three?’ (E1: 29)

Everything about the ‘melodies of the soul’ invites a pious withdrawal from the material world, and yet, the ‘coin’ is a reminder of that world. Deepening still the image of the coin, we can read its presence as a metaphor for death; the musician’s eyes are shut in a trance and his presence in the world is thus attenuated. Like Charon’s obol, in which coins are placed over the eyes or mouth to pay for passage to the afterlife, there is something deathly, almost ghoulish about the use of the coin. In fact, there is a distinctly uncanny recapitulation of the myth of Orpheus and Euridice in the relationship between Woolf and the street musician. Just as Orpheus is forbidden to

look at Euridice as he leads her out of Hades, Woolf follows the street musician who cannot, indeed, who will not see her.<sup>41</sup>

Reading on, Woolf does attempt an evaluation of the music, but she is careful to attribute the insubstantiality of the music to the 'labouring' violin and not the musician whose intentions are 'divine.' The implication is that art of any quality would leave laboriousness behind. There is something risible about labouring. Woolf literally summons up a class of people who inhabit London almost entirely unnoticed. These minstrels bring with them a brute, emotional simplicity that never materialises in sounds. In this sense, the divine music is never heard, but is attributed to these souls who roam the streets.

In addition to this, Woolf's wanderer, as a kind of holy figure, is also particularly 'whole' in this context. The Germanic origin of 'holy' confirms its original sense, as that which is whole. Yet again, Woolf has succeeded in writing a specific subject type which embodies wholeness and unification set against the fitful, fractured transience of the urban mass. Moreover, the logic and grammar of Woolf's writing seems to make music co-operate with the divine to momentarily stabilise and reinforce the idea of wholeness and unity of the self. However, further reflection upon the very constitution of these wanderers exposes this notion of wholeness as essentially false as these musicians are not, in fact, integrated or self-sustaining. The musical self is inhabited by an external force, and the interplay between the inner godly and outer corporeal self is fraught. The street musician, as Woolf explains, struggles to realise the divine power of music through, 'scraping' and 'laughable melodies.' She goes on: 'He is possessed by a spirit which the ordinary person cannot understand, but which is clearly very potent, and exercises so great a sway over him that when he hears its voice he must always rise and follow.' (E1: 29) The musician is seized by the divine power and music calls people to follow. Furthermore, these themes carry on in the following passage:

Many writers have tried to trace these old pagans, and have professed to find them in the disguise of animals and in the shelter of far-away woods and mountains; but it is not fantastic to suppose that while everyone is searching for them they are working their charms in the midst of us, and that those strange heathens who do the bidding of no man and are inspired by a voice that is other than human in their ears are not really as other people, but are either the very gods themselves or their priests or prophets upon earth. Certainly I should be inclined to ascribe some such divine origin to musicians at any rate, and it is probably some suspicion of this kind that drives us to persecute them as we do. (E1: 29)

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<sup>41</sup> See Book X from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).



Woolf's descriptions seem to suggest a possible identity of this divine origin- that of Dionysus. Once again, images of ecstasy and intoxication support the interpretation that Woolf's pleasure contains aspects of the narcotic:

He [the musician] is the minister of the wildest of all the gods, who has not yet learnt to speak with human voice, or to convey to the mind the likeness of human things. It is because music incites within us something that is wild and inhuman like itself – a spirit that we would willingly stamp out and forget – that we are distrustful of musicians and loathe to put ourselves under their power. (E1:29)

The reason why Woolf refers to the musician, as opposed to any other kind of artist, as the 'wildest' is because of her attitude towards rhythm, a concept upon which she lavishes attention in this essay:

We look upon those who have given up their lives to the service of this god as Christians regard the fantastic worshippers of some eastern idol. This arises perhaps from an uneasy foreknowledge that when the pagan gods come back the god we have never worshipped will have his revenge upon us. It will be the god of music who will breathe madness into our brains, crack the walls of our temples, and drive us in loathing of our rhythmless lives to dance and circle for ever in obedience to his voice. (E1: 29)

The cultish nature of music is reinforced as Woolf invites us to imagine ourselves dancing, chanting, as we succumb to the dangers of music, 'Music is dangerous as we know'. (E1: 30) She goes on:

The safest and easiest attribute of music – its tune – is taught, but rhythm, which is its soul, is allowed to escape like the winged creature it is...It may be indeed that the sense of rhythm is stronger in people whose mind are not elaborately trained to other pursuits, as it is true that savages who have none of the arts of civilization are very sensitive to rhythm, before they are awake to music proper. The beat of rhythm in the mind is akin to the beat of the pulse in the body, and thus though many are deaf to tune hardly any one is so coarsely organized as not to hear the rhythm of its own heart in words and music and movement. (E1: 30)

Woolf uses the essay to develop her aesthetic stance towards the importance of rhythm which she views as not just a feature of music, but as something that, if properly understood, would revolutionise life and writing. This is highlighted by the way the terms 'rhythm' and 'music' have almost become interchangeable by the end of the essay:

Rhythm alone might easily lead to excesses; but when the ear possessed its secret, tune and harmony would be united with it, and those actions which by means of

rhythm were performed punctually and in time, would now be done with whatever of melody is natural to each[...]we all know that the voices of friends are discordant after listening to beautiful music because they disturb the echo of rhythmic harmony, which for the moment makes of life a united and musical whole; and it seems probable considering this that there is a music in the air for which we are always straining our ears and which is only partially made audible to us by the transcripts which the great musicians are able to preserve. (E1: 31)

Rhythmic harmony is linked to 'a united and musical whole', but again Woolf undermines this sense of wholeness and attests to its partiality by declaring that there remains a music which will never be heard, a kind of perfectly preserved music that only appears through 'great musicians.' Woolf cannot dissociate this idea of wholeness and unity from music, and at the same time, she knows that it cannot be achieved, at least at a secular level. It seems worth noting that Woolf's view of music is surprisingly idealistic, one might even say, naïve. But music has to occupy this place in her world-view because it remains a way of relativising existence and secures the possibility that there might be an alternative to life on earth.

In summary, 'Street Music' is perhaps Woolf's clearest depiction of what music means to her, and is the most revealing account of the ways in which music seems to live at the interstices of a number of different discourses. There is the life-philosophy that is born of a rhythm that liberates the soul and harmonises disparate selves; there is the writing of a pagan theology in the midst of an urban secular landscape. And finally there are the mythological tropes in which music seems to be the pretext for a divine encounter. Towards the end of the essay Woolf writes, 'In forests and solitary places an attentive ear can detect something very like a vast pulsation, and if our ears were educated we might hear also the music which accompanies this.' (E1:31) There is something fundamentally unreconcilable about the fact that Woolf is reaching so far back into the past (she continually uses the word 'ancient') to find the source of the music which is so living and present in her environment. The images she paints, like the solitary woods, belong to the landscape of Ovid and she is straining her ears to hear a lost resonance of echo which is now only a sound, but which once had flesh and bones. Like Euridice, music has died twice; in the first instance music is simply the reverberation of the past, a speculative music which 'something in us is always straining to hear'. And secondly, the people that she identifies as being able to bring this music into the modern world by virtue of a divine gift are shunned and outlawed as petty criminals.

## **‘Impressions at Bayreuth’**

The second of Woolf’s three essays on a musical subject matter is ‘Impressions at Bayreuth’ from 1909 which first appeared in *The Times* newspaper. In this essay we see further examples of Woolf’s ability to turn musical impressions into resonant literary statements, as the text continually sways between poetic renderings of an evening performance at Bayreuth and faltering attempts to write music criticism (that are always closely attended by reflections on the criticism itself). At the outset of the essay Woolf sets out her views on the nature of current music criticism, which she intimates is a discourse without an anchor:

The common-place remark that music criticism is in its infancy is best borne out by the ambiguous state of musical criticism. It has few traditions behind it, and the art itself is so much alive that it fairly suffocates those who try to deal with it. A critic of writing is hardly to be taken by surprise, for he can compare almost every literary form with some earlier form and can measure the achievement by some familiar standard. But who in music has tried to do what Strauss is doing, or Debussy? (E1: 288)

There are three significant things about this passage. Initially, we learn that the art of music is so ‘alive’ that it ‘suffocates’ those who try to write criticism. Secondly, Woolf is unable to identify criteria of comparison which might make the critic’s task tractable. Thirdly, Woolf recognises that every piece of music seems to be like a fresh start, rendering the making of comparisons with traditional models an impossibility. But this represents for Woolf the perfect opportunity to begin anew with music criticism and gives, ‘someone the chance of doing now for music what Aristotle did 2000 years ago.’ (E1: 288).

This essay throws up some familiar themes that have already been explored in this dissertation. These include the search for a whole and unified account of experience. Woolf continually evokes wholeness as a means of measuring experience, and yet, her own writing resists, undermines even, this sense of wholeness by refusing to submit to systematic conceptual conclusion. This leads us to the other familiar trope of contradiction. On the one hand, experiential synthesis is the purported goal of writing, and yet, essayistic writing in particular undoes the possibility of this synthesis. And in addition to this, the very means by which any synthesis could be accomplished are denied her by virtue of her status as an amateur, because the amateur lacks ‘sufficient

technical knowledge to fasten upon details.’ (E1: 289) And yet, conversely, Woolf has not the means with which to capture the whole either, ‘a criticism of the whole resolves itself into vague formulas, comparisons, and adjectives.’ (E1: 289).

The essay, therefore, is somewhat defined by its occupation of the space between two ill-defined extremes: the universal and the particular. This position is peculiar to her music criticism because, in her literary criticism, she is able to harness normal linguistic relations and associations, and the unquestionable presence of a tradition of literary criticism that is so familiar to her, allows her connections, associations and judgements to be far more secure.

In the absence of any specific grounding in either the technical details of music or in a generalisable musical tradition, everything therefore depends upon her ability to form and convey in language local *impressions* of her experience, ‘There is only one way open thus for a writer [...] he may try to give his impressions as an amateur.’ (E1: 288) And in this sense, the essay is structured as a rhapsody on her impressions of Parsifal, the surrounding external environment at Bayreuth, and the nascent philosophical implications of her descriptions.

There are obvious similarities in this essay’s structure and ‘Street Music’ whereby Woolf juxtaposes two distinct modes of writing; one is highly imaginative and visually evocative, in which she paints pictures of scenes and people that stand as aesthetically autonomous passages of text, ‘As the lights sink, they rustle into their seats, and scarcely stir till the last wave of sound has ceased; when a stick falls, there is a nervous shudder, like a ripple in water, through the entire house.’ (E1: 289) The other mode conveys Woolf’s attempts to theorise musical interpretation, ‘Perhaps music owes something of its astonishing power over us to this lack of definite articulation; its statements have all the majesty of a generalisation, and yet contain our private emotions.’ (E1: 291) The localized disjunction of the two styles exemplified by the speed with which she jumps between the two modes, often, in this essay, combining them in the same paragraph, prepares the reader for no systematic conclusion. This formal antagonism only reinforces the essayistic avoidance of closure. The accumulation of fragmented impressions allows one to make a kind of whole out of the essay, but this wholeness asks the reader to perform an integrating and imaginative act.

We see early on in the essay Woolf’s concern with the bringing together of different parts in order to make sense of her musical experience. Writing of Wagner’s *Parsifal*, she notes:

The unfamiliarity of the idea hinders one at the outset from bringing the different parts together. One feels vaguely for a crisis that never comes, for, accustomed as one is to find the explanation of a drama in the love of man and woman, or in battle, one is bewildered by a music that continues with the utmost calm and intensity independent of them. Further, the change from the Temple of the Grail to the magic garden, with its swarms of flower-maidens and its red-hot blossoms, is too violent a break to be bridged conveniently. (E1: 289)

The fact that music is 'unfamiliar' prevents Woolf from 'bringing the different parts together' and she can find no explanation or description of music that 'continues with the utmost calm' independent from the drama of the operatic narrative. But there is not only the incongruity of the story and the music to contend with; there is also the difficulty of reconciling the formal structural syntax of the music itself, 'the change from the Temple of the Grail to the magic garden [...] is too violent a break to be bridged conveniently.' Woolf's observations reveal a presupposition that any connection between the drama and the music be of a particular quality, and that the disruption of this connection leaves one 'bewildered.' 'Drama' is set against 'calmness' which in turn is set against 'intensity' as conflicting states which fail to be resolved by their musical realisation. Woolf's insights seem to occupy a kind of fractured space as she sunders the music from the story and brings into question the nature, and the very possibility of an inherent connection between the two. All Woolf can do now is return to her impressions:

Somehow, Wagner has conveyed the desire of the Knights of the Grail in such a way that the intense emotion of human beings is combined with the unearthly nature of the things they seek. It tears us, as we hear it, as though its wings were sharply edged. Again, feelings of this kind that are equally diffused and felt for one object in common create an impression of largeness and [...] of an overwhelming unity. The Grail seems to burn through all superincumbences [*sic*]; the music is intimate in a sense that none other is; one is fired with emotion and yet possessed with tranquillity at the same time...The earlier operas have always their awkward moments, when the illusion breaks; but Parsifal seems poured out in a smooth stream at white heat; its shape is solid and entire. (E1: 290)

These impressions display Woolf's evocative linguistic sensibilities at their most heightened, but they are also evidence of her continual negotiation between the universal and the particular. The Knights' desire stands for the 'intense emotion of human beings'. Furthermore, the desire that this emotion gives way to is deemed in excess of the physical world, 'the intense emotion of human beings is combined with the unearthly nature of the things they seek.' What comes next is essentially the

setting up of a metaphorical paratext as Woolf's impressions of the opera become themselves impressionistic of the myth of Icarus. She refers to the music as having 'wings', the Grail 'burns' through impediments, the listener is 'fired' with emotion. Moreover, the illusion of *Parsifal* is never broken ('the earlier operas have always their awkward moments') but is instead, 'poured out in a continuous stream at white heat.' This oblique reference to the sun cannot be mistaken. And in addition to this, we get more impressions:

From the hill above the theatre you look over a wide land, smooth and without hedges; it is not beautiful, but it is very large and tranquil. One may sit among rows of turnips and watch a gigantic old woman, with a blue cotton bonnet on her head and a figure like one of Dürer's, swinging her hoe. (E1: 290)

The point about this quote is that Woolf doesn't just see a woman in a field but she sees through her as if the woman carries a representative force that allows her to summon cultural references and knowledge. Her own impressions give way to multiple extraneous, and often distantly related impressions that are superimposed upon any given situation or object. This chain of signification means that Woolf can pass through Greek mythology, Shakespeare and Renaissance painting as she describes her impressions at Bayreuth.

## ‘The Opera’

Woolf wrote *The Opera* in 1909 and it also appeared in *The Times* in that year. Woolf’s correspondence around this time is littered with references to, and reflections on, musical performances and festivals, as well as her growing fascination with opera. ‘We go almost nightly to the Opera’ she writes in May 1908. What characterises much of Woolf’s writing about music during this period is her interest in the relationship between music and literature, and her conception of her own writing as ‘musical.’ There are suggestions in her diaries and letters that she wanted to mimic in her writing certain qualities of music, a concern which itself was born out of Woolf’s perception of a fundamental chasm between music and writing that she thought might be overcome. Again and again, she writes of the difficulty of putting into words her musical experiences and the impossibility of transcending the starkly different media in which she was working and thinking. During a visit to Bayreuth she writes:

We heard Parsifal yesterday; it was much better done, and I felt within a space of tears. I expect it is the most remarkable of the operas; it slides from music to words almost imperceptibly. However, I have been niggling at the effect all the morning, without much success. (L1: 406)

Crucially, however, even though and in spite of how ‘niggling’ Woolf considered writing about music to be, she continued to reflect prodigiously not just on music itself and its relationship to other art forms, but on her own writing about music. A pronounced reciprocity between music and writing emerges in much of Woolf’s musical marginalia, with musical experience posing a certain technical challenge to the writer, and the obligation to write sending the writer back to music to test uncertain intuitions.

Woolf’s relationship to music, and her effort to articulate musical experiences, highlights similar concerns that preoccupied Adorno and Lukács’s studies of the essay. For these writers, the genre of the essay represented a type of discourse that could be both aesthetic and epistemological. Arguably, making judgements about music also requires that one employ and negotiate aesthetic and epistemic modes of enquiry. As we have seen, one of the key concepts that Adorno relies on in his essay is that of ‘understanding’. I wish to suggest that ‘understanding’ could be the concept that allows one to pass between the aesthetic and the epistemic. And just as the essay was thought to traverse two different modes of being that had hitherto commonly thought to have

been in opposition, Woolf's musical judgements, and her observations concerning the difficulty of making those judgements, negotiate this schism.

The key essayistic strategy at work in 'The Opera', a strategy that procures understanding, is the positing of a motif concerning the accommodation of differences necessitated by the *absence of universal satisfaction*. The opening lines are as follows:

The Opera season is upon us, and for some weeks the programme from which a selection will be made has laid under discussion. No one, of course, is satisfied; but then universal satisfaction could only be obtained if we all thought alike. As it is, the Grand Opera Syndicate has to consider a variety of tastes, and the ambiguous state of mind which their list indicates hints at the varieties of the public taste. (E1: 269)

Woolf is here establishing the idea that the institution of the Opera is without a centre, but that it is a cover term for a family of competing and differing preconceptions, technical problems, sites, spaces and discourses. This complex space is problematised via pairs of contrasting priorities that, because they concern cultural beliefs and artistic tastes, are epistemic in nature. She identifies factions within opera audiences at various levels: between opera lovers and opera loathers; between devotees of Wagner and followers of Glück; and between the different species of Wagnerians. These analyses are again epistemic in nature as they point towards significant dimensions of form and aesthetic within the works themselves and count as knowledge of the terrain. For example, the difference between Glück and Wagner can be established through their treatment of emotion and drama. Glück presents formalised emotional situations which lend themselves readily to musical presentation. But 'these emotions are not necessarily dramatic, and the music raises in us emotions of a general character which cannot be referred to the experiences of a particular person.' (E1:270) The attainment of something tantamount to the perfection in the accommodation of music to emotion in Glück (which inspires praise from some quarters of the opera audience) is achieved at the price of a certain abstractness.

Wagner, by contrast, can portray human emotional life with realism and immediacy, and as such his music draws on our sympathies more completely. But he does not achieve this consistently: 'And yet, swept away as we are at some moments, there are others when we seem to be dropped again'. (E1: 270) In her diagnosis of this failing, she sets out another key difference that is of course constitutive of the form itself, the difference between word and music. She describes the attempt of the ordinary operagoer



to reconcile the apparent disparity between Wagner's music with his mythic narratives. She asks,

Perhaps there is some cleavage between the drama and the music? Music (it may be) raises associations in the mind which are incongruous with associations raised by another art; the effort to resolve them into one clear conception is painful, and the mind is constantly woken and disillusioned. (E1: 270)

Persuasive though this analysis is, the tone of the essay does not settle into anything like a verdict or a negative judgement on the Opera (which it could easily become). Rather, the contradictions and complexities of the Opera feed into her distinctive technique of portraiture. The people that haunt the opera houses have found bizarre ways of occupying these unlikely and contradictory spaces. Woolf takes flight from the flow of the analysis to present the aesthetic side of her object, and arguably, one makes a mistake if one only consults this essay for information about operatic tastes in the early twentieth Century. Wagner's music has in fact produced new cultures of behaviour which mitigate the inconsistencies she pointed out above, but these behaviours need to be drawn, and they need a novelist's acerbic eye:

His and his characters appeal to people who would never listen to music in a concert-room. They find a Wagner opera much the same as a play, but easier to follow, because the emotions are emphasised by the music. They find the men and women much like themselves, only with a wonderful capacity for feeling things. How many, as the opera goes on, see themselves in the place of Tristan and Iseult [*sic*], are delighted with the depth of their own capacities, but feel little sympathy with the passages where they cannot undertake the parts? (E1: 270-71)

She continues in vivid, comic style:

Strange men and women are to be found in the cheap seats on a Wagner night: there is something primitive in the look of them as though they did their best to live in forests, upon the elemental emotions, and were quick to suspect their fellows of a lack of 'reality' as they call it. They find a philosophy of life in the operas, hum 'motives' to symbolise stages in their thought, and walk off their fervour on the Embankment, wrapped in great black cloaks [...] And the scholarly Wagnerians, detecting 'motives' by the flash of their electric lamps, and instructing humble female relatives in the intricacies of the score. (E1: 271)

Aside from the tone, which is cutting and humorous, Woolf's technique in this passage is sophisticated. One notes that there is a distinct lack of conjunctions in adjoining phrases (formally known as asyndeton), as comma after comma link the

clauses and lends the experience of reading the text a pace and a rhythmic urgency. More importantly, however, Woolf threads together, and concentrates striking imaginative pictures that represent the panoply of sights and experiences associated with attending the opera. The comic structure is clear enough: no intellectual posture comes without an associated physical and social symptom. The ardent Wagnerians sit in the cheap seats, wear black cloaks and hold their own emotional lives in higher regard than those of their fellows; the scholars (by implication male) carry special lamps so as to read the scores in the gloom of the theatre and bore their female relatives with analytical details. And the opera house itself is painted with opulent detail, as is the poverty of its immediate surroundings:

We see the immense house, with its vast curved sides, its soft depths of rose colour and cream, the laces hanging down in loops from the boxes, and the twinkle of diamonds within [...] Undoubtedly the great dome which has risen so pompously among the cabbages and slums shelters one of the oddest of all worlds – brilliant, beautiful, and absurd. (E1: 271-72)

It can clearly be seen that this essay has a double character: it shows and tells, it does what it says. The last paragraph sets out the basic position: ‘These are but a few points of view, but the variety seems to show that there is, at any rate, no general idea as to the true nature of the Opera.’ (E1: 271) In the absence of a general idea and a true nature, what is left is a series of raids on the ‘complex vision’ that is the Opera. In this sense, the Opera is the perfect subject matter for the essay since anything the eye, the ear or the imagination alights upon immediately become relevant to that vision. Without a centre, there can be no periphery; there is nothing that can be passed over as merely incidental to the picture that is being constructed. With no final truth on the matter, there is nothing to constrain the writer to one subject or another, and nothing to inhibit the writer is noting down whatever fragmentary vignettes a night at the Opera bestows.

This peculiar vision of the Opera liberates those details that one normally dare not mention in a serious reading of the Opera: the curtains, the stage, the building, the people, the seats, the post-concert analysis and so on, and it is her continual recourse to the more oblique elements of such an experience that makes her criticism so generous.

## Chapter 5

### Aspectual Non-Identity: Rhythm and Satire in Woolf's Urban Musical Observations

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Methodologically speaking, this chapter is constructed around a dialectically elaborated concept of rhythm which, as will be shown, is able to capture and penetrate vitally important aspects of Woolf's writing about music. The concept of rhythm, which Woolf herself foregrounds as being essential to her own writing practice, is here understood beyond any simple musical-technical application. Instead I explore the metaphorical complexity of the notion in two distinct directions. On the one hand, rhythm is concerned with synchronisation, with picking up a speed or tempo, with "being in time". This notion is suggestive of a "fit", an attunement, or resonance between two systems whereby energies are efficiently transferred or enhanced. On the other hand, rhythm is articulated and apprehended via interruptions, impacts and percussions. And there is always a resonant surface upon which the percussive event impacts, a surface which registers and amplifies the event.

In this formulation, Woolf's writing is another word for that resonant surface that is always being tuned to her environment. Thus, the pace of daily life in London is reflected in the tempo of Woolf's writing, whereby the threat of impending engagements often forces her to break a line of thought. The telegraphic style of her diary entries can readily register any unexpected and/or rapid changes in the course of events or the flow of thought. And, in line with the theme of the non-identical that has occupied this dissertation hitherto, this rhythmicised writing does not provide a vantage point that would admit conceptual survey, intellectual command or authoritative pronouncement. Rhythm is the disruption of ordinary logical consistency (motivated by the need to put disorder in abeyance) for the sake of what is, perhaps, a higher consistency between word and the world as it is (not the world as we might like it to be). The staccato rhythms of Woolf's urban observations reinforce the impossibility of a coherent synthesis of her experiences.

Rhythm, then, informs the structure, pattern and syntax of her writing. But rhythm, via techniques of interruption and digression, also informs what can be thought of as a *comic* register in her writing. That comedy sometimes emerges as she discusses music is especially telling because she, perhaps inadvertently, exposes prominent

musical ideologies of the period: music is precisely that which relies upon dignity, decorum and artistic seriousness for its success. If that is interrupted, what then? And beyond that, at this time, (and possibly to this day), the development of musical taste and awareness can be considered a central obligation, not to say chore, of personal “cultivation”. To interrupt this process, to keep the progress of musical taste faltering and uncertain, is a radical challenge to firmly entrenched Enlightenment (and class) values relating to the cultivation of Man as such.

The importance of personal cultivation to Enlightenment thought is illustrated in Friedrich Schiller’s *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* from 1794. Schiller’s ‘goal’ was to set out a systematic way of overcoming what he perceived as some of the most pressing problems of his age by way of an ‘aesthetic education.’ In fact, his thesis was that ‘every individual human being, one may say, carries within him, potentially and prescriptively, an ideal man, the archetype of a human being, and it is his life’s task through all his changing manifestations, in harmony with the unchanging unity of this ideal.’ (Schiller, 2005:17) Schiller’s view that one could progressively transform oneself into ‘an ideal man’ by way of an aesthetic education is exemplary of a strong line of post-Enlightenment, pre-Romantic German thought which gave way to the tradition of *Bildung*, or cultivation of the self. The idea of *Bildung*, in many ways, was concerned with liberation: liberation from the dominance of Kantian philosophy, liberation from pre-modern political systems which enslaved people in feudal states by means of religious dogma and social custom, and liberation via techno-scientific disenchantment. Liberation, is achieved, ironically, not by freeing oneself from the aforementioned circumstances, either intellectually or materially, but by tightening one’s control over certain aspects of immediate reality – namely, one’s own relation to action. *Bildung* attempts to account for man’s disparateness and the unpredictability of his environment by imposing an ultimate shape on the fundamental formlessness of life. But by adhering to the belief that man’s vocation, as it were, is to realise his own ‘ideal’ archetype by way of an aesthetic education, is also to write into that search the possibility of disappointment and failure. And, in addition to this, conceiving of one’s life in terms of an ultimate trajectory also opens up the idea that this trajectory can be interrupted, and disrupted.

In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the concept of *Bildung* fostered a view about the potential for art to be a means by which one might ‘improve’ one’s moral character. This view becomes pervasive across Europe and means that by the Victorian era in Britain, music is being contained by, and associated with, various ideological

forces. Such ideologies, moreover, can be seen to be manifested in the very traditions and customs that uphold the practices of musical performance and reception at the beginning of the twentieth century in Britain. Woolf's level of musical consumption was typical of what one might expect of a woman of her class and background in early twentieth century London. She frequented concerts and musical evenings, purchased a pianola, and was actively involved in the contemporary discourse about opera and musical criticism. Therefore, she would also have been exposed to much musical etiquette; applauding after performances, sitting in silence in the concert halls, dressing formally for a musical event and cultivating an articulate response to the music to communicate to one's associates at the interval or post-performance. But buried beneath these customs is the belief that music was educative and useful to moral improvement.<sup>42</sup> Woolf, I argue, disrupts this ideology by using satire as a technique to interrupt the narrative flow of her observations about musical life in London. Satire works at the level of the rhythm of sentences so as to displace the logical flow of events and undermines the stabilisation of a consistent thesis in support of the uncritical assumption about music's 'improving' qualities.

Much of the material of Woolf's early diaries and letters makes continued reference to concert life in London at the turn of the twentieth century. She was an extremely active member of the London cultural scene, where music was often at the centre of an evening's entertainment or socialising. In fact her frequent attendance at musical events could in some way contribute to a growing discourse that views Woolf as modernist *flâneuse*.<sup>43</sup> A musical event forced Woolf out of the relatively ordered and predictable environment of the domestic space and into the throng of the urban mass. Music was often not simply the destination of her journey, but was an accompaniment as she made her way through London:

On the way I walked through a narrow street lined on both sides with barrows, where stockings and ironmongery and candles and fish were being sold. [The diary notes that Woolf was talking about Berwick Street Market in Soho] A barrel

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<sup>42</sup> It was exactly this spirit that stimulated Sir George Grove (1820-1900) to found the eponymous music dictionary in the late 1870's. See 'Review: A Pyrrhic Victory for Scholarship? The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians' *Perspectives of New Music*, 20, pp.569-591.

<sup>43</sup> See Rachel Bowlby, 'Walking, women and writing: Virginia Woolf as *flâneuse*.' *Still Crazy After All These Years: Women, Writing and Psychoanalysis*. (London: Routledge, 1992) 1-33. Also Peter Brooker, 'The Wandering Flâneur, or, Something Lost in Translation.' In *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* 20 (Zaragoza: University of Zaragoza, 1999): 115-130

organ played in the middle. I bought six bundles of coloured tapers. The stir and colour and cheapness pleased me to the depths of my heart. (D1: 135)

The music from the barrel organ seems to heighten the sensation of being in the city: the colours are more vivid and the temptations of consuming more intoxicating, and yet, no less superficial. Music seems to be at the heart of the market experience and it provides the background to the chaos of the activity all around. Moreover, its place in this particular entry is in the middle – the music disrupts the narrative flow of the sentence, disconnecting Woolf's observation that candles were on sale and her eventual purchase of 'six bundles of coloured tapers.' Her final reflection that 'The stir and colour and cheapness pleased me to the depths of my heart,' is ambiguous, but it does seem to reflect something of the swirl of visual and auditory demands made on her at the market. The insinuation that the music adds to the sense of 'cheapness' comes somewhat as a relief to Woolf, as if she is relieved that music might actually *not* need to fulfil a certain seriousness of purpose. The barrel organ serves to reinforce the fractured, urban subjectivity in which music is just one of many sensory assaults to contend with. And, crucially, music functions as that which does not necessarily unify the disparate aspects of urban experience. Woolf's experience is not made orderly by the music, rather music is seen to contribute to the essentially un-orderly nature of experience. In this way, then, music is made to mirror those aspects of everyday life that are chaotic and unexpected– music is not shown to unify experience. In one particular letter to Roger Fry in 1923, Virginia Woolf writes:

That old goat Sir Claude, only kept by the tightness of his white waistcoat from gushing entrails all over the carpet, took it into his head to leave. The whole audience saw him move down the gangway. Suddenly he disappeared. There was a sound of coal sacks, bounding and rebounding. Then dead silence. He had fallen down a complete set of stairs; but is *not* hurt. (L3: 40)

What is striking about her observations on the urban concert scene is the way in which she captures the unrelenting and often brutal pace of city life. But what is of greater importance, for the purposes of this chapter, is her subtle tendency to satirise the stock characters and customs of musical culture; conductors, performers and even concert etiquette all become subject to Woolf's critical eye. In this sense, humour in her marginalia fulfills two functions. Firstly, satire effectively deflates potential symbolic excess in the articulation of musical experience, and secondly, satire undoes the moralizing discourse of the legacy of Romantic and Victorian notions of self-

improvement, as articulated by the concept of *Bildung*, and instead creates a subject position that rejects a 'stultifying, over-codified society.' (Connery and Coombe, 1995: ix)

As has already been alluded to, Woolf's recollections of the people and events of musical life in London are often extremely vivid and humorous, and she is able to transform experiences of people and places into acute, precise observations, like a kind of literary sketch, complete with characters, a narrative and a punch-line. She frequently paints amusing scenarios involving conductors, over-dressed society-types, and experimental musical theatre productions which allow the reader to imagine that these people are, in part, a literary creation. But Woolf's tendency to fictionalise and, in many ways, to make fun of her musical encounters, also serves to illustrate a more critical point; Woolf's satirisation actually questions and fundamentally destabilises many of the customs surrounding musical performance and presentation of the day, and by doing so, she brings to the surface potentially ideological issues around musical social convention and the articulation of experience.

But just what was London like when Woolf was attending concerts? Her accounts of concert life, some of which were written almost a hundred years ago, seem so full of energy and vivacity that she is able to overturn the transience of the pace of city life by capturing it so precisely in her writing. Another appealing quality about her documentation of London's burgeoning culture is that it can often be intriguing to read; it can seem puzzling or curious, as if it conceals secrets or intimacies that Woolf either wasn't aware of, or didn't know how to articulate. Music certainly had a marked impact on Woolf, but it was difficult for her always to say why it moved or captivated, or, as was sometimes the case, irritated her. Furthermore, Woolf's musical marginalia are often only partially about music, thus, this chapter argues that the urban environment contributes to the fragmented subjectivity in Woolf's work. Her observations about London often only have the shadow of formed ideas and prose; the diaries and letters read just as if she had dashed down thoughts in the hurried, stolen moments between social engagements. And, of course, this was precisely the case, and the writing, therefore, becomes a mirror of the pace and rhythm of life in London at the time. Moreover, Woolf's jottings reveal the extent to which her capacity to make meaningful judgements about any particular performance was often reduced by the impending urgency of the next social engagement. She made observations on the move, as it were, and the pace of the city, to a large extent, dictated her ability to spend time reflecting on the numerous parties, concerts and social events she attended. However, this fact did not

diminish the quality of her observations, rather, the rhythm of the city contributes to the sense that her aesthetic reflections on music could only ever be partial. To put it another way, the observations Woolf makes about musical life in London are incomplete without the references to the city and its environment –music and musical life are co-existent with London, its places, people and rhythms.

## Rhythm

Another way that rhythm comes to inflect Woolf's writing can be found if we look at this example of her attendance of a performance of William Walton's *Façade*.

On Wednesday, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1923 she writes in her diary:

Nessa is back and the London season of course in full swing. So I judged yesterday in the Aeolian Hall, listening, in a dazed way, to Edith Sitwell vociferating through the megaphone. (D2: 244)

The diary's editors note that:

The occasion was the first public performance of *Façade*, a collaborative effort by the Sitwells and the composer William Walton, in which the words and the voice (both Edith Sitwell's) were intended to play an equal and interdependent part with the instrumental music. The poems were recited through a 'Sengerphone' which protruded through the mouth of a grotesque head in the centre of a drop-curtain painted by Frank Dobson. The performance called forth almost universal obloquy from the press. (D2: 244)

The entry continues:

I should be describing Edith Sitwell's poems, but I kept saying to myself "I don't really understand...I don't really admire." The only view, presentable that I framed, was to the effect that she was monotonous. She has one tune only on her merry go round. And she makes her verse keep step accurately to the Hornpipe. This seems to be wrong; but I'm all sandy with writing criticism, and must be off to my book again. (D2: 244)

Woolf's 'dazed' listening is the first clue that her judgement of this particular concert is going to be less than favourable. But it is her frank admission that she didn't really understand or like it that is most important for it allows access to Woolf's private thoughts in such a way that might inspire sympathy from someone who had



experienced a similar effect upon listening to music. It is an unspoken rule of concert-going life that if you do not understand the work being played, then the last thing you would do is admit it. Woolf's private comments about Walton and Sitwells' *Façade* make a space for our own, perhaps private, experiences of finding ourselves without understanding in the face of a musical encounter. She gives validity to our own suspicions that we do not 'get' the piece and her uncertainty gives a voice to our uncertainty. Moreover, and more importantly, Woolf's position gives us an insight into the development of avant-garde art in England in the early twentieth century and from her work, we can see what the prevailing attitudes and behaviours were regarding music in London circa 1923. *Façade* represents an interesting turning point in the development of the British modernist aesthetic, and Woolf's ostensible rejection of this new kind of art tells us something about the distinctiveness of her attitudes and tastes. Her criticism of the piece reveals that she is able to make sharp technical observations about the interplay between the words and the music. She claims that Sitwell is 'monotonous', she is not impressed by what she sees, she deems it naïve, childish- 'merry go round', she thinks that the work is impoverished, that it is not musical enough. Sitwell's poetry becomes 'monotonous' set to music, which itself lacked variation and complexity. The music had only 'one tune' and presumably Woolf thinks that the piece underestimates the relationship between poetry and music. As a fervent opera goer, we can be assured that Woolf had detailed knowledge and experience of the traditions, language and behaviour of musical theatre, but at the same time, Edith Sitwell, too, went to great lengths to defend her thinking about the creative forces behind *Façade* in her own biography, denying us the simple conclusion that Woolf would have had the critical upperhand here.

Sitwell's theorisation about the relationship between rhythm and meaning is reflective of a burgeoning modernist aesthetic that is concerned with angles and shapes and the disruption of meaning. But Sitwell's conception of rhythm contrasts sharply with Woolf's which she treats more as a device that supports and enhances meaning. Rhythm, for Woolf, gives *more meaning* to that which is already there. Even Woolf's diary entry has its own particular rhythm that discloses the periodical nature of the day; her writing in the diary must end so that she can move on, forwards to her book. For Sitwell, rhythm is melody without pitch, suggesting that rhythm is not subordinate to melody, but is as equally important, and can in fact, replace melody as the focus of a musical text. Woolf's response to *Façade* and Sitwell's thoughts on rhythm tell us two

significant things about Woolf's aesthetic. The first is concerned with rhythm as it is conceived of as a fact of musical performance, that is, rhythm as it exists in the piece of music. One could speculate that one of the reasons why Woolf disliked *Façade* was because she associated dance rhythms with the behaviour of her servants and thus lively rhythms were the domain of the lower orders. In a letter written to Emma Vaughan in 1903, she writes:

A fresh lot of tunes came today chosen by Adrian and a very mixed set – Bach and Schumann and the Washington Post and the Dead March in Saul, Pinafore and the Messiah. We find the difference in quality a very good thing because all our servants sit beneath the drawing room window all the evening while we play – and by experiment we have discovered that if we play dance music all their crossnesses vanish and the whole room rings with their shrieks and then we tame them down so sentimentally with Saul or boredom with Schumann – on the whole their silence is the most desirable thing. (L1: 88)

Here, 'dance music' has an anaesthetic effect on the servants and is seen to appease their frustration, it makes them 'shriek' and they must be calmed. This kind of behaviour was not something that Woolf could admire, and therefore, the similarly rhythmic robustness of *Façade* would remind her that her servants might perhaps have been more appreciative of Sitwell's efforts than she was. Another noticeable term that Woolf employs when she writes about music is 'tune'. Composers write tunes, according to her diaries and letters, and she often remarks that she enjoyed listening to the tunes of the music. This privileging of melody contradicts Sitwell's attempts to reflect on the status of rhythm. In 1921 she writes in her diary:

But every afternoon for a week I've been up to the Aeolian Hall; taken my seat right at the back; put my bag on the floor and listened to Beethoven quartets. Do I dare say listened? Well, but if one gets a lot of pleasure, really divine pleasure, and knows the tunes, and only occasionally thinks of others things – surely I may say listened. (D2: 114)

The diary notes 'During a Beethoven Festival Week, 25-30 April, at the Aeolian Hall, the London String Quartet played, in chronological order, all 17 Beethoven string quartets.' (D2: 114) Woolf, accordingly, sees *Façade* as devoid of the pleasure of tunes, and the full extent to which she disapproved of the Sitwells is evidenced in a letter to Jaques Raverat written in July in 1923:

As for the Sitwell's, though I paid 3/6 to hear Edith vociferate her poems accompanied by a small and nimble orchestra, I understood so little that I could not judge. I know Osbert slightly. They take themselves very seriously. They descend from George the IVth. They look like Regency bucks. They have a mother who was in prison. They probably need careful reading, which I have never given them, and thus incline to think them vigorous, but unimportant acrobats. (L3: 59-60)

Even though she thought the Sitwell's 'unimportant' and 'acrobats', Woolf shares her preoccupation with rhythm. We have seen that she views dance music rhythms rather unfavourably, but in terms of her aesthetic disposition, she considers rhythm absolutely central to writing. She states this again in a letter to Vita Sackville West in 1926:

Indeed, these are the first letters I have written since I was married. As for the mot juste, you are quite wrong. Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. But on the other hand here I am sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for the lack of the right rhythm. Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it: But no doubt I shall think differently next year. (L3: 247)

For Woolf, style means rhythm. Here she seems to be gesturing towards a kind of rhythm that precedes meaning; she argues that something happens in consciousness, a movement of some kind, or a disturbance. Following on from this, words, and eventually meaning find their place within that shape. The task of writing is to represent this original motion. Rhythm is perceived long before meaning occurs. This is in contrast to Edith Sitwell's conception of rhythm that works on material that is already given. Rhythm shapes, changes and manipulates the meanings already given by the words, it does not persuade words to manifest themselves the way Woolf implies. In Sitwell's version rhythm is a tool that we have at our disposal; we are ultimately in control of rhythm and can make it come under our command. For Woolf, it is more like we are at the mercy of a rhythm that is always present, always forming in our minds, shapeless and meaningless, forming as it goes and providing the vital impetus for writing. Woolf's understanding of rhythm allows us to conclude that it had two significant meanings to her. On the one hand, quick and lively rhythms still symbolized a kind of lower social class – her servants enjoyed 'rhythmic' music. And this points us to the kind of conservative approach Woolf might have been encouraged to have towards music and musical performance. On the other hand, and perhaps slightly at

odds with this social and moral obligation to view rhythm as subversive, Woolf knew that rhythm had a fundamental role to play in writing. As much as rhythm was an indicator of social status, it was also a powerful aesthetic device. Christopher Butler in *Early Modernism* argues that the concept of rhythm in an urban landscape would have been crucial not just to writers like Woolf, but to the development of an early modernist subjectivity. He suggests that in the early twentieth century, the explosion of the urban environment causes philosophers and artists to consider ‘its effects upon the rhythms of the consciousness.’ (Butler, 1994: 134)

In addition to this dual aspect of rhythm, Woolf’s knowledge of and frequent attendance to some of London’s best known musical venues was impressive. In the first volume of Woolf’s diary written between 1915 and 1919, twelve of the nineteen references to music make mention of her attendance at a concert. An entry from Wednesday, 6 January 1915 reads:

Now I have to decide whether I shall go up again, to a party at Gordon Square, where the Aranyis are playing. (D1: 9)<sup>44</sup>

From Sunday, 17 January:

I went to a Queen’s Hall Concert, stayed for three beautiful tunes and came back. (D1: 20)<sup>45</sup>

And from Monday, 19 November 1917:

On Friday we went to a concert, walking out when the English piece came on into a disreputable side street clinging to the back of Bond St. (D1: 78)<sup>46</sup>

Of the London venues that Woolf frequented, it was the Queen’s Hall and the Aeolian Hall that seem to have featured most prominently, though there are also references in the marginalia to concerts at the Old Vic Theatre and the London Palladium, and opera performances at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and the Shaftesbury Theatre:

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<sup>44</sup> (The diary notes that the d’Aranyis sisters were Hungarian concert musicians who remained in England from 1914-18).

<sup>45</sup> The diary notes that the music Woolf heard was Bach’s 4<sup>th</sup> Brandenburg Concerto, the Symphony in D by Cesar Franck and three movements of Lalo’s *Symphonie Espagnole*.

<sup>46</sup> The diary notes that the concert was at the Aeolian Hall, Bond Street and was performed by the London Trio.

Then on to *Figaro* at the Old Vic. It's perfectly lovely; breaking from one beauty into another, and so romantic as well as witty – the perfection of music, and vindication of opera. (D1: 83)

I went to a concert at the Palladium this afternoon; but on the whole I regretted it. A man called Julian Clifford played Mozart as if it were a Dream Waltz, slowly and sentimentally and with a kind of lugubrious stickiness which spoilt my pleasure in the G minor (D1: 142)<sup>47</sup>

I went to the *Magic Flute*, and thought rather better of humanity for having that in them. Goldie was in the same row as me, thinking I daresay much the same thoughts, though the proximity of two youthful men may have coloured them differently. (D1: 153)<sup>48</sup>

And from Monday, 17 June 1918, 'I went to Don Giovanni, to my infinite delight.' (D1: 157)<sup>49</sup> Woolf also attended many private concert series, including those organised by Bruce Richmond at Shelley House, and at Ham House. In terms of the repertoire that these concerts exposed the general public to, it was mostly imported from Europe and Woolf notes attending performances of music by Handel, Haydn, Beethoven, Mozart, Bach, Schumann, Brahms, Debussy, Glück, Dvořák and Wagner. But Woolf's musical palette was not just limited to European Art music; she also makes mention of more popular musical forms that she would have seen performed in the Music Halls. Musical comedies by Gilbert and Sullivan are noted, as well as performances of works by British composers Ralph Vaughan Williams, Ethel Smyth and William Walton.

In terms of Woolf's listening experiences she would have largely been going to see the performance of music that had been part of a professional musical canon for the last hundred years or so. This is notable because it might be tempting to imagine that Woolf is satirising an emerging or modern musical culture, but, in fact, she was passing judgement over, what would have been by the 1910s and 20s, quite old fashioned concert practices. And this is interesting for us because many of the practices that might have seemed dated to Woolf at the beginning of the twentieth century remain part of our concert-going culture today. As Catherine Dale notes in her book *Music Analysis in Britain in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*, a rich concert life had been established in Britain even before 1850:

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<sup>47</sup> Julian Clifford 1877-1921 was a conductor, pianist and composer.

<sup>48</sup> The diary notes that the concert Woolf attended was at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and was part of Sir Thomas Beecham's 'Summer Season of Grand Opera in English'.

<sup>49</sup> The diary also notes that this was part of the same season 'Grand Opera in English' at the Shaftesbury Theatre.

The foundation of the Philharmonic Society in 1813 made a high standard of orchestral music available to the aristocracy and the new, wealthier bourgeoisie alike, and from 1835 specialised concerts, including the chamber concert and the solo recital, also began to appear regularly. (Dale, 2003: 2)

Dale describes how the dissemination of music grew steadily in the late nineteenth and early centuries. However, this expansion was not just limited to the major cities. There was, she remarks:

a rise in the number of musicians from 19,000 in 1871 to 47,000 in 1911 as more people benefited from increased purchasing power and were able to buy musical instruments;...(there was) a huge diversification in the type of musical activities available which ranged, in most towns, from brass bands to amateur orchestras and choral societies. Finally, as a result of nationalisation and the growth of the railways in particular, a national network of music publishers, touring musical companies and an expanding system of state education were able to flourish. These developments, combined with the later inventions of broadcasting and recording, permitted music to reach a much wider audience. (Dale, 2003: 2)

But Woolf's involvement in the musical concert of life of London did not begin and end with her presence in the audiences of such concerts. In fact, as this letter to Emma Vaughan from 23 February 1905 reveals, certainly early on in her critical career, Woolf felt that she had much to contribute to British musical discourse:

My National Review article is about [Street] Music so you can imagine what a flutter is going through the musical world – it has probably reached Dresden. My remarks will revolutionise the whole future of music. (L1: 179)

It is difficult to know how ironic Woolf was being in this article, but what she perceived as a lack in music criticism was something she was to later mention in her exchanges with the British composer Ethel Smyth. Again, this is important because Woolf sensed that music criticism was not as well defined a practice as, say, literary criticism, and this fact would come to dictate much of the content of her letters to Smyth. One figure, with whom Woolf was familiar, who did know the British musical scene extremely intimately and who was perhaps a more established musical commentator, was George Bernard Shaw, who, in *Music in London* writes about the Philharmonic Orchestra's latest performance:

But its last performance of the Ninth Symphony seems to have aroused the British lion. The critics said the usual thing; but one Edward Carpenter, an unattached essayist of credit and renown, declares, on the contrary, that the symphony was miserably unsatisfying. I was not at the concert myself, because, though I forewent Patti and the Albert Hall to attend, yet when I reached St James's Hall it was so full that I could only get one of those acutely uncomfortable stalls in the niches of the wall for my seven and six-pence. Now, for a good performance of the Ninth Symphony I would cheerfully sit the whole time on a sack of nails. For an average Philharmonic performance no seat, I regret to say, would be too comfortable – a fourposter would be best of all; so I looked askance at that ticket, with its discouraging "Row FF"; hesitated a moment; and – got my money back. (Shaw, 1932: 31)

Shaw's three volume book is full of candid observations and criticisms about British musical life and his writing bristles with attitude and humour as he presents his analysis of the contemporary situation. Shaw's humour and attitude could be said to be repeated in Woolf's musical observations too. But one of the less obvious things worth picking up on in this particular quote is the issue of money and the extent to which economic factors would have played a huge part in Woolf's exposure to and capacity to participate in musical culture. Her attendance at the private concerts mentioned above meant that she was in a somewhat privileged position, so far as listening to live music was concerned. But her social position also meant that she was subject to certain kinds of behaviour too. In a letter to Clive Bell from 1911, Virginia Woolf writes:

Gumbo [Marjorie Strachey] is seated at the piano, dressed in a tight green jersey, which makes her resemble the lean cat in the advertisement, singing *O Dolce Amor*, to her own accompaniment. The accompaniment ends: she flings her hands up, and gives vent to a passionate shriek; crashes her hands down again and goes on. A dry yellow skin has formed around her lips, owing to her having a fried egg for breakfast. Save that her songs are passionate, we have not mentioned the subject. (L1: 449)

The final statement in this letter gives us a clue as to what would have been expected of someone of Woolf's class in the early part of the twentieth century, and much of this behaviour could be said to have its legacy in cultural literature of the late nineteenth century, like Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* (1869) in which he makes the connection between culture and law enforcement. As Derek B. Scott observes in his book *Sounds of the Metropolis: The Nineteenth-Century Popular Music Revolution in London, New York, Paris, and Vienna*:

An audience may shout, stamp, applaud, or hiss at will at low entertainment, but a strict reception code operates for high art: you do not talk; you do not turn up late; you do not hum along; you do not eat, and so on. (Scott, 2009: 61)

It is likely that Woolf was subject to this kind of code of behaviour, attending *mostly* what would be called ‘high art’ events. Conversely, however, some social beliefs still held that music had the power to incite civil uprising or disturbance, an attitude that can be seen in Woolf’s fear that her servants responded wildly to music that she or her companions played. Moreover, there was great concern that the dancing which music accompanied contributed to a decline in moral stoutness. Scott identifies that the waltz<sup>50</sup> proved the most ‘threatening’ of all the dances:

The waltz offers an example of how music could be perceived as being linked to a physical threat to public morality. When the waltz first began to be danced “in society”, it provoked moral outrage in some quarters. Existing society dancers were more decorous; the minuet and gavotte may have been dances for couples, but they emphasised graceful movement and involved delicate contact with the fingers only. In the waltz you could hold your partner, and not just with fingertips...but you could (still) hold your partner close...The waltz combined closeness with a sensation of the room spinning around, and this could prove an erotic and giddy experience. (Scott, 2008: 64)

It is obvious from Woolf’s musical marginalia that she was attending all manner of musical concerts, and that she certainly knew not just about the activities of the upper-middle class, as this selection of letters shows: ‘This afternoon we are going to a Beethoven concert – opening Wigmore Hall (the old Bechstein)’ (L2: 135), then a month later; ‘What is the truth of the rumour that Barbara (Saxon) is going on the Music Hall Stage? I went to hear a new Debussy sonata for the harp flute and viola yesterday...I rather liked the Sonata.’ (L2: 140) And, to Edward Sackville-West in 1925, ‘But the piano arrived safely, and has already given a two hour concert, when one of Angus Davidson’s brothers sang, and it was the greatest success. I hope to give many more concerts of this kind in the autumn, and we shall consider you our patron.’ (L3: 195)

Woolf’s mention of her acquisition of a piano made her one of twenty thousand people in Britain who were making similar purchases. Pianos were still very affordable, costing somewhere between £14 and £16 in 1911. (Pearsall, 1975: 125) Moreover, the

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<sup>50</sup> As late as 1885 the waltz was begin attacked by moral speakers. Scott notes that ‘Mr Burband of the Aberdeen Presbytery launched a widely reported attack on ‘dancing parties, and promiscuous gatherings of people of both sexes for indulging in springs and flings and artistic circles and close-bosomed whirlings.’ (Scott, 2008: 64)



piano was still at the centre of the salon music tradition and the instrument provided a focus for what was known formally as a Musical Evening. The Musical Evening remained a staple of Edwardian cultural life because, as Ronald Pearsall has noted in his book *Edwardian Popular Music*, it was thought that the musical evening symbolized a host's cultural, social and moral sophistication. As Pearsall goes on to note, the evening's entertainment mostly consisted of ballads:

Because so many ballads were published amateurs eagerly read reports in the newspapers to find out what was good and what was not. Many of them frequented ballad concerts, the most important of which were held at the Queen's Hall, and the advertisements in, for example, the Daily Telegraph would list singers who were performing the most popular ballads on the same evening all over the country. (Pearsall, 1975: 119-120)

What is interesting about the 'musical evening' is that although it was normally a private affair that took place in people's homes, and the music that was played largely conformed to their expectations of a late Victorian ballad; i.e. tonal in harmony, relatively lightly textured, often sentimental in character, there was no escaping the seeds of modernism that were finding their way into British contemporary cultural life. As Pearsall observes:

Even in the world of salon piano music, modernism was rearing its ugly head, and Roloff's 'Russian Lullaby' was attacked for 'the awful reiterated seventh'. Cyril Scott's 'Barcarolle' had 'occasional lapses into discord [that] gives one the shudders', while Reginald Somerville's 'Automobile Valse' was an ill-timed excursion into the fashionable. There was easy-to-play modern music that was acceptable both at recitals and at musical evenings, such as Debussy's 'Arabesques', but anything more advanced than these graceful pieces was unequivocally eschewed. (Pearsall, 1975: 119-120)

It can be observed, therefore, that there was an enormous variety of musical activity and events for Woolf to be involved in and attend, many of which existed in tension with one another. Traditional musical concerts as we still know them today were readily available to the general public, but, alongside the recognizable face of Western Art music were the embryonic mutterings of modernism. Also in tension was the belief that music was a powerful tool in aiding and improving one's moral character, and the opinion that music should be mistrusted on account of its power to incite moral waywardness.

Interestingly, however, as much as modernism was creeping towards the Edwardians with ever increasing urgency, music, at the turn of the century, could not yet escape an ideology of respectability and improvement; an ideology that, arguably, we retain to this day. This meant that music was thought of as offering people some kind of moral education and was often encouraged in industrial workplaces to tempt the working classes to join the self-improvement bandwagon. Scott:

Music for the nineteenth-century middle-class home aligns itself with one the fundamental “Victorian Values” – that of improvement. It was the possession of an improving or edifying quality that allowed music to be described, in a favourite Victorian phrase, as “rational amusement” (Scott, 2008: 65)

### **‘Victorian Values’, Music and Bildung**

In fact, these ‘Victorian values’ can be traced back to a similar movement which flourished a century earlier in Germany. I want to now look more closely at the concept of *Bildung* in order to examine the extent to which it informs the development of music criticism and was still prevalent at the time that Woolf would have been writing. The idea of aesthetic education as the route to self-improvement was formally known as ‘Bildung’ in European circles and was concerned with the objective spiritual progression of man. With its origins in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* and the notion of the ‘highest good’, Bildung came to embrace ethical, moral, and spiritual questions concerning humankind and man’s role in the world. Frederick Beiser gives us an indication of how we might think about the word Bildung:

The German term *Bildung* is notoriously untranslatable. Depending on the context, it can mean education, culture and development. It means literally “formation,” implying the development of something potential, inchoate, and implicit into something actual, organised, and explicit. Sometimes the various connotations of the term join together to signify the educational process or product of acculturation, or the ethical process or product of self-realisation. If we view the romantic ideal of *Bildung* from a general philosophical perspective, it would be most accurate to describe it as an ethics of self-realisation. (Beiser, 2003: 28)

In the following section, I will examine whether the tension evident in a developing modernist aesthetic versus a rather more conservative view about music, can be traced back to a view about music that holds true to its morally improving character. In other words, to what extent might Woolf’s views on music have been trapped by ideological

constraints that have their intellectual legacy in German Romanticism? And to what extent, therefore, does Woolf's criticism contain traces of the ideology of *Bildung*? Moreover, and more importantly for this dissertation, by looking at the role of 'vocation' in the concept of *Bildung*, I will show that this particular aspect of *Bildung* can be viewed as another attempt by man to 'master' his environment, and indeed, himself.

Focusing on the term 'vocation' for a moment, this word implies initially, that one is inclined to pursue a certain occupation that would be particularly suitable to one's character or disposition. We understand a vocation to be something that one feels inclined to do, to act out or to realise, as a consequence of recognising that one has certain beliefs, values or interests. But it is the complexity of this inclination that interests me, for, at first glance, we might assume that one is *choosing* these certain pre-occupations and that one is ultimately free and able to control such desire. However, what is vital to the concept of a vocation is that one ultimately does *not* have the choice about what it is one feels compelled to invest in, and that to accept one's vocation is a potentially rather difficult and painful process. A vocation is something one is bound to, spiritually, morally and intellectually, and it is not something one is able to choose. Again, one is bound to something – a cause, an ethics, a set of beliefs, an Other – without even being aware one has consented to such a commitment. It is a commitment that transcends anything one is able to articulate; it occupies a place outwith experience and it is a commitment that shows little regard for rationality. This promise knows nothing of time or of space, it is immeasurable, unconquerable and unflinching. What is implicit in the word 'vocation' is the idea of an ending, a completion, or a teleology. It implies the fulfilment of a purpose or it implies that one considers existence has an intention. But there is a problem with the idea of vocation in *Bildung*, and it has been best addressed by the philosopher Maurice Blanchot, who makes a useful connection between the concept of vocation and Virginia Woolf. When Blanchot writes about Woolf, he identifies in and through her the need to attend to the notion of vocation. For Blanchot, however, (and one suspects for Woolf also during her most self-conscious moments) the term 'vocation' becomes a deeply problematic, and at times, crippling accompaniment to the act of writing. Living in the shadow of the perceived urgency of vocation, the writer is aware of an overarching necessity to write, but this being aware of, or knowing that one is at the mercy of vocation, is not a simply act of recognition. Rather, vocation becomes a psychic burden:

Each person has an essential –perhaps unique–goal that he devotes his existence to refusing or accomplishing, nonetheless struggling almost always against it in an obscure, desperate and living fight. (Blanchot, 2003: 101)

This quote comes from a passage from the essay ‘The Failure of the Demon: The Vocation’, from Blanchot’s *The Book to Come*, and falls under a section entitled ‘Perfidious Calling’. Given that Blanchot devotes so much time to exploring the vocational pull of the nature of writing, one might assume that he has faith in the idea that to write or to be a writer is, in part, a response to this vocational necessity. However, paradoxically, Blanchot labels the idea of vocation as ‘perfidious’. On what grounds though, might Blanchot presume that the nature of a calling or a vocation might be deceitful? If we assume that Blanchot is questioning the very nature of vocation itself, then we might understand that he views the idea of a subject being indebted to a vocation as unbelievable or inaccurate, and the perfidy would be in the very idea of vocation itself. That is to say, Blanchot might be suggesting that there is ‘no such thing’ as a vocation. On the other hand, though, there is another way we might understand Blanchot’s oxymoron, and that would be to assume that he is not, in fact, questioning the existence of a vocation, but that he is commenting on the nature of vocation itself. If this is the case, then Blanchot is suggesting that any vocation carries inside it an element of deceitfulness, and that a characteristic of the idea of vocation is that it represents an element of untruth. Whether or not this untruth is a reflection of the subject who, misguidedly, follows what he believes to be his ‘calling’, or whether it is the calling itself that has deceived him, is unclear. But certainly Blanchot’s staging of the idea of vocation with reference to Woolf makes it seem as though he is interpreting the notion of vocation as being ultimately false, unfulfilling and unattainable:

The idea of a calling (of a fidelity) is the most perverse that can afflict a free artist. Even and especially apart from any idealistic conviction (in which this idea is more easily tamed), we feel it close to each writer like a shadow that precedes him and that he flees, or that he pursues, deserter of himself, imitating himself or, worse, imitating the inimitable idea of the Artist or of the Man he wants spectacularly to present. (Blanchot, 2003: 102)

This idealised conception of the individual, as embraced by the notion of *Bildung* (where reason and desire are fully united), was a reaction on the part of the Romantics to the events of the French Revolution. Philosophically speaking, they had identified a tension between the tendencies to think of oneself as completely rational, as a purely cognitive being and had awoken the desire to recognise one's emotions, feelings, desires

and sensibilities. If one could conduct oneself only on a fully rational, reasonable level, why were they witnessing so much suffering and destruction? Philosophy's (specifically Kant's) explanation of the world had argued that the entirety of one's being could be explained by a series of cognitive processes in which there was little room for irrationality. Such an idea could not sustain itself in reality, and there arose a conflict between philosophy and practice, between philosophy and *experience*. Indeed, with philosophical hindsight it seems that many of the intellectual and artistic projects of Romanticism were a reaction to the short-comings of previous philosophical attempts to explain the world and the nature of reality, and the concept of *Bildung* was no different, except that it was not so much a criticism of Kantian philosophy, rather, it was a development of some of Kant's original theses on aesthetics and the nature of aesthetic experience. Beiser suggests how the Romantic concept of *Bildung* could be (and indeed was by the Romantics) articulated within the domain of aesthetics:

To develop all one's human and individual powers, to form them into a single whole, was to create a work of art. Hence Schlegel, Tieck, and Novalis were fond of saying that the individual should make his life into a novel, a beautiful whole. There were two analogies sustaining this aesthetic concept of *Bildung*, two concepts upholding the connection between the ideal of self-realisation and beauty. First, both the self-realised individual and a work of art are organic wholes, where conflicting forces (reason versus sensibility) are welded into an indissoluble unity. Second, both the self-realised individual and a work of art exhibit freedom, the absence of constraint or outside interference, since both appear to follow their own internal laws, their own inner dynamic, independent of external forces." (Beiser, 2003: 28)

The Romantic conception of *Bildung* stood in contrast to the two other possible alternatives regarding what could be considered the 'highest good' at the end of the eighteenth century. The first was the hedonism of the English utilitarians and the French *philosophes*, who regarded pleasure as man's highest good. The Romantics rejected this idea because, according to the philosopher Novalis, the pursuit of hedonism creates philistines – that is, man seeks pleasure in an un-self-conscious, un-reflective manner; enjoying art because it is entertainment, engaging with religion because it brings him comfort and so forth. But neither could the Romantics find relief in the alternative to hedonism – Kant's stoic morality – which they regarded as too morally bounded and found Kant's tendency to prioritise reason over sensibility intolerable. But one of the main reasons why art and man become fundamentally linked is because, like a work of art, man remains incomplete. Or, to put it another way, there are parallels between the development and growth of an art work, and the development and growth of a man.

Thus, man becomes *like* a work of art. He is treated like a living project; his sensibilities, his feelings, his desires are cultivated and are considered as equally important as his reason, his intellect and his rationality. Man is unified and made whole, and it was thought that only once this had been achieved, could he become truly enlightened.

Beiser again:

Schiller's most detailed account of how a person can become a work of art appears in his treatise *Anmut und Würde*. Here, he puts forward his ideal of the "the beautiful soul" (*die schöne Seele*), the person whose character is a work of art because all his or her actions exhibit grace. For Schiller, a graceful action is one that shows no sign of constraint – whether that of a physical need or a moral imperative – and that reveals the spontaneity and harmony of a person's whole character....In graceful action, then, our desires and feelings are neither repressed according to reason, nor indulged according to sensibility, but refined and ennobled, or, to use a modern term, "sublimated." (Beiser, 2003: 96-7)

One of the most lingering tropes of Romantic thought during the period in which Woolf was writing, was the reciprocal nature of the relationship between art and morality, and there was still a sense, certainly in the circles that Woolf moved in, that art was able to speak directly to, and about, the concept of the good. It followed quite naturally then, that any consideration of art in Bloomsbury circles must necessarily entail a similar consideration of ethics. What this did, of course, was highlight a developing correspondence between art, politics and subjectivity. The social reforms that were taking place at the time allowed such discourses to play a more prominent role in everyday life. Whilst, on the surface, this may seem like a valuable or worthwhile change, for Woolf, it in fact represented just the opposite, and perhaps there is a sense that some of the original 'grace' in Schiller's ideas about the 'beautiful soul' had been corrupted and restrained by Victorian values. In her essay entitled 'Socialism in Bloomsbury: Virginia Woolf and the Political Aesthetics of the 1880s', Ruth Livesey notes that this shifting political and aesthetic climate only reinforced Woolf's perception that the Georgian era represented a period that had been left aesthetically stunted by the Edwardians:

Morality...can come only from the purely aesthetic realm of the poets, and hence the unaesthetic Edwardians have left her (Woolf's) generation of Georgians orphaned. (Livesey, 2007: 127)

Livesey is referring to Woolf's frustration at the contemporary literary scene which she believed was lacking in both sound morality and poetic sensibility. Such a sensibility could be overtly identified in the writing of Schiller and his contemporaries, but Woolf was concerned that this had been lost to an age of industry and growing political revolution. Her frustration would prove vital to her developing critical consciousness. Woolf's way of responding to some of the intellectual, moral and social constraints of her era was to develop a form of criticism that essentially deflates potential symbolic excess, especially in her writing about music. In other words, her writing refuses to comply with the commonly held view, reinforced by social customs like the 'musical evening' and concert etiquette, that music has a morally improving character. Instead, Woolf focuses on the more marginal aspects of musical experience and uses humour to recount her musical outings.

### **Humour in Woolf's Musical Writings**

I will now show how Woolf responds to the moralizing discourse of her contemporaries and also to the lingering ideologies of a romanticized conception of music by examining the role of humour in her musical writings. It has already been noted that Woolf's relationship with opera was perhaps the most significant engagement she had with music and as her diary notes:

In August 1909 Virginia went with Adrian and Saxon Sydney-Turner to Bayreuth, for the opera, and then to Dresden for more opera and pictures. Finding their company faintly uncongenial, perhaps because she failed to match their musical enthusiasm to the full, she consoled herself by writing letters to Vanessa which were among her most affectionate. (L1: 404)

The trip to Bayreuth yielded a cluster of letters written to Vanessa about the opera, and she relied on her contemporaries, in particular Saxon Sydney-Turner and Edward Sackville-West to inform her about the finer details of musical form and composition, as she felt inadequate about her own lack of technical musical vocabulary. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that Woolf was in the relative infancy of her critical development, the notes she makes about the opera remain some of the most pointed and humorous observations about musical life that she was to make. In a letter to Vanessa from Sunday, 8 August 1909 she writes:

We heard Parsifal yesterday – a very mysterious emotional work, unlike any of the others I thought. There is no love in it; it is more religious than anything. People dress in half mourning, and you are hissed if you try to clap. As the emotions are all abstract – I mean not between men and women – the effect is very much diffused; and peaceful on the whole. However, Saxon and Adrian say that it was not a good performance, and that I shan't know anything about it until I have heard it 4 times. Between the acts, one goes and sits in a field, and watches a man hoeing turnips. The audience is very dowdy, and the look of the house is drab; one has hardly any room for ones knees, and it is very intense. I think earnest people only go – Germans for the most part, in sacks, with symbolical braid... We have been discussing obscure points in Parsifal all the morning. It seems to me weak vague stuff, with the usual enormities, but I can only read the German with great difficulty. The time seems to go in preparing for the opera, listening to it, and discussing it afterwards – but tomorrow I must begin to write – you will laugh. (L1: 404)

Woolf was not just concerned with the actual content of the opera performances, that is, the music itself, but she was always looking around her, at the environment, at the kinds of people she saw, the kinds of things they were wearing and the ways they were behaving, as if *all* of these elements constituted her musical experience. In terms of the actual opera, she calls it many things; 'mysterious', 'emotional', 'religious', 'abstract' 'peaceful' 'weak', and finally, 'vague', and all of these conclusions she manages to reach without too much difficulty, though she adds the conjecture that she 'shan't know anything about it until I heard it four times'. (L1: 404)

However, I wish to suggest that it is her descriptions of the non-musical events and observations that bring the extract to life. She adds to her thoughts about the music by including all of her experiences. The effect that this has on the overall style of the extract is that she diffuses the intensity of the opera (which she remarks is itself diffuse) by counter-balancing a potent emotional encounter with a humourous interlude regarding the appearance of the German audience. Note, though, that the following Thursday, 12 August 1909, she writes again to Vanessa:

We heard Parsifal yesterday; it was much better done, and I felt within a space of tears. I expect it is the most remarkable of the operas; it slides from music to words almost imperceptibly. However, I have been niggling at the effect all the morning, without much success. It is very hard to write in ones bedroom, without any books to look at, or my especial rabbit path, into the next room. I have balanced my box on my commode, and made a shaky desk. (L1: 406)

Woolf admits that opera moved her to tears; an experience had left its mark on her, but an experience about which she was unable to speak or write. She blames her 'writer's block' on her immediate environment, claiming that she cannot write without



her familiar home comforts, but one suspects that it was more than just her lack of an adequate desk that made turning her experience into words particularly difficult. Nothing else is mentioned about the effect the performance had on her, and by the next week, Woolf displays her humour to the full in this description of the German opera tradition:

I write in haste – this is no device, to excuse my dullness – but I am scrambling through my article, which has got into a fix, and the opera at 4 cuts the day short. They don't do the thing as well as we do it, I think: our seats are very near, and the ugly creatures look still uglier. I can never quite get over the florid Teuton spirit, with its gross symbolism – and its flaxen tresses. Imagine a heroine in a nightgown, with a pigtail on each shoulder, and watery eyes ogling heaven. Saxon says nothing; Adrian prods him for an opinion. He reclines on his hip between the acts, and pulls at a weed. There is a great crowd, and we get stared at, not for our beauty. (L1: 407)

This passage might be amusing for the British reader because the highly vivid descriptions of the opera singer seem so absurd, and we are forced to imagine a woman on stage in nothing but a night-dress, a bad wig and an over-developed sense of earnestness. The exaggerated tone of the remark makes us also suspect that Woolf is being rather critical about the German production of the opera, and indeed, she boasts, 'they don't do the thing as well as we do it...' Interestingly, though, so much of the effect of Woolf's humour relies on our ability to see what she sees, and, moreover, the visuality of the performance all but dominates the passage. She mentions, 'creatures look[ing] [...] uglier [...] watery eyes ogling heaven [...] and we get stared at [...]'.

Although it is noted that these recollections take place away from Britain and Woolf's usual London scene, I think they are still important in identifying one of the techniques Woolf develops to write about musical aesthetic experiences, that of exaggerated visual humour. In addition to these diary entries and letters written from Germany, we also have these extracts from Woolf's letters to illustrate how important and frequent her opera outings were at one point in her life:

I saw Saxon last night...a merry humour came over us, after a 'fairly satisfactory – yes, I think I may say, very fairly satisfactory' performance of the *Götterdämmerung* and we sat here, over our galantine, till three thirty. (L1: 329)

To Lytton Strachey Monday, 18 May 1908:

Could you come to tea with me on Thursday? I have got so miserably involved in opera and the German language that that seems to be the only free afternoon. (L1: 333)

To Lady Robert Cecil, May 1908:

I am going to another opera on Tuesday, so, unless I could come early, I am afraid that afternoon is useless. I am so bewildered with operas – we go regularly – that I can't make sensible arrangements. (L1: 333)

To Violet Dickinson June 1908:

I will come on Wednesday, but I must go back by the six something, because we are going to the opera. (L1: 335)

To Violet Dickinson, early July 1909:

I go to Cambridge on the 10<sup>th</sup> – and both Thursday and Friday are taken up with opera. (L1: 400)

To Violet Dickinson July 1909:

If you could have me another day next week, it would be easier – as I only come up from Cambridge on Monday morning, and we are going to the opera in the evening. (L1: 400)

In addition to this, the following set of examples illustrate Woolf's humour in writing about experience. Often this comes from her frequent tendency to place an incident concerning something to do with music in very close proximity to an entirely unrelated matter. They also, again, rely on the creation of surprising conjunctions. She writes to Vanessa Bell in 1908:

They (Herbert, Helen and Katharine Stephen – v's cousins) are all solidly devoted, of course, but I don't remember Helen much – except once, when we asked if she could play, and she strummed through a Beethoven Sonata, with the tramp of a regiment of dragoons [...] I [...] tried to write Melymbrosia. But a violin began 2 doors off, and all the tradesmen called, and they came and bashed the floor over my head. (L1: 342)

To Violet Dickinson, Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> May 1909:

Last time we met was in that sumptuous Jewesses [Miss Schreiner] room, when everything was like an illusion. Do you remember that curious episode on the empire sofa, when she played Brahms or Schumann to us, and all in her boots? (L1: 394)

To Lytton Strachey 6<sup>th</sup> November 1911:

I've just come back from the [Francis] Cornfords- from the 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony, from a scene with \_\_ \_\_, from an interview in a W.C. and, while I wash my teeth, a painter sings on a board outside my window. (L1: 479)

One of the most significant ways we see satire at work in Woolf is in her descriptions of the British composer Ethel Smyth. Here, it is possible to see that the success of Woolf's satire depends upon her construction of particular *illusory subjectivity*. The descriptions are funny because they are a temporary liberation from the conformity of society. In order for satire to work, there must be a common understanding between writer and audience which the work has to undermine.<sup>51</sup> We understand that Ethel Smyth is not as ludicrous as Woolf seems to make out that she is, but this understanding only arises from a shared conception of 'normal' standards of behaviour. She writes to Ethel Smyth 22 April, 1930 p.158

Today for the first time I have seen nobody, and my book, a very flickering flame at the moment, begins to draw. I don't know if music needs a shelter round it. Writing is so damnably susceptible to atmosphere...This house, you understand, contains two outer rooms, in which I live; it contains a large room where we sit and eat, play the gramophone, prop our feet up on the side of the fire and read endless books)...Are you writing? How does one write music?...Naturally therefore I warble on, unnecessarily to Dame Ethel Smyth; who won't read all this, being in a hurricane today, putting in trumpets, cello's [sic] and a trombone or two in the bass. She thumps it out on her piano; and is only roused to life by her dog; does she ever eat her dinner, or is it always cold? (L4: 158)

And her private remarks about Ethel:

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<sup>51</sup> W.H. Auden in the essay 'Satire' explains: 'Satire flourishes in a homogeneous society with a common conception of the moral law, for satirist and audience must agree as to how normal people can be expected to behave[...]' (Connery B., and Kirk Combe, *Theorizing Satire: Essays in Literature Criticism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995: 204).

The reason why Ethel Smyth is so repulsive, tell Nessa, is her table manners. She oozes; she chortles; and she half blew her rather red nose on her table napkin. Then she poured the cream – oh the blackberries were divine – into her beer; and I had rather dine with a dog. But you can tell people they are murderers; you can not tell them that they eat like hogs. That is wisdom. She was however full – after dinner – of vigorous charm; she walked four miles; she sang Brahms; the sheep looked up and were not fed. And we packed her off before midnight. (L5: 226-7)

In addition to the humorous images of singing tradesmen and an ‘oozing’ and ‘chortling’ Ethel Smyth, another striking feature of these excerpts is Woolf’s seamless inclusion of musical references into life’s ordinary activities. It is so refreshing to read that music is neither more nor less special than any other kind of experience. Not because this is the categorical truth about musical experience (sometimes it definitely is more or less exciting/interesting/boring than other experiences), but because we are not being subjected to florid descriptions of the music or facile metaphors that say nothing at all about the actual experience. We are not trying to be convinced that simply by virtue of there being music, that something stupendously life-changing is happening to us, for which we must be grateful. Woolf’s ability to write honestly about experience means that it is honoured in its entirety; it is not over-determined or distorted by description. And it is for this reason therefore, that Woolf’s writing allows us to see more clearly the particularities of individual moments of experience. Experience need not signify anything, it need not even be articulated, and by not attempting to master an experience, Woolf remains faithful to an authentic version of experience.

## Chapter 6

### Sovereignty and Autonomy in Aesthetic Experience

Characteristic of modern reflection on aesthetic experience is an unresolved ambivalence. It manifests itself in the two lines of tradition that have shaped modern aesthetics from its outset. In one tradition, aesthetic experience represents just one element among the various discourses and modes of experience making up the undifferentiated realm of reason. In the other, aesthetic experience is ascribed a potential that *exceeds* the limits of reason of nonaesthetic discourses. Already intertwined in Kantian aesthetics, these two lines of tradition are even more enmeshed in their most recent confrontation: in Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. In his central thesis on the "antinomy of aesthetic semblance" Adorno claims that the clarification of this relationship is the real problem confronting aesthetics today. (Menke, 1998: vii)

Christopher Menke is perhaps the most able and sophisticated critic to join the group of explicators of *Aesthetic Theory*<sup>52</sup> and his analysis of Adorno's text is remarkably cogent. The way Menke formulates key problems in Adorno's theory is extremely persuasive and confirms that many of his digressive and dialectical lines of enquiry continue to respond successfully to analytical scrutiny. One of the problems he gives close attention to in *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*<sup>53</sup> is set out above and concerns the preservation of the antimony between two different interpretations concerning the ways in which aesthetic experience derives significance. The first of these interpretations has it that art belongs to reason by virtue of its autonomy. Art is differentiated from other 'realms' such as the Good and the True but it is nevertheless subject to reasonable laws and conditions that are given to itself and upon which it founds its own internal tradition and logic. The second of these interpretations sees art 'exceed[ing] the limits of reason' and Menke defines this

<sup>52</sup> For further reading see Brunkhorst, H. 1999. *Adorno and Critical Theory* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press), Buck-Morss, S. 1978. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (Hassocks: Harvester Press), Herbele, R. (ed.). 2006. *Feminist Interpretations of Theodor Adorno* (University Park, PA.: Pennsylvania State University Press), Huhn, T. and Zuidervaart, L. (ed.). 1997. *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press), Jarvis, S. 1998. *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Oxford: Polity Press), Jay, M. 1984. *Adorno* (London: Fontana Paperbacks), Roberts, D. 1991. *Art and Enlightenment: Aesthetic Theory after Adorno* (Lincoln, Neb.; London: University of Nebraska Press), Zuidervaart, L. 1991. *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press).

<sup>53</sup> Menke, C. 1998. *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: The MIT Press)

through the concept of sovereignty. Art is taken to be in excess and transcendent of the non-aesthetic. In summary then, Menke states:

Whereas the autonomy model confers relative validity upon aesthetic experience, the sovereignty model grants it absolute validity, since its enactment disrupts the successful functioning of non-aesthetic discourses. The sovereignty model considers aesthetic experience a medium for the dissolution of the rule of nonaesthetic reason, the vehicle for an experientially enacted critique of reason. (Menke, 1998: viii)

Woolf reflects both types of interpretation, and in this chapter I will show how she preserves the antinomy between the two along the lines that Adorno and Menke suggest as being valid. For example, take the following quote from Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1920 when Woolf makes the following note in her diary:

To the Bach choir last night; but one of our failures. Is it the weather? I'd made out on walking, such a perfect day; and wasted the cream of the morning on the telephone. Then the weather; great bouncing gusts all set about with rain soaking one; buses crowded, left typewriting paper in the bus; a long time waiting at the Club – then Bach unaccompanied isn't easy – though at last (after L. had gone home) I was swept up to the heights by a song. Anna Magdalena's song. (D2: 32)<sup>54</sup>

Woolf's experience of the choir singing Bach is recounted as one experience amongst many she had that day. The sequential statements about her attendance at a Bach concert, her feelings that it was not a successful outing, and her suspicion that the whole affair could be explained by the weather, are all presented one after the other, with seemingly little to connect the different statements. In what follows, we are given vivid descriptions of the turbulent meteorological conditions, and then suddenly we read her revelation that 'Bach unaccompanied isn't easy.' Importantly, this statement is an example of Menke's aesthetic autonomy because this judgement is internal to her understanding of the musical performance. The very presence of her judgement aligns it specifically to aesthetic autonomy because judgement necessarily infers the architecture of the constitutive separation of the Good, the Beautiful and the True. Moreover, this

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<sup>54</sup> The diary notes that 'among the works performed on 19 April by the London Bach Choir were three unaccompanied motets.' It also notes that Woolf was probably referring to 'Bist Du bei mir' which was No.25 in the *Klavierbüchlein für Anna Magdalena Bach* most likely to have been composed by G.H. Stölzel and sung by Ethel McLelland.

statement refers back to the earlier assertion that the evening was a ‘failure’ and we now have a greater understanding of why she judged it to be so.

However, reading on Woolf declares that ‘at last...I was swept up to the heights by a song.’ This revelation exemplifies Menke’s opposing theory about aesthetic experience in which he sets out what he terms ‘aesthetic sovereignty’. Woolf refrains from going into detail about the precise nature of her aesthetic experience, and yet her words are enough to convince us that she really did experience something transcendent. Her figurative language invokes Menke’s notion of aesthetic sovereignty because Woolf’s experience ‘exceed[ed] the limits of reason of nonaesthetic discourses.’ In other words, the Bach song has ‘at last’ delivered an experience that exceeds all other experiences of that day. As if from some divine source, the song transcends the disappointment and frustrations of the weather and the disastrous bus journey. The theme of the unpredictable weather is made to linger in the reader’s imagination as Woolf is ‘swept up’ by a rogue current of wind, perhaps, as she experiences the full pleasure of the music. The idea of the experience being *in excess* of any other experience, that is, according to Menke, the experience being *sovereign*, is further embedded by the image of ‘height’ as that which goes above and beyond the ordinary limits of experience. Further to this is also the sense that as Woolf is being ‘swept up’ there is the danger that she becomes unbalanced; she might be knocked off her feet, swayed a little as the music/wind lifts her clean off the ground and transports her to somewhere beyond the realm of the ordinary, and beyond the realm of the reasonable.

According to Menke, this second model of aesthetic experience is based on the ‘sovereignty of art’. Distinct from the ‘autonomous’ mode, the ‘sovereign’ theory of aesthetic experience suggests that art does not occupy a place in relation to all other non-aesthetic experience, but rather *exceeds* non-aesthetic experience. In a letter to Ethel Smyth from 1932, Woolf writes:

We had thunder at night of course, but not very tremendous, only enough to spoil the Promenade [Concert] to which we were listening. Odd – there was a crack of lightning over Caburn, and instantly Mozart went zigzag too. Modern life is a very complicated affair – why not some sudden revelation of the meaning of everything, one night? – I think it might happen. (D5: 96)

Yet again, the weather seems to precipitate a comparison with the activity of the music. The lightning seems to visibly charge the night-sky and the performance of the Mozart too, making it ‘zigzag.’ Again, the experience of the music is described in terms of a

loss of form; the lightning surges through the atmosphere, and for a split second the Mozart is electrified and angularised, form becomes sharp-edged and inconsistent instead of consistent and integrated. But significantly, this combination of the thunder and lightning and the performance of the Mozart seems to cause Woolf to think it possible that the 'meaning of everything' might be revealed in a sudden flash of inspiration that would transcend the 'very complicated affair' of 'modern life.' One might have thought that the lightning could have sufficed to illuminate the nature of the greater depths of meaning that Woolf imagines possible, and yet, the lightning on this occasion does not 'light up' in the revelatory sense. Lightning, this time, only makes things appear in distorted form in a brash blast of exaggerated colour. But again this particular letter makes it possible to see Menke's 'autonomous' and 'sovereign' modes of experience at work. Music is both one experience amongst many, and at the same time, could be said to be considered a 'sovereign' form of experience which exceeds ordinary experience.

The problem for modern aestheticians, and for criticism, has been the attempt to reconcile these two opposing modes of thoughts. But, in fact, what is required is not a reconciliation of the 'autonomous' and 'sovereign' modes of interpretation, but rather a preservation of their differences. This gives way to Menke's interpretation of Adorno's theory which claims that what is required is:

An adequate conceptualisation of aesthetic experience [that] must avoid sacrificing either of these two elements whilst simultaneously finding a comprehensive resolution of the tension between them. (Menke, 1998: viii)

From a diary entry written in 1932, we read:

To sit to Nessa; gay and debonair; to tie up parcels; to the Busch Quartet where I met Elena R. and reflected upon the transiency of human beauty, passion, and illusion; and so up to lunch. (D4: 77-8)

Woolf's attendance at the Busch Quartet concert is simply one thing amongst many, and yet, it is the catalyst for much deeper reflection on the 'transienc[e] of human beauty, passion, and illusion'. But before any fuller explication of these terms is offered, Woolf cuts off her thought and announces that she went off to lunch. Typically, as we now know, Woolf's tendency to resist broader philosophical development of her aesthetic



reflections was very common. It has been shown in previous chapters that this tendency supported the idea that music in Woolf functioned to sustain the irreconcilability of subjectivity. In this particular instance, it is possible to interpret her self-interruption as the presentation of the both sides of the autonomy/sovereignty interpretation. There is the intimation that music can provide access to a realm beyond that of ordinary experience, and yet, the precise nature of either the means of access or the realm itself is never fully disclosed.

Menke notes that this is a typically Modernist stance: 'The modernity of aesthetic reflection is defined by this refusal to sacrifice either side of the antinomy, and indeed, by the insistence on granting full expression to both in all their mutual tension.' (Menke, 1998: viii) Woolf's musical marginalia work within this dynamic of mutual tension. But although this might be a typically Modernist stance, Menke explains that this notion of mutual tension has continued relevance for contemporary aesthetics. He does this by first explaining why having to choose between 'autonomous' and 'sovereign' modes of interpretation is no longer necessary. In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that anyone who claims that aesthetic experience can *only* be explained either in terms of autonomy or sovereignty is outdated and no longer relevant. These claims, he suggests, are typical of what has come to be called avant-garde and postmodern positions. The survival of aesthetics, they argue, requires it to choose one or the other of the sides of the antinomy.

The autonomous argument faces resistance from avant-gardists and postmodernists because they claim that differentiating aesthetic experience from non-aesthetic experiences actually reifies aesthetic experience because it relies on a nostalgic conception of a bourgeois ideal of aesthetic autonomy. An ideal, which it claims, 'has been definitively overcome by [...] art in its avant-garde and post modern forms.' (Menke, 1998: ix) The second challenge to a nostalgic interpretation of the aesthetic antinomy argues that art cannot be sovereign because its conception of aesthetic experience as something which exceeds and ultimately critiques reason is based on 'a nostalgia towards idealistic truth claims, which, being irredeemable in nonaesthetic terms, are projected on aesthetic experience.' (Menke, 1998: ix) In this respect, aesthetic experience as sovereign faces the charge of *overburdening* art (Menke, 1998: ix). JM Bernstein puts it this way:

If art is taken as lying outside truth and reason then if art speaks in its own voice it does not speak truthfully or rationally; while if one defends art from within the confines of the language of truth-only cognition one belies the claim that art is more truthful than truth-only cognition. (Bernstein, 1992: 2)

Bernstein recognises the problem of attempting to ground theoretical considerations of art from within the discourse of a philosophy which has traditionally concerned itself with the project of truth; a truth regarding the nature of the world and art, and our relation to this world. Historically, if art was considered as something that lies beyond the boundaries of our cognition, experience or rationality, or if art has been seen to pose a challenge to certain epistemologies of truth, then we become subject to a 'truth' oriented task of aesthetics and, conversely, we face the pressure to locate art somewhere beyond the confines of a philosophical domain.

However, Menke points out that the antimony model still has relevance so long as:

It can be shown in detail that the apparent contradiction between these two terms can be resolved without illegitimate compromises: that is, that it is indeed possible to conceive of the autonomy and the sovereignty of art at one and the same time. (Menke, 1998: x)

It appears, then, that what is required, if the two sides of this antinomy are to be preserved, is a kind of writing that allows both the autonomous and sovereign modes of aesthetic experience to be fully apparent, and yet, neither must be subordinate to the other. Woolf's writing about music fulfils this particular condition.

## **Aesthetic Negativity**

For Menke, a conceptual linking of the autonomous and sovereign discourses can be identified through the concept of aesthetic negativity. Aesthetic negativity, he claims, is central to Adorno's understanding of modern art. However, Menke suggests that Adorno's aesthetic negativity is badly defined, and thus, needs further clarification in order to see how it contributes to the autonomy/sovereignty debate. Although Adorno's category of negativity in aesthetics is not defined precisely enough for Menke and lacks clarity, he does see it as ultimately capable of resolving the antinomy:

For, when adequately conceived, aesthetic negativity is capable of achieving the twofold task: by reformulating the internal logic of aesthetic experience in its full scope, it gives force to the potential of aesthetic experience to provide a critique of reason without reshaping this experience to meet extrinsic ends. The concept of aesthetic negativity is the key to understanding the twofold definition of modern art in Adorno, of art as both one of several autonomous discourses and a sovereign subversion of the rationality of all discourses. (Menke, 1998: xi).

Menke argues that the problem left to modern aesthetics by Adorno's concept of aesthetic negativity can be best addressed by a, 'systematic reconstruction of this theory's basic concepts...undertaken and in light of other theoretical approaches.' (Menke, 1998: xi)

According to Menke, Adorno's aesthetic negativity is crucial to our ability to understand works of art as autonomous. Aesthetic negativity states that in order to understand the internal logic and coherence of a work of art, we have to view art in relation to everything that it is *not*, thus our negotiation of the aesthetic is mediated by the non-aesthetic. He goes on to suggest that there are two main aspects to Adorno's negativity. The first example of aesthetic negativity stems from the view that art is a critique of *all that is not art* in social reality (social-critical). And the second instance of aesthetic negativity considers that art is a domain that radically intensifies lived experience in relation to non-aesthetic experience (purist). Both instances of aesthetic negativity in some way reject the realm of the non-aesthetic, but in the case of the social-critical model, this rejection takes the form of critique. This is in opposition to the purist form in which the rejection of the nonaesthetic is necessary for the intensification of experience.

We can see examples of these instances of aesthetic negativity in two of Woolf's letters, written in 1901 and 1902. The first extract is an example of the social-critical aspect of aesthetic negativity in which art is seen as a critique of all that is not art. She writes to Emma Vaughan on the 23 April, 1901:

The only thing in this world is music – music and books and one or two pictures. I am going to found a colony where there shall be no marrying – unless you happen to fall in love with a symphony of Beethoven – no human element at all, except what comes through Art – nothing but ideal peace and endless meditation. (L1: 40)

Woolf intimates that she wishes to leave behind the world as it is, and imagines a world defined by art. Art allows her to construct a Utopia liberated from the constraints of human interaction. Her critique of social reality leads her to the idealism of absolute art. But Woolf's letter also seems to say more than the theoretical justification for such a comment. In providing us with an example of aesthetic negativity she also gives us an insight into her distaste for the 'human element' and her dislike of 'marriage.' In a later letter to Vita Sackville-West written in 1925, she writes:

This way of seeing people might be gigantically successful, and then your cousin [Eddy] has lent me his piano, and I intend to break up the human horror with music. (L3: 214)

Woolf identifies art as a domain into which she could escape the unpleasantnesses of the world. She gives music the power to ‘break up the human horror’ as if it were really possible to achieve such a thing. Menke argues that this social-critical conception of aesthetic negativity is misleading because it suggests that art has the power to *overcome* the social reality from which it seeks to escape, ‘[This] misconception distinguishes art from society as its critical negation; in doing so, it implies the idea of potentially overcoming aesthetic difference.’ (Menke, 1998: 4) This is problematic because another assumption follows if we were to believe that art could achieve this overcoming:

Art brings to bear potentialities, capabilities and insights, which, though still unrealised in society, can in principle remove themselves from the esoteric reality of the aesthetic and become incorporated into social relations. The equation of aesthetic and critical negativity occurs within the framework of a potential identity of that which is distinguished, art and society. (Menke, 1998: 4)

In other words, this model of aesthetic negativity is based upon a separation of art and society that art could potentially and ultimately overcome. However, such an overcoming is dependent on the terms provided by social reality and on art’s reintegration into the reality from which it seeks to escape. In other words, art and aesthetic experience remain trapped by the discourses belonging to the social reality they attempt to overcome or escape from.

In summary then, the social-critical model of aesthetic negativity whereby reflection on aesthetic experience includes a critique of material reality, is conceptually flawed. It fails to account for its dependency on the already established ‘potentialities, capabilities and insights’ of reality, and secondly it does not provide an account of the ways in which the esoteric aesthetic world could ‘become incorporated (back) into social relations.’ (Menke, 1998: 4)

The second example of aesthetic negativity, the purist conception, considers art to intensify lived experience. We can see intimations of this phenomenon in Woolf’s letter to Emma Vaughan from October 1902:

The Pianola is flourishing, and plays after dinner till the other side (the Mackenzies, who only do *hand* playing) are vanquished. Really it is a wonderful machine – beyond a machine in that it lets your own soul flow thro’. (L1: 56)

In this extract, Woolf thinks of the pianola as an instrument which allows the human soul to express itself – lived experience is made more intense by the piano. ‘Normal’ life does not occasion such occurrences, but aesthetic experience does. The pianola is ‘beyond a machine’, it is given powers greater than that of the natural world. Beyond its material reality, the pianola can discern movements from the soul and is able to communicate them. Again, however, according to Menke, this conception of aesthetic experience is also conceptually flawed because it makes the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experiences insurmountable:

In contrast, the purist understanding of aesthetic negativity insists on the insurmountability of the two. On this view, the intensification of lived experience that art promises retains its purity only through its indifference to social reality. Whereas the social-critical misconception conceives of aesthetic difference in terms of its potential surmountability, the purist model rigidly establishes it as representing a static unrelatedness of distinct spheres. (Menke, 1998: 4-5)

One of the consequences of this examination of aesthetic negativity is the way in which it acts upon any original aesthetic pleasure. Subjecting art and aesthetic experience to such involved theoretical intricacies could be said to take away from considering art as merely something to appreciate or enjoy. Woolf’s remarks about music, albeit conceptually inconsistent, retain the sense that she got enormous pleasure from musical encounters. Her writing does not relinquish pleasure for the sake of an intellectual posture. Whilst many of the aesthetic priorities of Woolf’s contemporaries may have been changing from a dependence on the concept of Kantian aesthetic pleasure and disinterestedness to a more Modernist rejection of aesthetic enjoyment, Woolf’s musical marginalia are odd in the respect that she maintained a more conventional attitude to music’s capacity to arouse pleasure. Menke points out that the social-critical model of aesthetic negativity in particular comes to distort pleasure because its frame of reference is always that of critique and, as such pleasure remains subject to moral judgement:

This demonstrates that in Adorno’s social-critical understanding of aesthetic negativity aesthetic pleasure can only be understood – whether it be rejected or accepted – at the price of being subsumed under moral judgement: either it is rejected for obscuring the true task of art – which is to indict present social ills – or it is accepted as an anticipation of a future reconciliation of those ills. (Menke, 1998: 8)

Woolf's writing avoids this problem because she relies so heavily on the *temporality* of aesthetic experience, and thus the category of pleasure becomes subject to the vagaries of the material world. Importantly, this corresponds to Menke's argument that one of the ways Adorno avoids the conceptual deficiencies of the social-critical and purist models is by arguing for the 'processuality of aesthetic experience against the purist conception and the importance of aesthetic pleasure against the social-critical conception.' (Menke, 1998: 6)

## Processuality

The idea of processuality is extremely important, not just to this chapter and aesthetic negativity, but to the notion of the essayistic spirit, to Woolf's musical marginalia, and to this dissertation's larger concern with the discourse of criticism. The theory of processuality stipulates that aesthetic pleasure is not derived from a direct encounter with the object, rather pleasure comes from the 'reflective recourse or return' to the experience of the object:

Accordingly, aesthetic pleasure should never be thought of as a direct or unmediated response or reaction; instead it always refers to that which occurs in aesthetically experiencing an object. As such, this connection between aesthetic pleasure and aesthetic experience further construes aesthetic experience essentially as a process. Aesthetic pleasure arises in reflection not on what the individual contents of the experience are, but rather on what happens during the process of their becoming aesthetic experiences. (Menke, 1998: 13)

It seems vital to acknowledge that our own aesthetic pleasure is never unmediated. Pleasure arises from the fact of its arising in the face of an object. To this end, Woolf is exemplary in that she remains faithful to the process of aesthetic pleasure. Furthermore, as has been shown, essayism is precisely the form of writing that allows this process to remain visible. The essay allows the essayist to document 'what happens during the process of their becoming aesthetic experiences.' (Menke, 1998:13)

With the theory of processuality, aesthetic negativity is freed from the purist misconception, which deems all aesthetic experience as superior to reality, because it makes the condition of aesthetic pleasure dependent on an *unstable* formulation of aesthetic experience. If we accept that aesthetic experience is a retrospective activity, then we deny ourselves the possibility of speaking with any authority about the sovereign nature of art. If aesthetic experience relies on the transition from reality to art,

then art cannot be granted the autonomy to intensify our experience, nor can it be granted the complete separation from the reality on which it relies.

Woolf's writing supports the idea that aesthetic experience is unstable and is constructed from a retrospective position. This has been shown already in this work when the idea of the Common Reader was explored in the second chapter. However, we also have the following diary entry from Wednesday, 7 May 1919 which demonstrates the capturing of aesthetic experience retrospectively:

They were going to hear Bertie lecture; but I preferred the songsters of Trafalgar Square. The steps of the column were built up, pyramid fashion, with elderly respectable householders grasping sheets of music, which they rendered, in time to a conductor on a chair beneath, with great precision. It was Life Boat day and the elderly people were singing sailor's chanties and Tom Bowling. This seemed to me a very amusing and instructive spectacle; and being famished for music, I could not get past, but stood and felt thrilled with an absurd visionary excitement; and walked over Hungerford Bridge making up stories. (D1: 270)<sup>55</sup>

In this particular instance, Woolf does not separate art from reality, nor does she grant it autonomy through the intensification of her experience, rather she binds art and reality together by noting that the music she heard prompted her to invent stories whilst she walked over the Hungerford Bridge. She also makes reference to the way the elderly people held their sheets of music and the chair upon which the conductor was sitting. She is referring to the very real things that were taking place, she is not making recourse to rarefied artistic spirit. Her aesthetic experience is also unstable in that it does not just occur in the temporal reality of the music playing, but rather it continues to exist long after the music has played by virtue of the stories she makes up, retrospectively constructing another experience. By dealing with what is actually happening, Woolf avoids subjugating aesthetic pleasure to the conceptual problems of the social-critical and purist conceptions of aesthetic negativity. Menke puts it this way:

The concept of aesthetic negativity gains another defining quality: "negativity" designates the structural principle of an experiential process, the reflection of which produces aesthetic pleasure, and which is oriented toward the aesthetic spirit of a representation. (Menke, 1998: 16)

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<sup>55</sup> The diary notes that 'Lifeboat day was marked by entertainment in Trafalgar Square organized by the League of Arts and consisting of Morris dancing and folk songs by a choir of 500 voices. 'Tom Bowling' is a nautical song by Charles Dibdin dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.'

Woolf's essayistic spirit seems to tie in very neatly with Adorno's rejection of the Kantian understanding of aesthetic experience as the embodiment of artistic spirit. This turn away from the spirit of the art work marks a fundamental shift in the way contemporary aesthetics has come to conceive of aesthetic experience because it works on one of the concepts that has come to define how we engage with works of art, namely that of representation. Menke:

To define aesthetic experience as the experience of the spirit of an artwork is to take it to be the comprehension of a representation (of something). Such a comprehension as representation can also be called the interpretation or understanding (*Verstehen*) of a work of art. The negativity of aesthetic experience is related to this in the following way: aesthetic experience negates the possibility of the interpretive comprehension of an artwork as the embodiment of its spirit. This raises the question as to how negative aesthetic experience experiences its object, if not interpretively as a representation of its spirit. (Menke, 1998: 16-17)

In order to answer this question, Adorno turned his attention to the artwork's letters or literalness, and thus makes a negative relation to the possibility of interpreting the work through its spirit. Reflections on representation and interpretation are familiar in Woolf's work also and appear, for example, in 'Mr Kipling's Notebook' from *Books and Portraits: Literary and Biographical Writings* in which Woolf queries how we might match up the things in the world to the words we have at our disposal. According to Woolf, representation is one of the conditions of reality, for things cannot truly exist unless they are properly described. She comments on a young writer's desperate search for the right representation of descriptions that are dutifully recorded in the form of a notebook that contains an endless list of 'maimed objects-half-realized trees, streams that are paralytic in their flow' (BP: 63) The simple act of word-choosing becomes immediately problematic for Woolf's writer who believes that this tree or this stream cannot have any life, cannot really be there, until the words that justify the beauty, or the ugliness of the thing, are found. She describes the process of matching the word to the thing, of concept to object, as a task which becomes not only an act of judgement but also an act of discernment, of decision, and of evaluation. One cannot describe, for example, the winter sun in any old way, one is compelled to almost re-realise the experience of that sun in words. It is as if the sensory experience of that sun must be reconstituted by the very words that write it down. However, Woolf comments that this is, in fact, the incorrect way to proceed in writing literature, and that, much as the act of describing the object gives us some indication of the nature of the thing, it cannot lead



us to the truth or the spirit of the object or the landscape etc. She implies that descriptive precision is methodologically naive and is akin to a practice that relies on the entries in one's notebook. Her critique of Kipling's work is based on the suggestion that his writing adopts this very practice. She accuses Kipling of being unreadable precisely because his endless note taking prohibits the process of reading:

All notebook literature produces the same effect of fatigue and obstacle, as if there dropped across the path of the mind some block of alien matter which must be removed or assimilated before one can go on with the true process of reading. The more vivid the note the greater the obstruction. (BP: 64)

Woolf argues for the kind of sentence that does the work of note-taking. In other words, the sentence must contain within it traces of the process of note-taking, but must not itself be in the form of the note. Her point is twofold; first, she suggests that note-taking which is subsequently turned into a form of literature is deeply unsatisfying for the reader, and merely results in the impossibility of a continuous or unified text. She calls into being a type of writing that may or may not have engaged in plenteous note-taking 'behind the scenes', as it were, in which the work of thinking has taken place already, so that the sentence which is finally produced carries within it all the perturbations of thought.

Woolf's musical marginalia contain the kind of sentences that she identifies as those which could offer a solution to the problems of representation. The notes on music are not finished prose, but they manage to draw such precise and pointed observations about musical experience that one cannot deny that a certain amount of crafting had taken place beforehand. This is not to say that this element of pre-thought contradicts or impedes the immediacy of Woolf's remarks about music, but rather, we get the sense that she is always very self-conscious about the form that these observations take. Woolf's note-taking responds to the reality of a musical experience as it happens, and in doing so she is faithful to the unstable and fleeting nature of aesthetic experience. Her notes do not try to represent the spirit of musical works, rather she responds to the the literal facts of the entire experience. This kind of essayistic writing omits nothing about the musical encounter, the essayist does not conceal any aspect of experience, rather this kind of writing preserves the experience by representing it in its aesthetic entirety. In other words, essayism does not interpret the experience and consign it to symbolic representation, rather it reads the experience like a text, and, by reading it aesthetically, it is able to recreate qualities of that experience in writing.

Take, for example, the following letter Woolf writes to Roger Fry in 1923 about one of her many outings to the opera, which has been mentioned before but which can be examined from another angle:

Two nights ago I went to the Opera with Saxon [Sydney-Turner]; both in attenuated evening dress, for he takes stalls. There was Sir Claude Philips<sup>56</sup>, Mrs Norman Grosvenor; Mrs Strep; and so on and so on. We had a divine Bach, Phoebus and Pan; towards the end of which, with the lights still low, that old goat Sir Claude, only kept by the tightness of his white waistcoat from gushing entrails all over the carpet, took it into his head to leave. The whole audience saw him move down the gangway. Suddenly he disappeared. There was a sound of coal sacks, bounding and rebounding. Then dead silence. He had fallen down a complete set of stairs; but is *not* hurt. (D3: 40)

Here, Woolf mentions the music in passing, using only 'divine' to describe it, but it is the description of Sir Claude Philips' unfortunate exit that is captivating. Her vivid, grotesque picture of 'gushing entrails', and the short, punchy account of his disappearance, followed by 'then dead silence' lend her story drama and humour that one can only imagine she had experienced at the hands of the 'divine Bach.' Her writing, therefore, appears to remain faithful to the 'processuality' of aesthetic experience. As a consequence, and in part as a solution to the antinomy of autonomy and sovereignty, Woolf avoids subsuming aesthetic experience to either notion because she fails to fully separate art from reality, and thus music cannot be seen to truly intensify experience. Furthermore, she cannot separate it from the reality in which music occurs, thus it cannot be seen to be sovereign.

Whilst it can be seen that Woolf preserves the 'literal' character of the musical experience, and that this in turn is one way of avoiding the problem of autonomy and sovereignty, there is a further caveat worth addressing around the precise distinction between the spirit, the letter and the work of art. According to Menke, Adorno realises that the project of aesthetic literalness leaves itself vulnerable to a misinterpretation if we take it that literalness is perceived in direct opposition to the work's spirit. The charge that can be waged against literalness is one of positivism if we take it that the aesthetic object is 'indistinguishable from...its literal comprehension.' (Menke, 1998: 18) In other words, if we assume that the work of art is only what it is, devoid of any spirit and any representation then we deny the work the possibility of being interpreted aesthetically, because all the work would constitute would be the presentation of

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<sup>56</sup> Diary notes that Sir Claude Philips was an art critic.

objective facts. So, in fact, it becomes clear that to abstractly separate the art work's letters and spirit would be to fundamentally obscure the task of aesthetics. Menke notes that the danger of ending up with a positivist argument led Adorno to reject the notion of aesthetic literalness altogether unless it can be configured in such a way that preserves the inter-relationship between letter and spirit. Menke:

The attempt to save aesthetic literalness by means of the abstract negation of the aesthetic spirit is itself premised on a false understanding of their relationship: spirit and letter can abstractly negate each other only if they are taken to be unrelated to one another. In this way however, the postulate of literal comprehension suffers from the same prejudice as its opponent, traditional hermeneutics, which seeks to comprehend in isolation the spirit embodied in the letter through acts of symbolic interpretation. There is a correspondence between the cult of the surface of the aesthetic letter and that of the depths of the aesthetic spirit. Both of them divide that which, as the aesthetic, can only be conceived of in its interconnectedness. (Menke, 1998: 19)

The point about Virginia Woolf's musical marginalia is that, by virtue of the fact that Woolf is a writer, and by virtue of the fact that her musical writing embodies what we have termed the essayistic spirit, she represents the point at which the aesthetic spirit and the art work's literalness come together. Her musical marginalia are an example of the interconnectedness of the characteristics of the aesthetic object and the expression of the ideas they represent.

The claim that Woolf's writing could embody a type of criticism that preserves both the spirit and the literalness of the art work can be supported if we examine how Menke treats Kant's concept of the aesthetic spirit. He claims that Kant's definition has two aspects. In the first instance, spirit is used in terms of the 'genius' of aesthetic production, and in the second instance, spirit is used to define the precise contents of the aesthetic object. The two aspects are related, though:

In this way, aesthetic spirit – understood as the ability of the genius to “create, as it were, another nature” – is not the productive power of the imagination set free and on its own, but only that imagination able to represent or express its ideas. (Menke, 1998: 19)

Kant states in the *Critique of Judgement*:

The second talent is properly the one we call spirit. For in order to express what is ineffable in the mental state accompanying a certain representation and to make it universally communicable...we need an ability to apprehend the imagination's

rapidly passing play and to unite it in a concept that can be communicated without the constraint of rules. (Kant, 2007: 120)

Woolf's writing about music responds profoundly to the idea of making the 'ineffable...universally communicable' in such a way that allows the co-existence of both the work's spirit and its literalness. Take, for example, the following letter she writes to Violet Dickinson in 1906:

I have been having a debauch of music and hearing certain notes to which I could be wed – pure simple notes – smooth from all passion and frailty, and flawless as gems. I read then, and feel beauty swell like ripe fruit within my palm: I hear music woven from the azure skeins of air; and gazing into deep pools skimmed with the Italian veil I see youth and melancholy walking hand in hand. (L1: 263)

Her description of the musical notes as 'flawless as gems' is a vividly imaginative way of describing the sound, and by transforming an ineffable quality of the music by virtue of the image of a gemstone, she makes that ineffable quality universally communicable. Her expression responds to the mysterious nature of the particular characteristics of a musical sound. It seems plausible that anybody, whether or not they are an expert in musical matters, could relate to and could recognise the idea of the music sounding as smooth and flawless as a gemstone. In other words, Woolf's representation of the musical gesture takes nothing away from- and in fact perhaps adds to- the work's spirit.

According to Menke, then, the goal for aesthetics is to preserve the antinomies latent in the aesthetic autonomy/sovereignty debate. What is needed, therefore, is a form of criticism that transforms the way we think about and articulate aesthetic experience. Such a model of criticism regards aesthetic experience as neither autonomous nor sovereign, but rather, it is a form of criticism that is *resistant to the sovereignty of synthesis*. And what I mean by this is that we need a form of writing about aesthetic and cultural experiences that remains faithful to the non-signifying element of experience; to the part of our experience that means nothing, that has no value and that is not remarkable. This is important, and conceptually logical, because it reinterprets Adorno's claims about the synthesis of the art work and the paratactical nature of a response to an art work:

In themselves, artworks ineluctably pursue nature-dominating reason by virtue of their element of unity, which organises the whole. But through the disavowal of

real domination this principle returns transformed, truncated, in a shadowy fashion, to put it metaphorically, which is perhaps the only way to describe it. Reason in artworks is reason in gesture: they synthesize like reason, but not with concepts, propositions, and syllogisms – where these forms occur in art they do so only as subordinated means – rather they do so by way of what transpires in the artworks. Their synthetic function is immanent; it is the unity of their self, without immediate relation to anything external given or determined in some way or other; it is directed to the dispersed, the aconceptual, quasi-fragmentary material with which in their interior space artworks are occupied. (AT: 387)

As has been shown thus far, and as I intend to show more fully in the following conclusion, Woolf's writing about music satisfies much of the criteria for this model of criticism. This can be seen in a number of ways. Firstly, her recourse to non-masterful criticism; both in the way that she does not over-determine experiences, and in the way that she 'fictionalises' past events as seen through the figure of the Common Reader, allows the non-signifying particularity of experience to remain intact. In addition to this, we have seen how the discourse of essayism, by remaining faithful to the 'process' of experience, and by refusing to conform to the expectations of academic rhetoric and logical argument, gives us an account of music that is authentic, as opposed to a synthesized rendering of the art-work and the ensuing experience. It was also shown that Woolf responded to another, potentially synthesizing discourse surrounding the legacy of Romantic ideals about music, by deflating symbolic excess through the use of humour. And finally, I have tried to show in this chapter that Woolf's writing sustains and preserves the antinomy of aesthetic autonomy and sovereignty, but also clarifies the relationship between the two by making the ineffable universally communicable without fundamentally destroying the unique and inexpressive elements of experience.

## Conclusion

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The intention of this doctoral dissertation has been to instigate a series of salvagings of Virginia Woolf's writings on music via T.W. Adorno's theory of the aesthetic. In the course of this study, certain problems associated with the writing of music criticism have also been identified and addressed.

Criticism can appear to be a hybrid or unconstrained discursive practice, surviving at the interstices of an enormous range of styles and intellectual traditions, such as journalism, the novel, philosophy, academic writing and the memoir. I argued that it is possible to show that criticism enjoys a common origin with these other practices by virtue of a specifically Romantic and post-Hegelian set of questions and priorities which are concerned with the truthful understanding of the world, experience and the development of human consciousness.

In addition to the difficulties imposed on it through the philosophy of judgement (reflective judgements are produced freely, without rules), music criticism must also contend with the perceived lack of clear semantic content in music. Music criticism tends to traffic musical impressions without unambiguous reference to textual materials. This throws the linguistic strategy of music criticism into peculiar relief.

It is therefore sometimes difficult to determine the precise object of criticism; whether it is the score, the work, the performance, the concert environment, members of the audience, or the content of the critic's own imagination. In practice however, criticism does not need to decide between these objects.

For Woolf, criticism, as a form of writing, must also be *good* writing. Woolf's musical marginalia have been shown to be philosophically robust and demonstrate an experiential depth and fidelity. And these characteristics provide content for the adjective 'good.' Moreover, via the technique of parataxis, they are stylistically rich. *Woolf's musical marginalia can be considered exemplary of a New Paradigm in music writing.*

To re-iterate, then, it was found that one of the most pressing problems concerning the writing of music criticism appears to be the sheer number of disparate schools of thought that could consider themselves to engaging in what might be termed 'music criticism'. In other words, there exists no absolute definition of the term 'music criticism', and to that end, the second chapter of this dissertation attempted to explore a

general taxonomy of music criticism. By looking at the development of the discourse of musical criticism diachronically, and by re-reading Simon Jarvis's article 'An Undeleter for Criticism', I then argued, as Jarvis does, that what was needed was a renewal of the field of music criticism. This need arises from not just the lack of a stable meaning of music criticism (the acquisition of which would not reveal anything other than a starting point for reflection), but from the desire to understand and realize the persistent conceptual antinomies that have come to characterise the discourse of criticism. Using the example of Subotnik's appeal to a musical-critical writing that avoided, or was at least aware of, the lure towards technical or analytical 'mastery', I tried to show that Virginia Woolf's writing about music could be said to be non-masterful. Only by relinquishing the need to possess and to master and to *make mean*, will it be possible to release the political potential of aesthetic reflection. This idea has been supported with evidence from Woolf's essays and musical marginalia in which it was shown that aesthetic experience was constituted negatively, that is, without systematic analysis or interpretation.

The fourth chapter of this dissertation outlined some of the main theoretical and philosophical issues that arise when we consider the form of the essay. I concentrated on the philosophy of the essay as outlined most dramatically by Adorno who examined various aspects of the essay including style, subject, the epistemological concerns of the essay and also, lastly, the literary aspect of the essay. It was shown that precise definitions of the essay are seldom found in much of the literature on the essay, and in a sense this inability to be defined is perhaps the closest thing the essay gets to formal definition. This indeterminate aspect of the essay was considered important for a model of criticism that seeks to remain faithful to those indeterminate, fugitive aspects of experience. Adorno's essay formed a backdrop to this chapter primarily because from it, it is possible to discern a distinct intellectual development that articulates a relation between the form of the essay and the practice of critique. It was shown that Adorno (and Lukács) explores the essay's potential to symbolise the ultimate tool of a critical consciousness. But, as Claire de Obaldia notes, there is one distinct difference that separates Adorno and Lukács's essays on the essay that is perhaps indicative of the intellectual shift from nineteenth century German idealism to the more fragmented, political concerns of twentieth century critique:

The shift from man's (the human soul's) 'struggle toward the absolute' to 'man's relationship to the world in its historical reality', and thus 'the definition of forms

dictated by an awareness of historical and sociological ties between art, history and society rather than purely subjective idealism', will occur a few years later in his (Lukács's) *Theory of the Novel*. In contradistinction, the awareness of these ties determines every aspect of Adorno's essay on the essay: the essentially critical quality of the genre is inseparable from its counter-ideological motivation, that is, from its challenge of the status quo and of the doxa as examined in the context of Montaigne. (de Obaldia, 1995: 99)

The counter-ideological potential of the essay form I consider to be one of the most important ideas for the purposes of this dissertation, and I tried to show that Virginia Woolf's essays successfully negotiate the relationship between the aesthetic and the cognitive that is at the heart of the essay's critical potential.

Chapter Five discussed the social historical context of Woolf's life in Bloomsbury, and showed how her exposure to the dialogic nature of the Bloomsbury Group's artistic and intellectual discussions supported the notion of the essayistic spirit. I then explored a more general social history of musical life in Britain at the turn of the twentieth century so as to gain insight into the entirety of an age defined somewhat by the tension between tradition and progress. This included examining the concept of *Bildung* to show that, in an Edwardian society, there was still the belief that music had some general capacity to 'improve' a person's character. At the end of the fifth chapter I argued that the use of humour in Virginia Woolf's writings about music was an effective way of countering the potentially overbearing way of articulating a musical encounter. Moreover, it was shown that Woolf's humourous appraisals of the musical customs and people she encountered allowed her to gently critique the social and cultural ideologies surrounding musical consumption and performance.

In Chapter Six, I explored a more theoretical reading of the way in which Woolf's work contributes to this discussion on criticism and this was done by looking at the problem of aesthetic autonomy and sovereignty in recent aesthetic theory. It was shown that Woolf's writing remained faithful to the experience of music because it preserved the antinomy of aesthetic autonomy and sovereignty without destroying any aspect of the original experience. This chapter also argued for the importance of 'processuality' in the articulation of aesthetic experience; an idea that can also be directly linked to the discourse on essayism.

In this concluding chapter I will now continue to theoretically develop the notion of a mode of critical writing that bears witness to the problem of *synthesis*, as outlined by Adorno in *Aesthetic Theory*. As I have shown in this dissertation, Adorno's seminal work continues to be one of the most important texts in recent philosophical and



aesthetic scholarship, and his reflection upon the apparent wane in interest in the study of aesthetics proves particularly useful in assessing the problems of criticism. In the 'Draft Introduction', Adorno comments on a number of complexities that arise from the consideration of the relationship between philosophy and aesthetics. According to Adorno, as we have seen, one of the problems that characterises the philosophy/art debate stems from the conceptualising tendencies of philosophy and the resulting difficulty with which we may speak of an aesthetics that is free from the subsuming inclinations of philosophy:

After the demise of idealistic systems, the difficulty of an aesthetics that would be more than a desperately reanimated branch of philosophy is that of bringing the artist's closeness to the phenomena into conjunction with a conceptual capacity free of any subordinating concept, free of all decreed judgement; committed to the medium of concepts, such an aesthetics would go beyond a mere phenomenology of artworks. (AT: 422)

To put it more clearly, Adorno argues that one of the difficulties of dealing with the discourse of aesthetics and criticism is that it inevitably adopts the vocabulary of philosophy, and thus, becomes indebted to a conceptual language that seeks to subsume artworks under generalising concepts. He argues that one of the problems facing the discipline of aesthetics is that its interpretation of its object of study is conditioned by theories that define that object, thus, aesthetics becomes caught up in certain philosophical theories of knowledge:

There is a double reason for this pluralism of aesthetic theories, which are often even left unfinished: It resides on the one hand in the fundamental difficulty, indeed impossibility, of gaining access to art by means of a system of philosophical categories, and on the other, in the fact that aesthetic statements have traditionally presupposed theories of knowledge. The problematic of theories of knowledge returns directly in aesthetics, because how aesthetics interprets its objects depends on the concept of the object held by the theory of knowledge. (AT: 422)

The philosophy of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century sought to conceptualise art in 'universals'. The philosophy of Kant and Hegel could officially speak of aesthetics, without really ever talking about art, because they believed that general concepts could speak on art's behalf:

Hegel and Kant were the last who, to put it bluntly, were able to write major aesthetics without understanding anything about art. That was possible so long as art itself was oriented to encompassing norms that were not questioned in individual works and were liquefied only in the work's immanent problematic. (AT: 424)

Adorno argues that it was possible for philosophy to conceptualise art because philosophy and art had not yet been 'torn apart'. They existed within the realm of spirit, they could refer to one another because they were like one another, philosophy could talk 'substantially' about art, without 'surrendering itself to the works' (AT: 424)

The conceptualising tendency of philosophical aesthetics remains problematic for the domain of criticism. By subordinating aesthetic experience to the domain of universal concepts, criticism then too faces the charge of being burdened by the pursuit of the objective 'truth' of the art work or experience. For Adorno, and for aesthetics, one solution appears if we resist the temptation to talk about works of art in their universality, and instead concentrate on the specificity of individual works. The historical universal determinations of art were therefore incompatible with its non-identity. That way out for Adorno, was of course, dialectics:

Aesthetic dialectics is not to presuppose a metaphysics of spirit, which in Hegel as in Fichte was to guarantee that the individual, with which induction begins, and the universal, which provides the basis for deduction, are one. (AT: 436)

Non-identity requires us to think that reality is determinately negated by the spirit of the artwork. This spirit represents the opposite of our empirical experiences. If it is the spirit of artworks that represents the negation of our social reality, the determinate negation of empirical life, our material existence, then it must also be that the work is to be considered dialectically, because whilst the work of art embodies spirit, it in no way possesses or presents spirit absolutely, the work represents a "crystalisation" of the process between spirit and its other. Adorno claims that for Hegel, the truth of spirit was the objectivity of the artwork, that is to say, the ability of the work of art to embody aspects of its otherness, and its otherness is the empirical world around it. In this instance, Hegel's emphasis on spirit means that, 'it is spirit that has gone over to its own otherness and become identical with itself. For Hegel, spirit is one with totality, also with the totality in art.' (AT: 437) This suggests then that for spirit to achieve identity with itself, it must pass over to its own otherness, it must recognise and confront its

negation, and in this case the negation of spirit is accessed through the objectivity of the artwork. However, spirit is recognised as being only one aspect of the artwork, as we have noted earlier, and the problem for criticism deepens when we look at how to represent an experience or an object without believing that concepts can reveal everything about that experience or object, 'The content (Gehalt) of art does not reduce without remainder into the idea, rather, this content is the extrapolation of what is irreducible.' (AT: 170)

The question of meaning and of the truth content of an aesthetic experience or a work of art is bound up also with the idea of an absolute or an ideal. The question that is asked of a work- 'what does it mean?' also asks questions about notions of truth content and absolutes. The telos of this question commits the work to the discourse of idealism and imposes on it specific and well-rehearsed conceptualities. That the question is even possible seems to suggest that the artwork is capable of an answer, thus, such questions of meaning and truth content guide the work towards certain conclusions. The fact that experience has a kind of coherence in itself, that no experience is without a coherence of sorts, implies that the truth content or meaning can be revealed by interrogating this coherence. And even if experience appears incomplete and ill-drawn, criticism remains a slave to the idea of completeness. Only in its total lack of regard for, and in ignorance of, this teleological burden, can criticism be authentic.

The way of escaping this teleological burden for Adorno, involves bringing to the fore ideas of parataxis and non-identity; and here we see the link between Adorno's work in *Aesthetic Theory*, Woolf's critical writing and the domain of criticism. Parataxis and non-identity connect most profoundly with the practice of writing. Critical writing, as a form of paraliterature, is also heir to the problems of literary determination and thus criticism must reflect its relationship to the work of art's logicity and mimetic power. It becomes apparent then, that what is required is a form of criticism that is strongly invested in (and aware of the limits of) a theoretical and philosophical vocabulary but which is also a form of art in itself. This would allow criticism to be a form of writing which bears witness to experience, to the practice of thought and to the act of creating.

But what else can we say about this kind of criticism? And why in particular have I argued that Virginia Woolf's work serves as an example of the kind of criticism that fulfils these criteria? One answer to these questions comes by examining the work done by Maurice Blanchot (mentioned earlier in this dissertation) in *The Space of Literature*

from 1955<sup>57</sup>. The reason I have chosen Blanchot is that his work too is strongly invested in the discourse of Hegelian philosophy. This investment is crucial because Blanchot devotes much attention in *The Space of Literature* to the relationship between death and writing, and constitutes death and writing as a comment on Hegelian negativity. In the fourth chapter there are no less than six sections devoted to a philosophical account of death; 'The Work and Death's Space', 'Death as Possibility', 'Rilke and Death's Demand: 1. The Search for a Proper Death 2. Death's Space 3. Death's Transmutation'. It may strike the reader that a continued reference to the concept of death is unnecessarily or provocatively pathological, but in fact this critical discussion of death represents the crucial link between Blanchot and the tradition of German philosophy to which he is so intimately bound. In its wider aspect, Blanchot's conception of death can be taken as pure negativity in an Adornoian sense, and as the negativity which impels his dialectic forwards through history, through art and through humanity. Blanchot sees death not just as the annihilation of being, or the end of existence, but as a creative and, indeed, life-giving force that penetrates through and contributes to existence. Non-being, absence, or that which is simply 'not' is not an empty space or a nothingness, but is an otherness or an 'outside' of what is already there. Blanchot's concern with non-being allows him to discover a movement, or an inner logic, within the concept of death that transforms the potential bleakness of non-being into something powerful. Let it be said too though, that Blanchot's treatment of the concept of death, in the philosophical sense, is also a critique of the practice of writing, and, as such, can be described as an example of a theoretically invested 'style' of criticism.

Blanchot frequently refers to the 'abyss of non-being' in order to locate within that abyss a force that connects it to the domain of being, to existence and to the act of writing. This connection is also a continuity between that which is and that which is not. Negativity, in this philosophical sense, is not to be taken as scepticism or pessimism but rather as an integrated and integral element of the unity and completeness that constitutes much of Hegel's idealism and the idea of the whole. Blanchot's account of death and subjectivity is played out and developed through the literary figures of Rilke and Kafka amongst others, and he frequently utilises various fragments of their work to examine *their* contemplation of death and the act of writing. Blanchot often uses these writers' personal letters and diaries rather than their literary texts, one suspects, perhaps,

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<sup>57</sup> Blanchot, M. *The Space of Literature*, trans. by Ann Smock, (Lincoln; London: University of Nebraska Press, 1982).

because he sees these forms as revealing something that would otherwise be concealed in a more academic or public text.

It can be seen, therefore, that Blanchot's explication of death is both a comment on subjectivity, and a theorisation of the process of writing (in which one must truly 'lose' himself, before he can begin to write). He describes a state in which one dies completely as oneself, that is, entirely individually. Value is given to the man who dies undivided from himself, to he who is thought to be at the centre of his being. (Nietzsche too believes that a man who dies singularly and as himself is more faithful to an idea of death we may have.) This state is contrasted with the less esteemed (the more horrific) state of dying as a result of disease or some other outside influence. The man who dies because he is, in a sense, taken by death, suffers a double blow- in being *taken* by death, in having his individuality or his uniqueness undermined by a consumptive death, he not only suffers the indignity of having to relinquish an image of himself that is unified and complete, but he must also endure the torment of the anonymous death. Unable to *choose* his death, the condemned man must be satisfied with the kind of death that renounces him, that recognises neither his individuality, nor his uniqueness and is the kind of death that *anyone* could suffer, 'Contempt for anonymous death, for the 'They die' is the disguised anguish to which the anonymous character of death gives rise.' (Blanchot, 1982: 122)

Commenting on Rilke's writing in the *Book of Hours*, Blanchot questions Rilke's commitment to enduring the horror of an anonymous, overbearing or unchosen death when Rilke appears to give up this existential burden and replaces it with a sense of hopefulness that would see him eventually achieving a chosen, well-timed 'amicable' death. Blanchot argues that Rilke's turning away from the intense fear of the anonymous or undignified death marks the precise point at which he also turns away from the preferred death; by refusing to sustain oneself in the potential of the death that divides, one also renounces the hope of ever evolving through this pain, of ever reaching that point of affirmation which comes from the bearing of that which is in excess of us. In other words, Blanchot believes that the only way Rilke could free himself of the burden of the unchosen death would be to somehow think and sustain himself through this state, until all the eventual possibilities of this state themselves became the site of familiarity and 'amicability' that Rilke had hoped to achieve by simply hoping.

The connection between Blanchot's text and Woolf and criticism hinges on the idea of sustaining oneself in a moment of 'non-being'. By sustaining oneself in and thinking through aspects of experience that do not necessarily immediately mean or

make sense, it becomes possible to allow those moments to be what they are. To be more specific; if there are aspects of a musical, or for that matter, any aesthetic experience that do not make sense, that do not mean, then one must relinquish the desire to find sense or meaning.

Blanchot's 'space' of literature is configured in opposition to the meaning centred, apodictic criticism which follows the Hegelian rules of the concept i.e. that the concept resolves itself in synthesis. This is because Blanchot presents us with what we might refer to a *literary* idea of criticism. This kind of criticism disrupts a conceptual concern with meaning and synthesis. Blanchot's 'space of literature' is closed to interpretation, because, as he suggests, the essential power of language is its absence of meaning and its ability to distance or negate itself from the actual reality of objects. Blanchot's work, therefore, could be viewed as a fundamental critique of synthesis that essentially differs from Adorno's 'negative dialectics'. Instead of remaining entirely invested in the concept, this kind of criticism renegotiates the concept by exposing it as meaningless, or at least, partially destructive in its very nature.

Perhaps one of the greatest responsibilities criticism has, therefore, is to continue to resist the sovereignty of synthesis. Consciousness's responsibility in turn is to be *self-conscious* of a dominating impulse which seizes hold of the work, *makes* it mean, and gestures towards reason. Our debt to the *language* of conceptual thinking, therefore, must be realised. To speak of art or to think of art is to wield a power bound by a vocabulary that takes for granted the work of history, and it is to assume that we have mastered, or are, indeed, capable of mastering this negotiation with the past. We attempt to contend with the cinders of philosophical discourses; remains of ideas filter their way through history, they become ahistorical, concepts are adopted and vulgarised. The passing of time renders them transient, mutable and unfixed. But what is at stake here is that certain ideas seem to continue to offer themselves up for re-examination. In other words, the persistence of certain historical philosophical and conceptual dialogues find their afterlife in contemporary thought; ideas pertaining to notions of subjectivity, aesthetic experience, interpretation and criticism. The desire to make sense of, to interpret or to analyse, a piece of music, a text, must, therefore, be recognised as a positioning of oneself; it is, in a sense, to commit oneself to the responsibility of a questioning that can only be set in motion once the conditioning discourses of the question have been destabilised. Certainly, the figure of Hegelian synthesis weaves itself amorphously in amongst our consciousness, but that is not to say that we are without options. As the editors of *Aesthetic Theory* suggest:

Paratactical form[s] are the expression of the attitude of thought to objectivity. Philosophical parataxis seeks to fulfil the promise of Hegel's program of a pure contemplation by not distorting things through the violence of preforming them subjectively, but rather by bringing their muteness, their non-identity, to speech. (AT: 463)

The musical marginalia of Virginia Woolf could be considered as paratactical forms; her essays, diaries and letters are all fragmentary forms of writing, and as such, they will continue to speak for non-mastery, for non-identity, and for muteness.

## **Towards a Poetics of Criticism**

In 'The Narrow Bridge of Art' first published in the New York Herald Tribune in 1927, Woolf writes:

But one has sometimes asked oneself, must the duty of the critic always be to the past, must his gaze always be fixed backwards? Could he not turn around and, shading his eyes in the manner of Robinson Crusoe on the desert island, look into the future and trace on its mist the faint lines of the land which some day perhaps we may reach? [...] Is it not the critic's duty to tell us, or to guess at least, where we are going? (GR: 11)

And so, as we look back to Woolf's work, we are told also to look forwards and to try and predict in what direction criticism might be going. And perhaps something of this task owes itself to the sense of loss written into both Blanchot and Woolf that arises when they contemplate the task of writing and the future of criticism. Loss that articulates itself through poetry is a concern that Woolf and Blanchot share; loss that arises from continually trying to (re)capture events, people, feelings from the past in writing. But all writing can do is testify to the impossibility of this (re)capturing. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes:

It [the world] does not ask people to write poems and novels and histories; it does not need them. It does not care whether Flaubert finds the right word or whether Carlyle scrupulously verifies this or that fact. Naturally, it will not pay for what it does not want. And so the writer, Keats, Flaubert, Carlyle, suffers, especially in the creative years of youth, every form of distraction and discouragement. A curse, a cry of agony, rises from those books of analysis and confession. 'Mighty poets in their misery dead' – and that is the burden of their song. If anything comes through in spite of all this, it is a miracle, and probably no book is born entire and uncrippled as it was conceived. (RO: 60)

More precisely then, what inspires both Woolf and Blanchot to write is loss. And this is what ultimately connects them, and what connects the project of criticism with the writing of (musical) experience. Just as Woolf tries to recapture events, moments and the past, Blanchot tries to renegotiate death as he attempts to recapture the loss of life that death implies. Music criticism too, tries to recapture and retrace, but it cannot do so unless it accepts this sense of loss, unless it writes this loss into the writing. This thesis has argued that marginal writing could take account of and give a voice to this loss. Blanchot says this about the diary form:

The Diary is linked to the strange conviction that one can observe oneself and that one must know oneself. But Socrates did not write. The most Christian centuries ignore this examination, whose only intermediary is silence. We are told that Protestantism favours this confession without confessor, but why should the confessor be replaced by writing? We must rather return to a cumbersome jumble of Protestantism, Catholicism, and Romanticism so that writers, setting off in search of themselves in this false dialogue, can try to give form and language to what cannot speak in them. Those who realise this and little by little recognise that they cannot know themselves, but only transform themselves and destroy themselves, and who pursue this strange struggle in which they feel drawn outside of themselves to a place which they nonetheless do not have access, have left us, according to their abilities, fragments, sometimes even impersonal ones, that we may actually prefer to any other works. (Blanchot, 2003: 186-7)

Woolf has left us fragments. And I think it is possible to read in them her search for a self, or at the very least we could read her fragments as the attempt to ‘give form and language to what cannot speak.’ But, as Blanchot suggests, absolute knowledge of oneself, of experience, or of an object or text is an illusion. Instead, a process of transformation and destruction replaces systematic conclusion and conceptual synthesis. Blanchot calls this process a ‘strange struggle’, and I think we have seen this struggle in Woolf’s musical marginalia where she has been ‘drawn outside’ of herself ‘to a place which [she] nonetheless [does] not have access [to].’

In ‘The Failure of the Demon: The Vocation’ Blanchot’s seven page essay dedicated to Virginia Woolf, he makes the following comments:

Deeply disturbing, but often difficult to read. Readers who are not indulgent risk being irritated in seeing the Virginia they love so taken with success, so happy with praise, so vain about a moment of recognition, so wounded at its lack. Yes, that is surprising, painful, almost incomprehensible. There is something enigmatic in these distorted reports that place a writer of such delicacy in such gross dependence. And each time, with each new book, the comedy, the tragedy is the



same. This repetition, of which she is very aware – who was more lucid? – is made even more annoying by the abridgements of the *Journal*, but these errors of perspective also have their truth. And suddenly the outcome: that death she chose[...] How can we dare link it with her creative life? How can we see in it the completion of her destiny? What is fitting in this most unsuitable end? [...] We understand better now the words of young Goethe – “For me, there could be no question of ending well” – a certainty that accompanies him during his whole youth until the day he discovers and accepts the demoniacal power that must protect him, he thinks, against the fear of losing himself. This power did protect him, true, but then began his infidelity to himself, and the glorious decline from which Virginia Woolf preferred to escape by sinking. (Blanchot, 2003: 97-104)

For Blanchot, Woolf's death makes sense because he sees it as 'the completion of her destiny.' And this destiny is her vocation as a writer. But, as he sees it, this vocation is also to blame for her, 'most unsuitable end.' Her vocation has lead to her demise:

To link oneself to dispersion, to intermittency, to the fragmented brilliance of images, to the shimmering fascination of the instant, is a terrible movement – a terrible happiness, especially when it must finally give way to a book. Is there a way to gather together what is dispersed, to make continuous the discontinuous and to maintain the wandering in a nonetheless unified whole? Virginia Woolf sometimes finds it. (Blanchot, 2003: 101)

Indeed, Woolf does sometimes 'gather what is dispersed', she does 'make continuous the discontinuous', but even if, as been shown, this continuity is essentially false, her writing continually bears witness to that very process of failure.

## Appendices

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### Appendix 1

*The following extracts are taken from The Letters of Virginia Woolf edited by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautman. The Volumes were originally published, in chronological order, with the following titles: The Flight of the Mind (1888-1912), The Question of Things Happening (1912-22), A Change of Perspective (1923-28), A Reflection of the Other Person (1929-31), The Sickle Side of the Moon (1932-35), Leave the Letters Till We're Dead (1936-41).*

#### **Volume One: 1888-1912**

**(p.40)**

**To Emma Vaughan**

**23 April, 1901**

The only thing in this world is music – music and books and one or two pictures. I am going to found a colony where there shall be no marrying – unless you happen to fall in love with a symphony of Beethoven – no human element at all, except what comes through Art – nothing but ideal peace and endless meditation.

**(p.56)**

**To Emma Vaughan**

**October, 1902**

The Pianola is flourishing, and plays after dinner till the other side (the Mackenzies, who only do *hand* playing) are vanquished. Really it is a wonderful machine – beyond a machine in that it lets your own soul flow thro'.

*(The diary notes that Virginia's Hyde Park Gate neighbours were the Mackenzies.)*

**(p.59)**

**To Thoby Stephen**

**October/November 1902**

The Pianola is going strong.

**(p.64)**

**To Emma Vaughan**

**Late December, 1902**

I write nonsense, because the pianola is playing with extreme brilliance and precision in the next room.

**(p.88)**

**To Emma Vaughan**

**24 July, 1903**

A fresh lot of tunes came today chosen by Adrian and a very mixed set – Bach and Schumann and the Washington Post and the Dead March in Saul, Pinafore and the Messiah. We find the difference in quality a very good thing because all out servants sit beneath the drawing room window all the evening while we play – and by experiment we have discovered that if we play dance music all their crossnesses vanish and the whole room rings with their shrieks and then we tame them down so sentimentally with Saul or boredom with Schumann – on the whole their silence is the most desirable thing.

**USED**

**(p.139-40)**

**To Violet Dickinson**

**6 May, 1904**

She (Beatrice Thynne) is as red and tough as a very fine apple; her face is positively muscular, with character which seems to have stiffened there. We took her to dine with Bell last night, a real Bohemian party, after he heart. Kelly the painter was there, and we

stayed talking of Art, Sculpture and Music till 11.30. This was all in the common café, while we smoked half a dozen cigarettes a piece. Kelly is an enthusiast, and Beatrice seeing this contradicted him. She expounded theories on Wagner which were, I know, made that moment. He actually shook his fist at her across the table, and at one moment I held her down – a stormy scene.

**(p.147)**

**To Violet Dickinson**

**30 October, 1904**

They don't realise that London means my own home, and books, and pictures, and music, from all of which I have been parted since February now, -and I have never spent such a wretched eight months in my life.

**(p.150)**

**To Emma Vaughan**

**1 Nov, 1904**

The great Ralph [Vaughan Williams], I hear, from Florence, is giving a concert at the Queen's Hall, composed *entirely* of his works.

**(p.179)**

**To Emma Vaughan,**

**23 Feb, 1905**

My National Review article is about [Street] Music so you can imagine what a flutter is going through the musical world – it has probably reached Dresden. My remarks will revolutionise the whole future of music.

**(p.183)****To Violet Dickinson****April 5 1905**

You see, there ain't much news; you can't think how bored everybody is, and how hard up for something to do or think about. They play the piano all day long, and eat sandwiches and drink soup.

**(p.190)****To Violet Dickinson****May, 1905**

It is now time to apologies for my egoism, and ask you how you are. However, one more thing. Kitty writes that she had made great friends with the writer of Elizabeth's German Garden; who says, what is the point of the story, that *my* article on *Music* interested her so much!!!

**(p.222)****To Lady Robert Cecil****Wed 18 April, 1906**

But beautiful writing is like music often, the wrong notes, and discords and barbarities that one hears generally – and makes too.

**(p.263)****To Violet Dickinson****Sun 16 Dec, 1906**

I have been having a debauch of music and hearing certain notes to which I could be wed – pure simple notes – smooth from all passion and frailty, and flawless as gems. That means so much to me, and so little to you! Now do you know that sound has shape and colour and texture as well?

**(p.282)****To Clive Bell****Feb, 1907**

I read then, and feel beauty swell like ripe fruit within my palm: I hear music woven from the azure skeins of air; and gazing into deep pools skimmed with the Italian veil I see youth and melancholy walking hand in hand.

**(p.288)****To Violet Dickinson****March, 1907**

We are going to concert on Tuesday, or we would have come.

**(p.308)****To Violet Dickinson****Sunday 1 September, 1907**

Further, I write in the morning and read Pindar, in a room which overlooks the Marsh; beneath Adrian takes notes on English History, and spells out Wagner on the piano.

**(p.312)****To Emma Vaughan****29 September, 1907**

However, noting will induce me to sacrifice my Richter...I heard from Aunt Mary the other day; and the ten children are all either coming to-day for the night, going to balls, staying at Seaford, hearing R[alph Vaughan Williams]'s piece at Cardiff, producing children...

**(p.329)****To Clive Bell****Wednesday 6 May, 1908**

I saw Saxon last night...a merry humour came over us, after a 'fairly satisfactory – yes, I think I may say, very fairly satisfactory' performance of the Gotterdamerung and we sat here, over our galantine, till three thirty.

**(p.333)****To Lytton Strachey****Monday 18 May, 1908**

Could you come to tea with me on Thursday? I have got so miserably involved in opera and the German language that that seems to be the only free afternoon.

**(p.333) To Lady Robert Cecil,****May? 1908**

I am going to another opera on Tuesday, so, unless I could come early, I am afraid that afternoon is useless. I am so bewildered with operas – we go regularly – that I can't make sensible arrangements.

**(p.335)****To Violet Dickinson****June, 1908**

I will come on Wednesday, but I must go back by the six something, because we are going to the opera.

**(p.342)****To Vanessa Bell****Friday 7 Aug, 1908**

They (Herbert, Helen and Katharine Stephen – v's cousins) are all solidly devoted, of course, but I don't remember Helen much – except once, when we asked if she could

play, and she strummed through a Beethoven Sonata, with the tramp of a regiment of dragoons...I...tried to write Melymbrosia. But a violin began 2 doors off, and all the tradesmen called, and they came and bashed the floor over my head.

**(p.347)**

**To Saxon Sydney –Turner**

**10 August, 1908**

I hope you will write and describe the operas – unworthy as I am to hear.

**(p.348)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Monday 10 August, 1908**

By this mornings post, too, I got a card, with musical hieroglyphs; halfway though breakfast, I sang my song to keep myself in spirits, and saw it, as though in a mirror before me – mocking me. I at once changed my tune, and sang the second song; which no one knows. Tell the Chipmonk [Clive] his malice is thwarted; I sang for half an hour, and all the house crouched on the step to listen.

**(p.362)**

**To Saxon Sydney-Turner**

**28 August, 1908**

I suppose you are back again, and I note what you say about the concert. I am pining for music. Could you, if you think it necessary, get me a ticket for Tuesday night?

**(p.363)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Saturday 29 August, 1908**

It is amazingly comfortable to stretch one's legs have one's read out, and not to be interrupted at half past six, and spend the evening at the opera, or in talk about it. I never knew I had such a desire to read; and in London it is always fretted and stinted,



and always will be. I wish one could sweep one's day clean, say not at home, and refuse ever to go out.

**(p.371)**

**To Violet Dickinson**

**Thursday 29 October, 1908**

I met Bruce Richmond last night at a concert, and we had an awkward moment.

**(p.382)**

**To Lytton Strachey**

**1 February, 1909**

Could you come early tomorrow – by the bye? Mr Ilchester [Saxon] has sent me a ticket for the Wagner Opera – what d'you call it – and I don't want to miss the overture.

**(p.393)**

**To Clive Bell**

**April, 1909**

Perhaps we shall meet at the Freshfields music tonight.

**(p.394)**

**To Violet Dickinson**

**Thursday 13 May, 1909**

Last time we met was in that sumptuous Jewesses [Miss Schreiner] room, when everything was like an illusion. Do you remember that curious episode on the empire sofa, when she played Brahms or Schumann to us, and all her boots?

**(p.400)**

**To Violet Dickinson**

**July, 1909**

I go to Cambridge on the 10<sup>th</sup> – and both Thursday and Friday are taken up with opera.

**(p.400)**

**To Violet Dickinson**

**July, 1909**

If you could have me another day next week, it would be easier – as I only come up from Cambridge on Monday morning, and we are going to the opera in the evening.

**(p.403-4)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Saturday 7 August, 1909**

(From Bayreuth)

Now we are going to read Parsifal, and then lunch, and then we shall hear the immortal work.

*(The letters note that, 'In August 1909 Virginia went with Adrian and Saxon Sydney-Turner to Bayreuth, for the opera, and then to Dresden for more opera and pictures. Finding their company faintly uncongenial, perhaps because she failed to match their musical enthusiasm to the full, she consoled herself by writing letters to Vanessa which were among her most affectionate.')*

**(p.404)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Sunday 8 August, 1909**

We heard Parsifal yesterday – a very mysterious emotional work, unlike any of the others I thought. There is no love in it; it is more religious than anything. People dress in half mourning, and you are hissed if you try to clap. As the emotions are all abstract – I mean not between men and women – the effect is very much diffused; and peaceful on the whole. However, Saxon and Adrian say that it was not a good performance, and that

I shan't know anything about it until I have heard it 4 times. Between the acts, one goes and sits in a field, and watches a man hoeing turnips. The audience is very dowdy, and the look of the house is drab; one has hardly any room for ones knees, and it is very intense. I think earnest people only go – Germans for the most part, in sacks, with symbolical braid...We have been discussing obscure points in Parsifal all the morning. It seems to me weak vague stuff, with the usual enormities, but I can only read the German with great difficulty. The time seems to go in preparing for the opera, listening to it, and discussing it afterwards – but tomorrow I must begin to write – you will laugh.

**(p.406)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Thursday 12 August, 1909**

We heard Parsifal yesterday; it was much better done, and I felt within a space of tears. I expect it is the most remarkable of the operas; it slides from music to words almost imperceptibly. However, I have been niggling at the effect all the morning, without much success. It is very hard to write in ones bedroom, without any books to look at, or my especial rabbit path, into the next room. I have balanced my box on my commode, and made a shaky desk.

**(p.407)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Monday 16 August, 1909**

I write in haste – this is no device, to excuse my dullness – but I scrambling through my article, which has got into a fix, and the opera at 4 cuts the day short. They don't do the thing as well as we do it, I think: our seats are very near, and the ugly creatures look still uglier. I can never quite get over the florid Teuton spirit, with its gross symbolism – and its flaxen tresses. Imagine a heroine in a nightgown, with a pigtail on each shoulder, and watery eyes ogling heaven. Saxon says nothing; Adrian prods him for an opinion. He reclines on his hip between the acts, and pulls at a weed. There is a great crowd, and we get stared at, not for our beauty.

**(p.408)****To Vanessa Bell****Thursday 19 August, 1909**

We are now going out to Lohengrin – a very dull opera, and this is, I expect, a damnably dull letter, but the quickest Ape brain always flags after dinner.

**(p.410)****To Vanessa Bell****Tuesday 24 August, 1909**

We went to Salome (Strauss, as you may know) last night. I was much excited, and believe that it is a new discovery. He gets great emotion into his music, without any beauty. However, Saxon thought we were encroaching upon Wagner, and we had a long and rather acid discussion. He has an amazing knowledge of detail – I can't think why he doesn't say something more interesting...I must start for the opera.

**(p.412)****To Violet Dickinson****21 September, 1909**

I took your letter to Bayreuth and meant to answer it. But the opera was always interrupting.

**(p.425)****To Clive Bell****16 May, 1910**

It is possible that there will be tickets for Tristan at the opera itself.

**(p.427)****To Saxon Sydney-Turner****June, 1910**

I shall probably be alone. But I don't know what operas there may be.

**(p.432)**

**To Saxon Sydney- Turner**

**Monday 10 August, 1910**

Last night we crept under the windows of the grand hotel and saw Miss Mickle and Mr Thomas Dunhill playing Brahms to a great drawing room full of dowagers and athletes.

**(p.449)**

**To Clive Bell**

**23 January, 1911**

Gumbo [Marjorie Strachey] is seated at the piano, dressed in a tight green jersey, which makes her resemble the lean cat in the advertisement, singing O Dolce Amor, to her own accompaniment. The accompaniment ends: she flings her hands up, and gives vent to a passionate shriek; crashes her hands down again and goes on. A dry yellow skin has formed around her lips, owing to her having a fried egg for breakfast. Save that her songs are passionate, we have not mentioned the subject.

**(p.466)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Thursday 8 June, 1911**

As it is very hot, and Adrian and Saxon are sweating at the opera, I am going up to Hampstead to see if I can drag old [Janet] Case out for a walk among the lovers on he heath.

**(p.479)**

**To Leonard Woolf**

**21 October, 1911**

Thankyou very much – I am going to this cycle [The Ring], but if I might come to your box for Siegfried on Monday I should like to.

**(p.479)****To Lytton Strachey****6 November, 1911**

I've just come back from the [Francis] Cornfords- from the 7<sup>th</sup> Symphony, from a scene with \_\_ \_\_, from an interview in a W.C. and, while I wash my teeth, a painter sings on a board outside my window.

**(p.481)****To Lytton Strachey****Monday 20 November, 1911**

If you can't come would you telephone to Gordon Sq. If you can, will you meet us at the box office hall (I mean the ordinary big hall) at the opera, 25 minutes past 8 – the opera beginning at 8.30, I presume, being out of the way of reading newspapers.

**(p.497)****To Katherine Cox****2 May, 1912**

Here is a cheque for the concert, though, considering I was in bed at Twickenham at the time, I didn't hear much ancient music for my money...Janet never came so I'm here alone, and go back rather melancholy this afternoon to settle in for the Summer, which will be absolutely dry, and all awirl with Wagner, and Russian dancers.

## **Volume Two: 1912-1922**

**(p.5)**

**To Lytton Strachey**

**1 September, 1912**

Our habits are simple; 2 days in a place, one day in a train; we walk in the morning, read in the afternoon, make our tea, which is the point we have just passed, then walk on the sea-shore; and after dinner sit by a café, and, as its Sunday tonight, listen to the military band.

**(p.8)**

**To Saxon Sydney-Turner**

**17 September, 1912**

We are both starved for music-have to trail about after town bands.

**(p.20)**

**To Katherine Cox**

**18 March, 1913**

Things in London were much the same as usual 10 days ago. A good deal of love, spite, art gossip, and opera. We dine at the Cock, and see the usual run. However, we shall probably retire after Easter and live sensibly.

**(p.26)**

**To Katherine Cox**

**16 May, 1913**

We came up here 10 days ago to attend the Ring- and I hereby state that I will never go again, and you must help us both to keep to that. My eyes are bruised, my ears dulled, my brain a mere pudding of pulp – O the noise and the heat, and the bawling sentimentality, which once used to carry me away, and now leaves me sitting perfectly still. Everyone seems to have come to this opinion, though some pretend to believe still.

**(p.51)**

**To Katherine Cox**

**12 August, 1914**

They discuss Thomson's poetry, and post impressionism, and have read everything, and at the same time control all the trade in Hides, and can sing comic songs and do music hall turns.

**(p.81)**

**To Lady Robert Cecil**

**18 February, 1916**

I have been reading Mr Strutts musical reminiscences, with interest. I must have seen him at every concert and opera I ever went to, and he often describes the same concerts. It is very outspoken criticism, which is refreshing.

**(p.128)**

**To Saxon Sydney-Turner**

**27 November, 1916**

We went to a concert on Friday.

**(p.135)**

**To Saxon Sydney-Turner**

**16 January 1917**

This afternoon we are going to a Beethoven concert – opening Wigmore Hall (the old Bechstein)

**(p.140)**

**To Saxon Sydney-Turner**

**3 February 1917**



What is the truth of the rumour that Barbara (Saxon) is going on the Music Hall Stage? I went to hear a new Debussy sonata for the harp flute and viola yesterday...I rather liked the Sonata.

**(p.144)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**11 February, 1917**

I can't remember a word of tonic-sol-fa...

**(p.184)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**Wednesday 3 October, 1917**

I tried to sing the Wolf song this morning, tell Quentin.

### **Volume Three: 1923-1928**

**(p.30)**

**To Leonard Woolf**

**Tuesday 25 April, 1923**

Now I've dined at our usual place – omelette, ham and pots, and spinach; Suisse, coffee and cream, then chocolate, very good, at the orchestra café, but the music was such that even I could dream no dreams, so came away, got straight to bed, and finished reading my Gissing book; which brings me to the present moment.

**(p.40)**

**To Roger Fry**

**Saturday 18 May 1923**

Two nights ago I went to the Opera with Saxon [Sydney-Turner]; both in attenuated evening dress, for he takes stalls. There was Sir Claude Philips (diary notes he was an art critic), Mrs Norman Grosvenor; Mrs Strep; and so on and so on. We had a divine Bach, Phoebus and Pan; towards the end of which, with the lights still low, that old goat Sir Claude, only kept by the tightness of his white waistcoat from gushing entrails all over the carpet, to it into his head to leave. The whole audience saw him move down the gangway. Suddenly he disappeared. There was a sound of coal sacks, bounding and rebounding. Then dead silence. He had fallen down a complete set of stairs; but is *not* hurt.

**(p.59-60)**

**To Jaques Raverat**

**July 30, 1923**

As for the Sitwell's, though I paid 3/6 to hear Edith vociferate her poems accompanied by a small and nimble orchestra, I understood so little that I could not judge. I know Osbert slightly. They take themselves very seriously. They descend from George the IVth. They look like Regency bucks. They have a mother who was in prison. They probably need careful reading, which I have never given them, and thus incline to think them vigorous, but unimportant acrobats.

**(p.81)**

**To Ethel Sands**

**1923?**

I wonder whether you could possibly tell me the address of Miss Fass, at whose house concerts are given by the English quartet? She sent me a programme, which I lost, and now I want one to give a friend, and would also like to try and come myself. (The diary notes that the Quartet was formed in 1902 and 'achieved a high reputation for chamber music.' It also notes that Marjorie Fass was a friend and the patron of composer Frank Bridge.

**(p.186)**

**To Saxon Syndey-Turner**

**31 May, 1925**

I have been to the Walkure, and to Lords: at both places I looked for you in vain. I saw Hearne make 56, by which time we were so cold we went home. Walkure completely triumphed, I thought; except for some boredom – I can't ever enjoy those long arguments in music – when it is obviously mere conversation upon business matters between Wotan and Brunhilde: however, the rest was superb.

**(p.195)**

**To Edward Sackville West**

**28 July, 1925**

But the piano arrived safely, and has already given a two hour concert, when one of Angus Davidson's brothers sang, and it was the greatest success. I hope to give many more concerts of this kind in the autumn, and we shall consider you our patron.

**(p.201)**

**To Janet Case**

**Tuesday 1 September, 1925**

But how difficult criticism is! Not a single word has the same meaning for two people.

**(p.214)**

**To Vita Sackville-West**

**Wednesday 23 September, 1925**

This way of seeing people might be gigantically successful, and then your cousin [Eddy] has lent me his piano, and I intend to break up the human horror with music.

**(p.222)**

**To Edward Sackville West**

**November, 1925**

I am still kept strictly in bed and visitors rationed, but if you should be in London, I hope you will come and see me, only its better to ring up first. This explains why the piano has remained dumb. I make do with an algraphone, as I can't get down to my studio.

*(The letters note that algraphone was a 'joke-word for a gramophone in a sick-room*

**(p.240)**

**To Edward Sackville West**

**Saturday 6 February, 1926**

I think you ought to take your piano away as soon as possible – the damp is something awful.

**(p.247)**

**To Vita Sackville West**

**16 March, 1926**

Indeed, these are the first letters I have written since I was married. As for the mot juste, you are quite wrong. Style is a very simple matter; it is all rhythm. Once you get that, you can't use the wrong words. But on the other hand here I am sitting after half the morning, crammed with ideas, and visions, and so on, and can't dislodge them, for the lack of the right rhythm. Now this is very profound, what rhythm is, and goes far deeper

than words. A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind, long before it makes words to fit it; and in writing (such is my present belief) one has to recapture this, and set this working (which has nothing apparently to do with words) and then, as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it: But no doubt I shall think differently next year.

**(p.255)**

**To Vita Sackville-West**

**13 April, 1926**

We all chatter hard about music – Eddy explains about 19<sup>th</sup> Century music and rhetoric – Duncan attacks: but seldom uses the word he means: sometimes has to unbutton his waistcoat while endeavouring: very interesting: we compare movies and operas...

**(p.267)**

**To Edward Sackville-West**

**Friday 1926?**

This is more like it (as far as I remember) that you had a passion for Wagner, were a fanatic, and thought Lawrence the best living English writer...

**(p.355)**

**To Violet Dickinson**

**Sunday 27 March, 1927**

But I thought of many odd people, you and Lady S. and Katie [Cromer] whom I sat next to at a Mozart opera the other night.

**(p.360)**

**To Vanessa Bell**

**9 April, 1927**

There are explosions going on in the street and a general buzz and hum which rather entice me to step out into the Square and go to the movies; but we are off to Segesta early tomorrow so we are having a quiet night. However, they are at this moment

marching through the Square, playing a band, with lanterns, and some sacred object under a panoply – It is Easter, I suppose – I like the Roman Catholic religion. I say it is an attempt at art; Leonard is outraged...It seems to me simply the desire to create gone slightly crooked, and no God in it at all.

**Volume Four: 1929-31****(p.19)****To Hugh Walpole****10 February, 1929**

Berlin was very exhausting; very larger; very cold; lots of music.

**(p.45-6)****To Ethel Sands****24 April, 1929**

Heaven knows what happened in Berlin – it was a very odd affair; Count Kessler, pictures, operas, vast distances, icy cold, Vita in snowboots at one end, Eddy, Nessa and Duncan and I all far away at the other. It was hideous, and highly respectable in the midst of all its vice – we went to the Opera most nights and even Leonard pined for the diamonds of Lady Londonderry (is that right?) – so hairy and hearty and beery and cheery and like Bessie Trevelyan eating muffins in black kid gloves were they. Naturally I was ill.

**(p.115)****To Hugh Walpole****Saturday 7 December, 1929**

A catastrophe has happened. We are in for a lawsuit with the Imperial Hotel, which is driving us crazy with a Jazz band...

**(p.115)****To Lady Ottoline Morrell****December, 1929**

All my life is now upset by a lawsuit against a Jazz band in an hotel, and I may have to put you off and visit the eternal lawyers...

**(p.116)**

**To David Garnet**

**10 December, 1929**

We are engaged in a lawsuit. It is against the Imperial Hotel and their infernal band – so may be a nuisance and begins on Friday.

**(p.132)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Tuesday 4 Feb, 1930**

But this is no return whatever for the immense pleasure I have had from your books (I dare not say music, because though willing, I am ignorant) in which my husband agrees with me.

**(p.134)**

**To Clive Bell**

**6 February, 1930**

Oh I can't remember, if indeed I ever knew what Duncan's story was about, and so we went on, until the afternoon light was waning, and Duncan and I walked to Bond Street, and were so elated by every incident – for one thing the discovery of Blake's house, for old man playing a violin said "Good bye to you," that we found ourselves inside one of the smartest shops in Bond Street asking the price of rings.

**(p.145)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**27 February, 1930**

I want to talk and talk and talk – About music; about love; about Countess Russell.



**(p.146)**

**To Saxon Sydney-Turner**

**27 February, 1930**

What is your opinion of Ethel Smyth? – her music, I mean? She has descended upon like a wolf on the fold in purple and gold, terrifically strident and enthusiastic – I like her – she is as shabby as a washerwoman and shouts and sings – but the question of her music crops up – I don't mean that she cares what I think, being apparently indomitable in her own view, but one day you must tell me the truth about it.

**(p.158)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**22 April, 1930**

Today for the first time I have seen nobody, and my book, a very flickering flame at the moment, begins to draw. I don't know if music needs a shelter round it. Writing is so damnably susceptible to atmosphere...This house, you understand, contains two outer rooms, in which I live; it contains a large room where we sit and eat, play the gramophone, prop our feet up on the side of the fire and read endless books)...Are you writing? How does one write music?...Naturally therefore I warble on, unnecessarily to Dame Ethel Smyth; who won't read all this, being in a hurricane today, putting in trumpets, cello's and a trombone or two in the bass. She thumps it out on her piano; and is only roused to life by her dog; does she ever eat her dinner, or is it always cold?

**(p.163)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Tuesday, perhaps 6 May, 1930**

By the way, I heard the Wreckers years ago, from the pit, in some theatre.

**(p.168)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Wednesday 13 [14<sup>th</sup>] May, 1930**

Lord how difficult it is to write a letter! You painters and musicians don't know the horror of pens that dry up and no blotting paper...I don't see how you can play your music because I haven't got a piano...Shall I go to the opera, shall I go to the cocktail party? So the ocean tosses its pebbles, and I turn them over, naked, a child, and no one helps me. There's Ethel at Woking among her pear – no daffodil trees; with her bacon mouldering on the piano.

**(p.171)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Monday 26 May, 1930**

If only I weren't a writer, perhaps I could thank you and praise you and admire you perfectly simply and expressively and say in one word what I felt about the Concert yesterday. As it is, an image forms in my mind; a quickset briar hedge, innumerable intricate and spiky and thorned; in the centre burns a rose. Miraculously, the rose is you; flushed pink, wearing pearls. The thorn hedge is the music; and I have to break my way through violins, flutes, cymbals, voices to this red burning centre. Now I admit that this has nothing to do with musical criticism. It is only what I feel as I sat on my silver winged (was it winged?) chair on the slippery floor yesterday. I am enthralled that you, the dominant and superb, should have this tremor and vibration of fire around you – violins flickering, flutes purring; (the image is of a winter hedge) – that you should be able to create this world from your centre. Perhaps I was not thinking of the music but of all the loves and ages you have been through...That's what I call living; that's the quality I would give my eyes to possess. Of course, in my furtive and sidelong way (being like a flatfish with eyes not in the usual place) I had read a good deal of this years ago in your books, and now I begin to read it and other oddities and revelations too in your music. It will take a long time not merely because I am musically feeble, but because all my faculties are so industriously bringing in news of so many Ethels at the same moment.

**(p.181)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Thursday 26 June, 1930**

So I've had to take to dressing gown and sofa and can't work. I shall be alright in a day or two: in fact I am better today; but it is a stealthy disease and pounces out if I give it a chance. So I shan't attempt your concert: and I shan't attempt answering your letters...I am sorry about the Concert. Tell me about it.

**(p.184)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Sunday 6 July, 1930**

I say Ethel – what a party! What a triumph! I can only assure you that when I saw all those hands stretched over the gate I felt I was being shut out from Paradise. I daresay it went on for hours after we left in the garden, under the roses. It was a superb affair, rolling and warbling from melody to melody like some divine quartet –no, octet.

**(p.204)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Thursday 28 August, 1930**

I think then that my difficulty is that I am writing to a rhythm and not to a plot. Does this convey anything? And thus though the rhythmical is more natural to me than the narrative, it is completely opposed to the tradition of fiction and I am casting about all the time for some rope to throw to the reader.

**(p.207)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Wednesday 3 September, 1930**

I have a devout belief in the human soul – when I meet what can be called such emphatically; and your power of soul completely daunts me. That's an odd phrase – but I can't stop – post going – to make a better, and will write anyhow tomorrow. No, no,

no, the pain is always hanging about after any spill; you kept it off. I say, I shall listen in; and hear the shouts and the music.

**(p.209)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Friday 5 September, 1930**

Well, we listened in. 'How like she is to her music' L. said: a great compliment: for he sees you vividly and warmly. I thought the Anacreontic Ode very exciting – even buzzed at it was across England. And the other, the songs, very satisfying (like a complete demonstration of something). Lord, how they knocked out Berners! How robust, and at the same time piercing.

**(p.214)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**September, 1930**

(1): We want to know if you will let us publish the speech to the girls about Lambert, music etc?

*(The letters note that Lambert refers to Constant Lambert (1905-51), 'the conductor, composer and writer on music. Ethel never published her lecture.)*

**(p.215)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**19 September, 1930**

(1) Hour: I say certainly, it can be legitimately two syllables; Leonard says, No: that is only done by the illiterate in writing, but can be done in music without offence.

**(p.225)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Sunday 5 October, 1930**

Am I to vote for the Opera merger? A post card, with a stamp, has been sent me; as if Sir Thomas [Beecham] means business: I'll put on 1 ½ if by so doing I can ensure a perfect performance of the Wreckers [Ethel's opera].

*(The Diary notes that 'It was Beecham's plan to amalgamate the Imperial League of Opera with the Covent Garden Opera in order to form a National Opera.')*

## **Volume Five: 1932-1935**

**(P.15)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Friday 5 February, 1932**

I think I dislike them both equally – so clumsy – Where musical criticism sideslips – where musical criticism derails – I think it a mistake to be colloquial, vernacular, unless you hit it off exactly. Why not, simply and dully, Some fallacies of m.c. ‘Failings and fallacies of the Musical Critic.’ ‘Where Musical Criticism is at fault-‘ no I certainly don’t like where musical criticism derails. I leave it at that...Sing me the Jacobite songs one of these days.

*(The letters note that Ethel was writing an article eventually called Where Musical Criticism Goes Astray.)*

**(p.37)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Monday 21 March, 1932**

I’m scribbling with Leonard sneezing, and the effect is of a hen pecking up here one grain, there another – MB (Maurice Baring) has sent me his book, and I’ve snatched up his praise of your singing, which is all to my mind I mean what I would say myself, on the strength of half one of Schuberts songs that morning. Aren’t you happy to have that gift as well as the others?

*(Maurice Baring was a poet, novelist and friend of Ethel Smyth.)*

**(p.96)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Sunday 21 August, 1932**

We had thunder at night of course, but not very tremendous, only enough to spoil the Promenade [Concert] to which we were listening. Odd – there was a crack of lightning over Caburn, and instantly Mozart went zigzag too. Modern life is a very complicated

affair – why not some sudden revelation of the meaning of everything, one night? – I think it might happen.

Are you, in a more humble way, appearing at the Queen's Hall;? I must make a note to listen –

*(The letters note that 'The overture to Ethel's opera The Wreckers was conducted by Sir Henry Wood at the Queen's Hall on 22 August)*

**(p.112)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Friday 21 October, 1932**

I wish I were at the Opera with you – can't be helped. It was my fault for going to the motor show before a dinner party. I've been drowsy all day – have read perhaps 2 pages...Please please please write more – also write the Empress. I could write a book about your memoirs. Surely, if you sat over the fire o' nights, after music, you could drop out some more, like pearls – pearls that have got into one's underclothes. Oh I'm so sleepy. Thank you for coming.

**(p.122)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Tuesday 8 November, 1932**

L. threw away the last L/ Mercury, before I'd read you. Cd. You lend me a copy?

*(The letters note that 'Ethel's article in the London Mercury for November was entitled Delirious Tempi in Music, protesting that conductors played Gilbert and Sullivan music too fast.')*

**(p.126)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**13 November, 1932**

Really- I quite understand-I should be just as much out about music. And I'm better and we're back, but I'm going to be very quiet.

(p.126)

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Sunday 20 November, 1932**

I know I have been a wretch, as usual, not to write before, if only to indulge you in your mad Jane Austen mood, which amuses me immensely. Why on earth should you mind coming a howler once in a way about that article? As I said, I should be far more howling if I wrote to you about your music. Its only your d\_\_d rashness that's at fault – and as you know I rather admire that quality in you....

(p.130)

**To Lady Ottoline Morrell**

**25? November, 1932**

That reminds me- you must come to a quite ghastly party that Nessa and I are giving on Wednesday. It is a purely commercial (don't whisper it) affair, to induce the rich to buy furniture, and so employ a swarm of poor scarecrows who are languishing in Fitzroy Street.

*(The letters note that "The party (on 30 November) was given by Virginia and Vanessa at the Lefebvre Gallery to open a Music Room which Duncan and Vanessa had designed, down to the carpets, chairs and mirrors.)*

(p.135)

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Sunday 11 December, 1932**

Nessa says she is sending me a letter of yours, so that's all right – I went to Dido and Aeneas [Purcell] at the Wells and thought it absolutely and entirely satisfying: so come away before the English opera. My taste is very limited. I can't judge music any more than someone else can judge articles in the T.L.S.

(p.137)



**To Ethel Smyth**

**22 December, 1932**

The waits have just done singing: L. has given them 2/6 – but I can't say I caught the music of old England, though I listened – which reminds me, is Vernon Lee's book on music good? Ought I to order it? I like her trailing clouds of sub fulgent ink – why can't she write tighter though? – that's what trips me up, like falling over one's train.

*(The diary notes 'Vernon Lee (1856-1935), whose real name was Violet Paget, published Music and its Lovers in 1932. She was an intimate friend of Ethel.')*

**(p.141)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**28 December, 1932**

You sound a little raucous – your cold I suppose: and I hope its gone; and I hope you're writing music; and I hope you're thinking of me...

**(p.163)**

**To Lady Ottoline Morrell**

**Monday 27 February, 1933**

I've been listening to Jelly playing Bach in the [Westminster] Abbey; but the crowd was too great, and the violin took in gulps of air.

**(p.194)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Thursday 8 June, 1933**

No I don't think I put my point effectively; I did not mean that I dislike facts and dates; What I mean was – oh dear how silly to try and explain – but my conscience is tender about writing – I meant, give it all the facts and all the dates; the more the better; but let them be about other people, not E.S. My own longing in reading your article is to escape the individual; and to be told simply, plainly, objectively in 1880 there was not a

single woman in an orchestra; there was not a single teacher to teach women harmony; the expense of going to Berlin was 165 pound ten; eight women were educated partly by 1891; in 1902 [Henry] Wood took five violinists women into his orchestra; the number increased, and is now – (here is a table)...and so on, all the way through. But to be told My opera was not played because\_\_\_My mass was played only once, Elgar 17 times – to have to listen to anecdotes, hearsay, verbal anecdotes about how some unknown Austrian said that some unnamed conductor ought to be very proud of ES makes me feel, and will I think make any moderately intelligent moderately sensitive man or woman feel-Oh the woman's got a grievance about herself; Shes unable to think of anyone else...

**(p.222)**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Wednesday 6 September, 1933**

What a descriptive writer was lost when you took up the piano.

**(p.226-7)**

**To Quentin Bell**

**Tuesday 19 September, 1933**

The reason why Ethel Smyth is so repulsive, tell Nessa, is her table manners. She oozes; she chortles; and she half blew her rather red nose on her table napkin. Then she poured the cream – oh the blackberries were divine – into her beer; and I had rather dine with a dog. But you can tell people they are murderers; you can not tell them that they eat like hogs. That is wisdom. She was however full – after dinner – of vigorous charm; she walked four miles; she sang Brahms; the sheep looked up and were not fed. And we packed her off before midnight.

## **Volume Six: 1936-41**

**(p.19)**

**To Julian Bell**

**11 March, 1936**

As for Leonard he works all day, drafting measures for the Labour party; answering that gaby Kingsley Martin, who can't make up his own mind without tapping every other mind within a radius of twenty miles. He always interrupts our one resource against politics which is music. That's why I curse him.

**(p.132)**

**To Emphie Case**

**3 June, 1937**

Here we are, having a few days off, before we go back to London which is all abuzz with the Opera. The season, the Coronation.

**p.135**

**To Janet Case**

**12 June, 1937**

Now in London there's a lot of telephone ringing: L. has all his politicians at him, and I have old Ethel Smyth who stumps in for what she calls ten minutes. Its really two hours; one all long harangue, to which I listen, because she's stone deaf, and her trumpet doesn't work, but what does that matter, since she has a supreme belief in her own divine genius, and if you get he off on that, and love, and music, and her sheep dog, there's no need to answer.

**p.190-1**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**Monday 13 December, 1937**

And how could my opinion of what you say of MB. Have any shade of value, coming from one purblind to the subject you're dealing with? As well ask a deaf donkey to criticise Mozart. And how did the BBC do your concert?

**p.217**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**24 February, 1938**

Are women allowed to play in orchestras? When was this, allowed, if: and are they now musically, (as far as training goes) equal with the other sex?

**p.426**

**To Mrs R.C. Trevelyan**

**4 September, 1940**

It was delightful of you to write to me about my life of Roger. You have found out exactly what I was trying to do when you compare it to a piece of music. It's odd, for I'm not regularly musical, but I always think of my books as music before I write them.

**p.450**

**To Ethel Smyth**

**6 December, 1940**

Now let us talk of something interesting. I was going to say why don't you write a Common Reader review of music? Now consider that. Write your loves and hates for Bach Wagner etc out in plain English. I have an ulterior motive. I want to investigate the influence of music on literature. But there's not a book on music that gives me a hint – Parry all padding. What about Tovey? Too metaphysical. Ethel is the *[last page missing]*

## Appendix 2

*The following extracts are taken from The Diary of Virginia Woolf, edited by Anne Oliver Bell and all contain either direct or indirect references to music, musical events and musical performances. The extracts have been reproduced as they appear in Bell's edition and edited where necessary. I have also cited the notes from Bell's edition in parentheses after several of the entries, when they have been thought to provide important supplementary information regarding the specificities of a concert program, particular performers or venues etc.*

### **Volume One: 1915-1919**

(p.5)

**Sunday 3 January, 1915**

We went to a concert at the Queen's Hall, in the afternoon. Considering that my ears have been pure of music for some weeks, I think patriotism is a base emotion. By this I mean (I am writing in haste, expecting Flora to dinner) that they played a national Anthem and a Hymn, and all I could feel was the entire absence of emotion in myself and everyone else. If the British spoke about W.C' s and copulation, then they might be stirred by universal emotions. As it is, an appeal to feel together is hopelessly muddled by intervening greatcoats and fur coats.

*(The diary notes that the concert began with the National Anthem, followed by 'O God our Strength' by Sir Henry Wood who was also conducting, followed by music by Bach, Handel, Beethoven and Wagner.)*

(p.9)

**Wednesday 6 January, 1915**

Now I have to decide whether I shall go up again, to a party at Gordon Square, where the Aranyis are playing.

*(The diary notes that the d'Aranyis sisters were Hungarian concert musicians who lived in England from 1914-18)*

**(p.20)**

**Sunday 17 January, 1915**

I went to a Queen's Hall Concert, stayed for three beautiful tunes and came back.

*(The diary notes that the pieces played were Bach's 4<sup>th</sup> Brandenburg Concerto, the Symphony in D by Cesar Franck and three movements of Lalo's Symphony Espagnole.)*

**(p.33)**

**Saturday 13 February, 1915**

We wrote and after luncheon L. went to the Library and I went to a concert at the Queen's Hall. I ran into Oliver Strachey, standing very like a Strachey in the Hall, because he dislikes sitting inside waiting for the music. I got by luck a very good place, for the Hall was nearly full – and it was a divine concert. But one of the things I decided as I listened (its difficult not to think of other things) was that all descriptions of music are worthless, and rather unpleasant; they are apt to be hysterical, and to say things that people will be ashamed of having said afterwards. They played Haydn, Mozart no. 8, Brandenburg Concerto, and the Unfinished. I daresay the playing wasn't very good, but the stream of melody was divine. It struck me what an odd thing it was – this little box of pure beauty set down in the middle of London streets, and people – all looking so ordinary, crowding to hear, as if they weren't ordinary after all, or had an ambition for something better. Opposite me was Bernard Shaw.

**(p.70)**

**Saturday 3, Sunday 4, Monday 5 November, 1917**

On Sunday I finished my Aksakoff, and writing has the advantage of making a weekday out of the Sabbath, in spite of the clamour and blare of military music and church bells

which always takes place at about eleven – a noise which the other people have no right to inflict.

**(p.78)**

**Monday 19 November, 1917**

On Friday we went to a concert, walking out when the English piece came on into a disreputable side street clinging to the back of Bond St.

*(The diary notes that the concert was at the Aeolian Hall, Bond Street by the London Trio.)*

**(p.83)**

**Monday 3 December, 1917**

Then on to Figaro at the Old Vic. It's perfectly lovely; breaking from one beauty into another, and so romantic as well as witty – the perfection of music, and vindication of opera.

**(p.135)**

**Monday 8 April, 1918**

A barrel organ played in the middle. I bought six bundles of coloured tapers. The stir and colour and cheapness pleased me to the depths of my heart.

**(p.142)**

**Sunday 21 April, 1918**

I went to a concert at the Palladium this afternoon; but on the whole I regretted it. A man called Julian Clifford played Mozart as if it were a Dream Waltz, slowly and sentimentally and with a kind of lugubrious stickiness which spoilt my pleasure in the G minor.

*(The diary notes that Julian Clifford 1877-1921 was a conductor, pianist and composer.)*

**(p.148)**

**Sunday 5 May, 1918**

Outside Dysart House we heard a cuckoo, inside some forlorn week end party was listening to a pianola. Desmond put us off, I confess to our relief.

*(The diary notes that the name of the house was actually Ham House and was the residence of the Earl of Dysart.)*

**(p.153)**

**Friday 7 June, 1918**

I went to the Magic Flute, and thought rather better of humanity for having that in them. Goldie was in the same row as me, thinking I daresay much the same thoughts, though the proximity of two youthful men may have coloured them differently.

*(The diary notes that the concert Woolf attended was at the Theatre Royal Drury Lane and was part of Sir Thomas Beecham's 'Summer Season of Grand Opera in English')*

**USED**

**(p.157)**

**Monday 17 June, 1918**

I went to Don Giovanni, to my infinite delight.

*(The diary notes that this was part of the same season 'Grand Opera in English' at the Shaftesbury Theatre.)*



(p.205)

**Friday 18 October, 1918**

But I write hurriedly...since I must read a little about Voltaire before going up to hear a Promenade Concert at the Queen's Hall.

(p.206)

**Wednesday 23 October, 1918**

I went up to the concert and heard the ghosts of lovely things, since the substance somehow escaped me; partly owing to my mood, partly to the usual vulgarity of Wood. Even so the ghosts of two Bach pieces (one for a duet of violins) were exquisitely lovely. Edith Sichel, whose entire soul is now open to me through her letters, makes me determine to write descriptions neither of pictures nor of music.

*(The diary notes that the concert was part of Sir Henry Wood's Promenade Concerts and the pieces played were Bach's Suite number 2 for flute and strings, and Concerto no. 3 for two violins and orchestra. Woolf also heard works by Beethoven, Mozart, Glück and Dvorak.)*

(p.219)

**Thursday 21 November, 1918**

I am overwhelmed with things that I ought to have written about; peace dropped like a great stone into my pool, and the eddies are still rippling out to the further bank. Has Nelly Cecil sunk beyond recall? And that concert at Shelley House, presided over, so appropriately by Bruce Richmond?

*(The diary notes that Woolf went to quartet concert at Shelley House, which is thought to have been part of a private subscription series of concerts organized by Bruce Richmond.)*

(p.244)

**Tuesday 25 February, 1919**

Meanwhile Sir Henry (Newbolt) confessed that music, especially the music of strings moves the fount of poetry in him, and “something always comes of a concert – something will come this evening” – he assured me, as a priest foretelling a miracle, or a conjuror producing a rabbit.

**p.245**

**Tuesday 25 February, 1919**

The company was decorous and fur bearing as usual; and the music like the voice of spirits in another world enticing he hopelessly damned. Sir Henry wrote a patriotic song to the tune of it. But how nice they are too!

**(p.270)**

**Wednesday 7 May, 1919**

They were going to hear Bertie lecture; but I preferred the songsters of Trafalgar Square. The steps of the column were built up, pyramid fashion, with elderly respectable householders grasping sheets of music, which they rendered, in time to a conductor on a chair beneath, with great precision. It was Life boat day and the elderly people were singing sailor’s chanties and Tom Bowling. This seemed to me a very amusing and instructive spectacle; and being famished for music, I could not get past, but stood and felt thrilled with an absurd visionary excitement; and walked over Hungerford Bridge making up stories.

*(The diary notes that ‘Lifeboat day was marked by entertainment in Trafalgar Square organized by the League of Arts and consisting of Morris dancing and folk songs by a choir of 500 voices. ‘Tom Bowling’ is a nautical song by Charles Dibdin dating from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century.’)*

**(p.309)**

**Thursday 4 November, 1919**

I was hauled out of the background to talk to Katie at the Richmond's concert on Sunday...So we talked in the intervals of Mozart.

## **Volume Two: 1920-1924**

**(p.14)**

**Monday 26 January, 1920**

Yesterday being my birthday and a clear and bright day into the bargain showing many green and yellow flushes on the trees, I went to South Kensington and heard Mozart and Beethoven. I don't think I did hear very much of them, seated as I was between Katie and Elena, and pitched headforemost into outrageous banter of the usual kind with the Countess.

**(p.32)**

**Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> April, 1920**

To the Bach choir last night; but one of our failures. Is it the weather? I'd made out on walking, such a perfect day; and wasted the cream of the morning on the telephone. Then the weather; great bouncing gusts all set about with rain soaking one; buses crowded, left typewriting paper in the bus; a long time waiting at the Club – then Bach unaccompanied isn't easy – though at last (after L. had gone home) I was swept up to the heights by a song. Anna Magdalena's song.

*(The diary notes that 'among the works performed on 19<sup>th</sup> April by the London Bach Choir were three unaccompanied motets.' It also notes that Woolf was probably referring to 'Bist Du bei mir' which was no.25 in the Klavierbüchlein für Anna Magdalena by Bach most likely to have been composed by G.H. Stölzel and sung by Ethel McLelland)*

**(p.72)**

**Monday 25<sup>th</sup> October, 1920**

The fire burns; we are going to hear the Beggars Opera.

*(The diary notes that The Beggars Opera by John Gay was played at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith by Giles Playfair in 1920.)*

**(p.114)**

**Friday 29<sup>th</sup> April 1921**

But every afternoon for a week I've been up to the Aeolian Hall; taken my seat right at the back; put my bag on the floor and listened to Beethoven quartets. Do I dare say listened? Well, but if one gets a lot of pleasure, really divine pleasure, and knows the tunes, and only occasionally thinks of others things – surely I may say listened.

*(The diary notes 'During a Beethoven Festival Week, 25-30 April, at the Aelian Hall, the London String Quartet played, in chronological order, all 17 Beethoven string quartets.')*

**(p.128)**

**Thursday 11 August, 1921**

Sometimes it seems to me that I shall never write out all the books in my head, because of the strain. The devilish thing about writing is that it calls upon every nerve to hold itself taut. That is exactly what I cannot do – Now if it were painting or scribbling music or making patchwork quilts or mud pies, it wouldn't matter.

**(p.174-5)**

**Thursday 30 March, 1922**

John Goss sings.

*(The diary notes that John Goss was a baritone soloist)*

**(p.212)**

**Monday 13 November, 1922**

We went to the Beggars Opera the other night, L. being at Liverpool.

**(p.216)**

**Sunday 3 December, 1922**

This autumn has been perhaps the busiest of my dilatory life. People and books- I sing that to the tune of Woman and Wine, which comes in the Beggars Opera.

**Sunday 7 January, 1923**

Woolf mentions a party at which there was singing and Oliver Strachey sings Handel.

**(p.244)**

**Wednesday 13 June, 1923**

Nessa is back and the London season of course in full swing. So I judged yesterday in the Aeolian Hall, listening, in a dazed way, to Edith Sitwell vociferating through the megaphone...I should be describing Edith Sitwell's poems, but I kept saying to myself "I don't really understand...I don't really admire." The only view, presentable that I framed, was to the effect that she was monotonous. She has one tune only on her merry go round. And she makes her verse keep step accurately to the Hornpipe. This seems to be wrong; but I'm all sandy with writing criticism, and must be off to my book again

**USED**

*(The diary notes that 'The occasion was the first public performance of Façade, a collaborative effort by the Sitwells and the composer William Walton, in which the words and the voice (both Edith Sitwell's) were intended to play an equal and interdependent part with the instrumental music. The poems were recited through a 'Sengerphone' which protruded through the mouth of a grotesque head in the centre of a drop-curtain painted by Frank Dobson. The performance called forth almost universal obloquy from the press.')*

**(p.320)**

**Sunday 1 November, 1924**

As usual, I am, or think myself, snowed under with work to do; and this is cut into by hours of solid pleasure – going to the pictures tonight and Suggis on Monday. For its music I want; to stimulate and suggest.

*(The diary notes that Guuilvermina Suggia was a Portuguese cellist and performed on the 3<sup>rd</sup> November in 1924 at the Wigmore Hall.)*

### **Volume Three: 1925- 1930**

**(p.19)**

**Thursday 14 May, 1925**

But I meant to describe my dear old Desmond, whom it rejoiced me to see again, and he held out both his hands, and I set him in his chair and we talked till seven o'clock. He is rather worn and aged; a little, I think, feeling that here's forty five on him and nothing achieved, except indeed the children, whom he dotes on – Micky to write, Desmond and Rachel trilling and warbling on flute and piano.

**(p.25)**

**Wednesday 20 May, 1925**

(Concerning the Sitwell's with whom she had dined the previous night)

But why are they thought daring and clever? Why are they laughing sticks of the music halls and the penny a liners?

**(p.27)**

**Friday 5<sup>th</sup> June, 1925**

This is the spiritual truth about [Elizabeth] Bibesco: the fact being that she lies in bed, in green crepe de chine, with real diamonds on her fingers, and a silk quilt, and thinks she talks brilliantly to the most intellectual set in London – so she does, to Desmond, and Mortimer, and poor Philip Ritchie, and I was half in a rage, having sacrificed my Mozart 5tet to her, from which I should have got gallons of pure pleasure instead of the breakfast cup of rather impure delight. For it had its fun.

**(p.32)**

**Tuesday 16 June, 1925**

This reminds me I must get back to D. Copperfield. There are moments when all the masterpieces do no more than strum upon broken strings.



(p.34)

**Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> June, 1925**

But while I try to write, I am making up “To the Lighthouse” – the sea is to be heard all through it. I have an idea that I will invent a new name for my books to supplant “novel”. A new \_\_\_\_\_ by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?

(p.34-5)

**Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> July, 1925**

So a whole tribe of people and parties has gone down the sink to oblivion – Ott’s tea parties and complaints; Gwen Raverat set sturdy dusty grim black, yesterday; Tom hedging a little over the Bank; Sybil Colefax drinking tea and protesting her desire to give up parties; her party when Olga Lynn dropped her music in a rage and had to be pacified by Balfour.....Then little Eddie Sackville-West and Julian Morrell to dine (and I am to have his piano) and Philip in to fetch her; and then a party at Ott’s with Ching playing the piano.

*(The diary notes “This scene, at a Colefax party probably given on 1 July at Argyll House, is described by Olga Lynn (1882-1957), a diminutive Lieder singer much favoured by Society, in her memoirs Oggie (1955); her rage was occasioned by the entry of Margot Asquith (Lady Oxford), who created such a disturbance that the singer had to stop.)*

(p.37)

**Thursday 30 July, 1925**

My summer’s wanderings with the pen have I think shown me one or two new dodges for catching my flies. I have sat here, like an improviser with his hands rambling over the piano. The result is perfectly inconclusive, and almost illiterate.

**(p.39)****Saturday 5 September, 1925**

I really forget anything more from the lips of E[lena]. I believe it was all the same: how she would like a house with a piano: and they meant to retire and buy a house with a piano.

**(p.42)****Monday 14 September, 1925**

Now, with my Studio habitable, and another servant perhaps, I shall aim at haphazard, bohemian meetings, music (we have the algraphone, and that's a heavenly prospect – music after dinner while I stitch at my wool-work – I go to Lewes this afternoon to meet Nessa and buy wools)...

**(p.57)****Tuesday 19 January, 1926**

Of a dim November fog; the lights are dulled and damped. I walked towards the sound of a barrel organ in Marchmont Street.

**(p.63)****Saturday 27 February, 1926**

Lord B[erners]. Was stockish, resolute, quick witted: analysed his own instability. His father was a sea captain; wished him not on any account to be a long haired artist; his mother used to say "My little boy plays so nicely – you should hear him play" but she minded his not hunting and riding. So, he said, he was inhibited as a musician. His talent clung (I think he said) like a creeper to the edge of a cliff. One day he wrote two marches for fun. Stravinsky saw them, and thought them good, and they were published. So he was accepted as a serious musician, with only four lessons from Tovey in counterpoint. He had an astonishing facility. He could write things that sounded all right. Suddenly, last year, all his pleasure in it went. He met a painter, asked him how you

paint; bought 'hogsheads' –(meant hog's bristles) and canvas and copied an Italian picture, brilliantly, consummately, says Clive. He has the same facility there: but it will come to nothing he said, like the other.

*(The diary notes 'Donald Francis Tovey (1875-1940), pianist, composer and scholar, was one the greatest personalities in the musical world of his day; he had been Reid Professor of Music at Edinburgh University since 1914.')*

**(p.72)**

**Saturday 27 March, 1926**

And was just striking oil when in comes Angus to tell me Eddy was on the phone: would I go to Rimsky Korsakov with him on Tuesday. I agreed-more, asked him to dinner.

*(The diary notes "A concert performance of Rimsky Karsakov's opera The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh was to be given at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, on 30 March." - Woolf actually did not attend claiming that she 'detested engagements')*

**(p.84)**

**Wednesday 12 May, 1926**

The Strike was settled about 1.15 – or it was then broadcast...5 minutes later the wireless. They told us to stand by and await important news. Then a piano played a tune. Then the solemn broadcaster assuming incredible pomp and gloom and speaking one word to the minute read out: Message from 10 Downing Street. The T.U.C. leaders have agreed that Strike shall be withdrawn.

**(p.87)**

**Thursday 20 May, 1926**

I should have been reading her (Vita's) poem tonight: instead finished Sharon Turner – a prosy, simple, old man; the very spit and image of Saxon. A boundless bore, I daresay, with the most intense zeal for "improving myself", and the holiest of affections, and 13

children, and no character or impetus – a love of long walks, of music; modest, yet conceited in an ant like way.

**(p.90)**

**Wednesday 9 June, 1926**

We are very hungry, by the way; Nelly is preparing a nice roast chicken and ices for dinner, which I shall enjoy. Then we shall play the Gramophone.

**(p.126)**

**Thursday 3 February, 1927**

Without eyes and ears (but Mrs Webb listens in and prefers Mozart to Handel, if I may guess) one can come down with more of a weight upon bread and butter or whatever the substance is before one.

**(p.128)**

**Monday 21 February, 1927**

Why not invent a new kind of play – as for instance

Woman thinks:...

He does.

Organ plays.

She writes.

They say:

She sings:

Night speaks:

They miss

I think it must be something in this line – though I can't now see what. Away from facts: free, yet concentrated; prose yet poetry; a novel and a play.

**(p.129)**

**Monday 28 February, 1927**

Coming back last night I thought, owing to civilization, I, who am now cold, wet, and hungry, can be warm and satisfied and listening to a Mozart 4tet in 15 minutes. And so I was.

**(p.135)**

**Thursday 5 May, 1927**

Nelly away; Pinker [dog] away; Clive coming back; Opera in swing; Francis to see me about writing; fine spring weather.

**(p.135)**

**Wednesday 11 May, 1927**

Mary was at the opera, on a hot evening like this think of listening to Wagner he (Clive Bell) said.

**(p.139)**

**Saturday 18 June, 1927**

(Concerning Woolf's writing of *The Waves*)

But it needs ripening. I do a little work on it in the evening when the gramophone is playing late Beethoven sonatas. (The windows fidget at their fastenings as if we were at sea.)

**(p.153)**

**Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> August, 1927**

Some little scenes I meant to write down.

One was on the flats towards Ripe one blazing hot day. We stopped in a bye road about 3 in the afternoon, and heard hymn singing. It was very lonely and desolate. Here were people singing to themselves, in the hot afternoon. I looked and saw a middle class

'lady' in skirt and coat and ribboned hat, by the cottage door. She was making the daughters of the agricultural labourers sing; it was about three o'clock on a Tuesday perhaps...It strikes me that they hymn singing in the flats went on precisely so in Cromwell's time.

## **Volume Four: 1931-1935**

**(p. 5)**

**Wednesday 7 January, 1931**

We shall play the Grosse Fugue [Beethoven] tonight – Ethel, I daresay, will ring up.

**(p. 9)**

**Wednesday 4 February, 1931**

Today Ethel comes. On Monday I went to hear her rehearse at Lady Lewis's...The rehearsal was in a long room with a bow window looking on...Ethel stood at the piano in the window, in her battered felt, in her jersey and short skirt conducting with a pencil. There was a drop at the end of her nose. Miss Suddaby was singing the Soul, and I observed that went through precisely the same attitudes of ecstasy and inspiration in the room, as in a hall. There were two young or youngish men. Ethel's pince nez rode nearer and nearer the tip of her nose. She sang now and then; and once, taking the bass, made a cat squalling sound – but everything she does with such forthrightness directness that there is nothing ridiculous. She loses self-consciousness completely. She seems all vitalized; all energized: she knocks her hat from side to side. Strides rhythmically down the room to signify to Elizabeth that this is the Greek melody; strides back; Now the furniture moving begins, she said, referring to some supernatural gambols connected with the prisoner's escape, or defiance or death. I suspect the music is too literary – too stressed – too didactic for my taste. But I am always impressed by the fact that it is music – I mean that she has spun these coherent chords harmonies melodies out of her so practical, strident mind. What if she should be a great composer? This fantastic idea is to her the merest commonplace: it is the fabric of her being. As she conducts, she hears music like Beethoven's. As she strides and turns and wheels about to us perched mute on chairs she thinks this is about the most important event now taking place in London. And perhaps it is. Well – I watched the curiously sensitive, perceptive Jewish face of old Lady L. trembling like a butterfly's antennae to the sound. How sensitized to music old Jewesses are – how pliable, how supple.

*(The diary notes that Ethel Smyth was rehearsing her setting of Henry Brewster's poem The Prison. Elsie Suddaby was a noted soprano and Lady Lewis was the widow of Sir George Lewis, and her house played regular host to musicians, artists and writers of the day.)*

**(p.14)**

**Thursday 19 March, 1931**

Ethel yesterday, very uneasy about her character; and possible misrepresentations. I think deluding herself about her own motives in countering reviewers: (purely for the sake of other musicians, women in particular: I've nothing to lose: have suffered neglect all my life). ..It seems possible to me that nature gave her everything except the power of expression in her music: hence the race and violence and restlessness of her nature: the one outlet is stopped up.

**(p. 29)**

**Thursday 2 June, 1931**

Ethel again...I try to find out what motive lies behind Ethel and her calomel. I think; (but then I am not a psychologist) that she wants me to be everlasting; that she wants me to be unhurt by any amount of talk about the Prison: that she wants to have things – to her own will: that she dislikes other people's illnesses which interfere with her vitality; that she likes to rationalize everything: that she suspects, on principle, all shrinking, subtlety and sensibility...I don't know. It is very characteristic, and akin to the methods she pursues about her music. There too, to explain her lack of success, she fabricates a theory (about her kinship with the common man, and her consequent failure to attract the sophisticated, who control the Ring, so that Bax Vaughan Williams and co. are done. But she not).

**(p. 30)**

**Tuesday 23 June, 1931**

Tonight we go to the Gala Opera with Christabel. Stalls costing 25/- each.

**(p.31)**



**Wednesday 24 June, 1931**

Last night we went to the gala opera; sat in the stalls, two rows from the stage, with Christabel and a woman, who came in late, called Lady Abingdon.

*(The diary notes: 'The Gala Performance on 23 June during Sir Thomas Beecham's 'Season of Russian Opera and Ballet' at the Lyceum Theatre, consisted of performances of acts from three operas, Don Quixote, Prince Igor, and La Fiancée du Czar, and the ballet Petrouchka)*

**(p. 42)**

**Thursday 3 September, 1931**

We listened to a Bach concert with the clouds thickening purple over Caburn, the light springing, and the pale cadaverous glow in the chalk pit. At one moment the brown horses stampeded – flinging out their great legs wildly. The worst of it is that my brain fills too fast – overflows.

*(The diary notes that the concert was conducted by Sir Henry Wood as part of the Promenade Concerts at the Queen's Hall and that Brandenburg Concerto No. 2 in F; Fantasy and Fugue in C minor; and Suite No. 5. for Oboe and Strings were the pieces performed.)*

**(p. 44)**

**Saturday 19 September, 1931**

But O – again – how happy I am: how calm, for the moment how sweet life is with L. here, in its regularity and order, and the garden and the room at night and music and my walks and writing easily and interestedly at Donne of a morning, and poems all about me.

(p. 69)

**Tuesday 2 February, 1932**

But I had such a good visit from Eddy...I assure you he's a phenomenon. Musical. How I pity him! Forced to live in England with that gift – you don't know the loneliness. Compare the people at [illegible]. They talk of cricket golf: in Berlin, they have their ham and beer and talk of the way the violin plays the G sharp. Eddy has the duties of his position – a very great one: very real duties...what was I going to say – He played *Der Wald*. He says nobody knows Ethel Smyth till they've heard all this. Who made the theme? I did. Well it's the pure flower of the romantic movement. And we sat reading our books and he played and played.

*(The diary notes that *Der Wald* was Ethel Smyth's second opera.)*

(p.77-8)

**Tuesday 16 February, 1932**

To sit to Nessa; gay and debonair; to tie up parcels; to the Busch Quartet where I met Elena R. and reflected upon the transiency of human beauty, passion, and illusion; and so up to lunch.

*(The diary notes that the concert was a performance of music by Brahms, Dvořák, and Beethoven given by the Busch Quartet at the Wigmore Hall.)*

(p.111)

**Friday 24 June, 1932**

So to the Zoo: a mist rising; white bears elongated like El Grecos: stinking meat held near my nose: bear bit a boy's arm off; bears dived; white explosion; red and yellow fairy lamps; distant music; the sea lions...

**(p.128)**

**Thursday 13 October, 1932**

It was an odd sight – Desmond with Rachel on his arm. Everybody stood up...Then a dribble back of relatives. Then the Wagner wedding march.

**(p.165)**

**Monday 26 June, 1933**

The present moment...doctors, scarlet, purple in streets; poor little students in gowns: so to dine, and read Archibald Marshall's memoir; and music; thunder, I dare say; and so to open my windows, and go up: the moment done.

**(p. 172)**

**Saturday 12 August, 1933**

Still, Saturday, I can't focus; am disoriented; sleepy; physically tired, but quite calm; the dear old repetitions soothe me again: L; Pinka; dinner; tea; papers; music; I have a dread of 'seeing' people...

**(p.243)**

**Saturday 15 September, 1933**

I was glad we went to the service on Thursday. It was a very hot summers day. And all very simple and dignified. Music. Not a word spoken...They played Bach. Then the coffin moved slowly through the doors. They shut. They played again – Anon., I think: old music. Yes, I liked the wordlessness.

*(The Diary notes that Roger Fry's funeral took place on 13 September at Golder's Green Crematorium.)*

(p.247)

**Tuesday 2 October, 1934**

And we went to Sissinghurst. Vita playing the Gramophone at the top of the pink tower.  
A blazing day.

(p.284)

**Monday 4 March, 1935**

Then the concert. How long how little music in it that I enjoyed! Beecham's face beaming, ecstatic, like a yellow copper idol: such grimaces, attenuations, dancings, swingings: his collar crumpled...In the artists room afterwards there was Zelig with the red lips and another ex prima donna and a dissolute musician, all waiting their turn to plague Beecham.

*(The Diary notes, 'In one of his series of Sunday concerts at the Queen's Hall, sir Thomas Beecham, conducting the London Philharmonic Orchestra, included the Prelude to Act II of Ethel Smyth's opera The Wreckers, together with works by Wagner, Beethoven, Schubert and Berlioz...')*

(p.296)

**Tuesday 2 April, 1935**

And does Louie cheat? A bill for a chicken that we had at Christmas again throws doubt on her. We must have it out about the milk this week. Not a week I want altogether. Angelica's concert on Thursday: a [Labour Party] meeting at Rodmell...

(p.311)

**Sunday 12 May, 1935**

The dullest day of them all. But we got to [Augsburg; and we had a room with a bath, and then went on to] Heidelberg, which is – yes – a very distinguished University town, on the Neckar. The dons and their daughters were having a musical evening. I saw them tripping out to each others houses with pale blue Beethoven quartets under their arms.

**(p.313)**

**15 May, 1935**

Rome. Tea in café. Ladies in bright coats and white hats. Music. Look out and see people like movies. Abyssinia. Children begging. Café haunters. Ices. Old man who haunts the Greco.

## **Volume Five: 1936-1941**

*Interestingly, Woolf writes nothing about music in her diary in 1936, but there are many references to her writing of *Three Guineas* and *The Years*. It is not until 1937 that we get the first mention of musical entertainment when Woolf describes an evening at the Albert Hall – but this remains the only entry about music for the entire year. There are only four references to music in the diary from 1938. There is nothing about music from when the war begins in 1939 until the last diary entry from Monday, 24 March 1941 – four days before Woolf drowned herself in the river Ouse.*

**(p.99)**

**Friday 25 June, 1937**

All very stagey empty and unreal. Wogan with his arm in a sling: looked so tragic when unwatched, so I thought, listening to the Basque children singing on the gramophone. Robeson sang: a sympathetic, malleable, nigger, expressive, uninhibited, all warmth and the hot vapours of African forests.

*(The diary notes that Vanessa Woolf describes Robeson (an American singer and actor) in a letter to Quentin Bell as ‘the real star of the evening – he is superb to look at...and his voice fits his looks’)*

**(p.129)**

**Saturday 12 March, 1938**

Hitler has invaded Austria: that is at 10 last night his army crossed the frontier unresisted. The Austrian national anthem was heard on the wireless for the last time. We got a snatch of dance music from Vienna.

**(p.152)**

**Tuesday 21 June, 1938**

*(During a trip to the Scottish borders she mentions music in its religious capacity when she mimics a conversation she overhears between old Scottish ladies.)*

The choir's beautiful...I hear the prayers the young men the music.

**(p.155)**

**Saturday 17 July, 1938**

Last night at the Robsons. Old French woman in skimpy black, beautiful eyes playing Beethoven and looking round like Mitz at Juliette: their faces playing: voluptuous absorption and sorrow and exaltation. Lovely brown swollen cello.

**(p.173)**

**Thursday 22 September, 1938**

Yet I was getting into that old, very old, rhythm of regular reading, first this book then that; Roger all the morning; walk from 2 to 4; bowls 5 to 6.30: then Madame de Sevigné; get dinner 7.30; read Roger; listen to music; bind Eddie's *Candide*; read Sigfried Sassoon; and so bed at 11.30 or so. A very good rhythm; but I can only manage it for a few days it seems.

**(p.197)**

**Monday 9 January, 1939**

Rodmell is a grind on the brain: in winter especially. I write three solid hours, walk 2: then we read, with intervals for cooking dinner, music, news till 11.30.

**(p.216)**

**Friday 28 April, 1939**

He (Leonard) said I lived more in a world of my own. I go for long walks alone. So we argued. I was very happy to think I was so much needed. Its strange how seldom one feels this: yet 'life in common' is an immense reality. For instance, I can't go to *The Wreckers* tonight with Ethel Smyth because 1. I have a little temperature: 2: ( and more

serious) I'd rather stay at home with L. Its no use fighting against this. Its one of the facts.

*(The diary notes that The Wreckers was Ethel Smyth's opera and was being performed for the last time that evening at Sadler's Wells.)*



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